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Oral history interview with Reuben Nakian, 1981 June 9-17

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service. Funding for this interview was provided by the Wyeth Endowment for American Art.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Reuben Nakian on June 9, 1981. The interview took place in Stamford, CT, and was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[Transcriber's note: RN's transcribed words make him appear on the written page as gruff, irritable, and even unkindly. The timbre of his voice, however, is usually at odds with the words.]

Interview

[Tape 1, side A (all tapes are 45 minutes per side)]

DON ROSS: DON ROSS (Nakian's assistant)

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't care anymore what anyone thinks. It doesn't matter, you know, what I do or what I say. I just try to keep busy. Even my art's, you know. . . . I do things just to keep busy. I don't give a goddamn if. . . . I don't even care to go to the Metropolitan Museum, and that was like a sacred place for me, and that meant, you know, I don't even care to go there. So, Jesus, I don't know what's happening to me. I'm bored and blasé, you know. But I think my eyes. . . . I can't see too good. Then I've been tired, I have a cold in my system. And it stays all summer and I've been tired as hell. Well, I'm feeling a little better now; maybe the cold's worn off. I've got a little more pep. But when you're saggy and tired and your eyes are not too sharp, you know, I get depressed.

AVIS BERMAN: Can you see well enough to go to the Gorky show, since Gorky was a friend of yours?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well, I have to go close up to look at the paintings.

DON ROSS: He's still producing a lot of work.

AVIS BERMAN: Certainly.

DON ROSS: It's not like he can't do anything.

AVIS BERMAN: I know.

DON ROSS: He's still full of piss and vinegar.

AVIS BERMAN: Uh huh.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I still, you know, make drawings and some sculpture. But, you know, I just have to get up close.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And I almost do it instinctively. I don't ever have to look. [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: What I want to do is start with the basics. I want to go back to your childhood.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't want to do that. No memories of it, there's no. . . .

DON ROSS: Yes, you do. You just have to be. . . . You have to let people pick at you.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, that's what I'm going to do. I know you were born in, you were from College Point, Long Island, and I'd like to know first of all your parents' names and their occupations.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, my father's name was George, and my mother's name was Mary. And he was in a number of occupations. He used to be in embroidery and in weaving. Sort of business in this and that, I don't know what. He used to change around.

AVIS BERMAN: And were you conscious of being Armenian when you were younger? Were you different?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, not. . . . I always felt American. It's now the Armenians, they're trying to come around and make an Armenian out of me, and I. . . . I don't know the language. And I only saw a few of them when we were living in Jersey. And after that, I seldom saw an Armenian. I never think Armenian. I'm raised up on American and Greek history, and Walt Whitman, and Buffalo Bill, and cowboys and Indians, and I was never interested, even in reading Armenian history. I've never looked. . . . I've read French history, Roman and Greek, and

everything. But Armenian is, I never. . . . I wasn't excited about it, you know, not interested. And the Armenians know, you know, it's a big history. They know all about it. I have no interest. They're always saying, "Why don't you make mythological Armenian sculpture?" What. . . . When you've got the Greek mythology, what the hell is the Armenian mythology? So I never felt Armenian.

AVIS BERMAN: But did you ever speak it at home, or anything? Did your parents speak it?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: They used to speak a little bit. And we used to speak Turkish at home. And Turkish, the Armenian, and English—the three languages. And I used to. . . . I couldn't speak it, but I remember a lot of Turkish words. And especially the funny curse words. They're so funny, you know, it's a belly laugh. It's a beautiful language. Well, it's the only other language I knew a little bit about, because they used to speak it at home, and I used to hear it. And I love it, you know, but I never hear anyone speak it anymore. But if anyone talks it, I can remember it, you know. It's a strange language. Everything's ass-backwards, you know. If they insult you, it's ass-backwards insulting. It's funny as hell. [chuckling]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what was your father like?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He was a tall. . . . He was tall and he was bald. He was a nice fellow.

AVIS BERMAN: Were you close to him?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, you know. We were an old Christian family. Used to go to church. Not the Catholic church, but the Protestant, the Episcopal or Armenian church. It wasn't the Catholic church. So I used to go to Sunday school. And, you know, they all went to church on Sunday. We had an Armenian church in Union City. It used to be called West Hoboken, and they changed it.

AVIS BERMAN: So you. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I was there three or four years around that area, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: You moved to New Jersey when you were a kid?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Let's see, what. . . . I had a brother named George, and he died at the age of twenty around 1905. And I had a sister who was beautiful. She was a, she looked like a German, she was so blond. She didn't look Armenian, with blue eyes, yellow hair, and everything. And she married an Armenian. . . . He was in the roof business. So he brought the whole family from College Point after my brother died. A year later she married him, and we all moved to 116th Street and Lenox Avenue, around there. And it wasn't colored then. There were no colored people around. Now, it's a colored neighborhood. And we lived there for a year, and then we moved to Rutherford, New Jersey. In 1906 we were in Lenox and 116th Street, and I went to school there for a year on 117th Street. There was a school, and I went there for a year. Then we moved to Rutherford, which was nicer. It was in the country, right in the country. And the locomotives there had, you know, they had locomotives there. Boy, I used to love them, because I'd just sit down in the station and wait for the locomotives to come in, you know. Have you ever seen them?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yes. They don't have them anymore. They were real works of art. I actually made two of them, around 1930, abstractions of locomotives, and I even had them on an abstract trestle, you know, a locomotive in an abstraction. I made two of them. That's around 1930, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I have no pictures of them.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that's something I never knew, that you had anything to do making, anything to do with machines. That's very interesting.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I actually went downtown, to the. . . . I got in touch with a locomotive magazine. They gave me pictures and I spent about a year, and made them out of great, big, and in plaster, you know, full of action.

DON ROSS: What happened to them?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I, you know, I break things up, move on, throw them away.

AVIS BERMAN: You've always destroyed things.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And that was around 1930. Yeah, I think. . . . That was before I got the Guggenheim. So it was 1929, I made that. And I made that at 55 Christopher Street. After the Whitney dropped me in 1928, I moved to 55. And I remember that room. I made them in there. Yeah, I made two of them. Everybody thought I was crazy. [laughter]

AVIS BERMAN: How did you get in the habit of destroying so much stuff?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, when you move, where are you going to put 'em? Every time you move, you gotta. . . . You can't take 'em along. I had no huge house. We were poor, and where you gonna put 'em? So I say screw it, smash 'em up.

AVIS BERMAN: But even a lot of your small. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I get bored with them. I've smashed up a lot of terra-cottas that were shown at the Egan Gallery around 1950. They were great big ones. When I moved out here in the country, they were in the way. Bingo, I wasn't happy with them. Maybe they were swell things, they just at that time and the mood I was in, and no room, oh, screw 'em, smash 'em up.

AVIS BERMAN: And no one ever tried to keep you from destroying any of these pieces?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, no one was around. No one was around. My wife encouraged me. "You know, it's junk anyway, so smash it." You know, she, what, she once said that. [laughs]

DON ROSS: There were people who took things away from him.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I used to break 'em up.

DON ROSS: A lot of the heads, Reuben, none of those heads would be around if Thor didn't take them away from you. The head of Duchamp would have been smashed up.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. Well, they were down in the basement, and they were getting in that old little shack and throwing things, so I told them to take it. Well, afterwards I got them back. They saved 'em for me for a couple years there.

AVIS BERMAN: Thank goodness. Who's Thor?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, he's an old friend of mine. Now he's working for me downtown. He's a photographer. He comes out a couple days a week. See, that big thing, it's 22 feet long. It's a great big whopper. Yeah, I've known him for years.

AVIS BERMAN: There were other children in the family. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, there were five altogether. Two died when they were young. My brother got hurt in a football game. He got kicked in the head, and he got spinal meningitis or something and died young. That was a great tragedy at that time. And then my sister Bessie married and she had three boys. They're still living; they're in their seventies now. [laughs] She died all of a sudden, I think around 1940. I don't know why. That's, that's my family. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Do you keep in contact with your nephews still?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Seldom, no.

AVIS BERMAN: Do they live around in this area?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: One lives in Philadelphia, one lives in Rutherford, and one lives in Virginia. And I haven't seen them for five years or so.

AVIS BERMAN: Do they know your work?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: They're not interested in it.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I guess I'd like to know what kind of a household your family was to grow up in.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hmm?

AVIS BERMAN: What kind of a household was the Nakian household to grow up in?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: My parents?

AVIS BERMAN: Did you have a happy childhood?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, they were good. They were good parents, and when I wanted to be an artist, they didn't stop it. I was still going to grammar school, and I wanted to be an artist, fine, you know. We were poor, you know. An artist in those days was crazy, you know. You'd starve to death in the garret. Everyone was sorry for you. [They'd] say "Oh my god! What's going to happen to you? You're going to starve to death." "So all right, nice, but how you going to earn your living?" In those days, it was a struggle to earn a living. We were poor and everyone was poor, you know.
There was horses around, and a wagon would come with horses with [fish] in it and that. He'd blow a horn and everyone would run down the street and buy a piece of newspaper or fish, and there was horseshit in the streets. And you'd see runaway horses running down the streets, you know, and they, someone'd get up and stop 'em. Iceman was there, he'd come with ice right with a pick, cut up, put it on his, with a pick and come up put it in your house. The coal man would come. . . .

DON ROSS: Tell 'em the story about that strange little gypsy.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Huh?

DON ROSS: She'll appreciate that.

AVIS BERMAN: The story about a gypsy?

DON ROSS: A gypsy. A guy who went around with a paper bag.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, yeah, there was one, you know, they used to go around for rags and. . . . It was strange, in 1916, when I was at Manship's, at Lexington Avenue and 24th Street, a man come around and asked for if we had any gelatin. Because, you know, sculptors used it. I guess, for the war or something. Nice-looking guy, you know, like he was in business. Having any gelatin, he wanted to buy it. I guess they needed it during the war. [chuckling] But this, this gypsy, I saw a little tiny fella in rags, and he had a bag, and he was going around in the streets and the side alleys and everything, and trying to find dog turd that was white, you know, dogs that ate bones, and he'd just collect that and put it in a bag. Maybe for medicinal or just, you know, someone wanted it. [laughter] Just, you know, picking up that. Actually, you know, picking up rags and bottles and anything, you know. People that would want dog turd. [laughter] That's history. That's ancient history!

AVIS BERMAN: That certainly is.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: That goes back to Shakespeare's days. [laughing] Going around picking up white dog turd. It's hard to believe. [laughter]

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, what on earth could they have, could he have wanted it for?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: In those days, every corner had a saloon, you know, and they're all Germans out in Hoboken, West Hoboken, and Weehawken, you know. Every corner was a saloon, and they had German bands, you know, with the trumpets. About three or four would come. They'd go up to one place. They'd stand on the street corner, you know, and play their music. That was the only music we had, you know. And they played that band, and then they'd pass the hat around and they'd go in the saloon. And you used to hear that all the time, you know, the band, you don't hear it anymore. And they had organ grinders with a monkey. You know, a guy with an organ grinder and a monkey?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, this was [another one] that had the monkey. Sometimes they didn't have the monkey, but this one did—a small monkey with a red hat on a chain. Ah, that was wonderful. [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Sounds pretty European.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, it was real. . . . It was like Europe there then, you know. Now, Jesus, I mean, now everything is. . . . Wow, the change I've seen in my lifetime! And people used to die all the time. They weren't clean; they were, people just died young, you know. Disease and. . . . That's where you'd go in a butcher store, you'd get a bad piece of meat. Flies, and they had no screens, or nothing, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, things are pretty antiseptic now. For good and for bad.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yes. Well, that's, it's mainly what's keeping us alive. You read history, American or anything, they all died in their forties, fifties, and sixties. You know, the average, you know, everyone in those days.

AVIS BERMAN: When did you decide you wanted to be an artist?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: When I was still a kid in school. I don't know. I used to look at the frame stores. They had a picture of a, two horses' heads—Rosa Bonheur's horses.

AVIS BERMAN: The Horse Fair.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, the horses. You know, that's a wonderful job. Don't you think so?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Oh, at the Metropolitan? Tell me why you like it. Why do you like it?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's full of life, and it's a great job. The horses are alive and sweating, and. . . . It's a little academic. If she studied under Manet, she'd know how to put a little more style to it. But I think it's a great job. And it's a wonderful for a woman!

AVIS BERMAN: Well!

RUEBEN NAKIAN: The horses are hefty and, man, it's a great job! I'm glad they own it.

AVIS BERMAN: I just read a book about her.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't know anything about her. It should be interesting. Have you read her book? Is it interesting?

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, Dore Ashton just wrote a biography of her, and. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, good.

AVIS BERMAN: It is. Except she had very. . . . It's very sad because she did have talent, and all she ever wanted to do was be a success at the Salon.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh yeah, she had. . . . Well, Cézanne wanted to be a success at the Salon.

AVIS BERMAN: That's true.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: They were all, even Manet was, you know, he would. . . . The Impressionists, they were even trying to get into the Salon.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: You know, they all. . . . They all had either a red ribbon, you know. That was a big thing. They all wanted that, you know. It was funny as hell. They all, they all wanted to impress somebody else in those days. You know, another laborer or shopkeeper and. . . . You know?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I think it was very important. They all took pride in their profession. You were a doctor, dressed well, and everything.

AVIS BERMAN: She did say. . . . However, eventually, she did speak very condescendingly of the Impressionists. This is Rosa Bonheur, and she really liked. . . . The Horse Fair owes a lot to Gericault. And that's what's so great about it—she took his very powerful example for inspiration, but then. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I've never seen anything else of hers. What do you say, she had something to do with Gericault?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, The Horse Fair is sort of inspired by Gericault. But then she went to England.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It was inspired by that?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, he did horses didn't he?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And then, then she went to England, and she met Landseer, who did the animals, the stags.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: And then she decided that he was really the greatest artist, and she started imitating his very dull style.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yes, yes. Was she ever married or what's that. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: No, she was a lesbian.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: A lesbian! Imagine that!

DON ROSS: Who was the woman. . . . Now, how could I forget her name. She was a very important painter, Italian painter, very influential. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: She made pastels in the eighteenth century?

DON ROSS: Yeah, and Goethe was a friend of hers.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: What's her name? It starts with an R or something.

DON ROSS: She was. . . . They almost made her an ambassador, she was such an important person.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. She did good portraits in pastel.

DON ROSS: She was damn good, boy.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: What was it?

DON ROSS: I just happened to catch part of a program on Channel 13, The Artist Was a Woman, or something like that.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, and she was famous, she got commissions and. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: I don't know who you're talking about, I'm embarrassed to say.

DON ROSS: Gee, we caught you in something you don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, you did. There are many things. You just haven't figured them all out yet.

DON ROSS: Well, we'll catch them out. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: I'm controlling the conversation so I can look learned. [laughs]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, she was Italian, but she traveled in all the courts, you know, Poland, Russia, and she was famous, and she did good. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: It was easier in the eighteenth century than the nineteenth century for women to do that, I think. When you were a kid, did you mostly draw, or were you working in clay?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, I didn't work in clay. I had no talent for clay, or anything. I used to draw. I used to copy things. Around 1909 and 1910 there was a place in Jersey City, some German. . . . It was called the Academy, the something Drawing Academy, for children. And I used to go there, and there was a drawing board high up and there were stools. And he'd [the instructor—Ed.] give us old engravings and old woodcuts to copy and pieces of pink paper, you know, drawing or blue paper and crayon, and we used to put the picture there and copy it and make a bunch of roses or leaves or something, and we used to copy it. That was okay, and he used to come with a piece of rye bread that was baked at home and use that as an eraser. So he'd go all around where there were these little smudges and he'd erase it. Then he'd go and he had a stamp that was "Academy" and he'd put a stamp on the paper, and then we'd take it home and show it to papa and say "Look, see what I made." [laughter] So I used to go there once a week for quite a while. [laughs] So that, that was the training. I was able to sit on my ass and copy something, you know. That was good.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess I'd like to know when you started to differentiate between, say, that you were going to be a sculptor as opposed to a painter?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, that was an accident. I wanted to be a painter. Peter Paul RUEBENs, they had some at the Met, and, you know, they're good paintings. So I was at the Independent Art School. It used be the Robert Henri place, and I used to sketch from life in conte crayon, and the nude model in the evenings, once or twice a week or whatever it was. And after I had a bunch of drawings, I, you know, I'd get a job someplace. And so I made the rounds of all, of all the painters that I heard of, and there wasn't anything doing. They said, "You know, it isn't like the old days where you have a studio and an apprentice. They'd say, "We paint alone." They said, "Why don't you try the sculptors?" "Oh, yeah, okay." So I looked in the phone book and people and I got addresses of

the sculptors. I went to two or three, and they had nothing. Then I went to James Earle Fraser. You've heard of him?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. He created the Buffalo Nickel.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. He was a nice guy, and he was in MacDougal Alley. He had a big studio there. I went to see him. He was awfully nice. He said, "Why don't you go and see Paul Manship, and if he doesn't take you, come back in three weeks, and I will." "Who's Paul," you know. . . . Well, I had known about him; I'd seen things in magazines. So I went to Paul Manship. And he was on Lexington Avenue and 24th. There was a low wooden rambling building there, and there was a funny-looking guy in the background with black eyes and long black hair, and that was Gaston Lachaise. He was working for him, you know. And there was Manship there. So I had some large charcoal drawings, and I had a little sketchbook, and I showed him the large charcoal drawing and put it down, and he wasn't interested. But then he happened to pick up my little sketchbook, in conte crayon from the nude models. He looked through it, and he went through it again, and he looked at me, and he went through it three times. [laughs] He said, "I'll write you a letter. See if I can use you." So a week later I got a letter. I still got that letter somewhere in the house.

AVIS BERMAN: Terrific! Don't throw it out!

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. So I went there. . . . Then I was with him for a long time. He said, "Reuben, for Christ's sake, Jesus, you can draw, you can draw, but you can't do any modeling. You're lousy. What's the matter with you?" So he sent me up to the Art Students League evening classes, and I was still lousy. It took a long time for me to get going with clay. It was because, I guess, the kind of work he was doing, you got to put eyes in, and, you know, I was under the influence, I guess naturally, of abstracting things, because as soon as I discovered Cézanne and Brancusi, I went with them like a ton of bricks. And you know, Manship's stuff, detailed eyes, fingernails—that stuff bored me. [laughter] That's the kind of stuff he was doing.

AVIS BERMAN: I think it might have bored Manship, too. Didn't he make Lachaise do most of the carving of the fingertips and everything?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well, in marble. There was a big slab, John Pierpont Morgan, they used to have it in the Met in the wall. They took it away. And that was carved in limestone. Lachaise had to carve it. He did all the carving—the ornament and the figures and everything, you know.

DON ROSS: Reuben, you've got to show Avis that sketchbook, you know.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't know where it is. In the house somewheres? I don't know where. . . .

DON ROSS: Well, we just had it. Remember, we had it? I hid it somewhere. Probably someplace we'll never find it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. I don't know, maybe it's in the closet, in the closet in the bedroom, or something. [chuckles] Yeah, that's one thing I saved. And it's marked in there 1915, I think. Yeah. That's when I went to the Independent Art School, yeah. 1915.

AVIS BERMAN: So just becoming a sculptor was completely accidental. Did you ever paint at all?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No. No, I never painted. I guess I would have been a flop as a painter. I mean, I would have had to go into sculpture anyway. There was no choice about that. I didn't think I had that kind of mentality, to paint. See, what saved me was my drawing talent. Going to that German Academy sitting on my ass and copying flowers. [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's good discipline.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Going to the German Academy taught me something. [laughs] Aah, boy.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, when you started thinking of yourself as being an apprentice as a sculptor, did you think you were going to do large public commissions? I mean, is that what you. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, that was the only thing in those days. There wasn't, you know. . . . Or like Manship—why he made a hit—he was the first one to make little statuettes in bronze, you know, to put on the table. Because everything in those days was for the state houses and the courthouses, and Abraham Lincoln, and all that kind of stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: An Indian, you know, by Fraser, sitting on a horse, you know, it was the last roundup.

AVIS BERMAN: The End of the Trail.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, there was always a story. Something like that. And it was naturalistic, and that's all the sculptors. They were all doing it, and that's the jobs they were getting. And they all had helpers, you know, for these big monuments, three or four guys. They had plaster casters, bronze casters. They were getting the money then. They were the big shots. George Grey Barnard, that started the Cloisters. Oh, what a. . . . He had a statue of Abraham Lincoln about 400 feet high, or something. Oh, what a great man.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you visit his studio?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no, I was too scared. I wasn't the kind who could walk in. I met, I met a guy when, when I was in Washington making the New Deal heads, and he was up there, and he had a little publicity. He was making little crappy stuff. And he was from Georgia. He was a regular Southerner. So as I came back from Washington—we were living on 58th Street—someone knocked at the door in the evening and came in. I stared at him, and he stared at me. He says, "Are you Reuben Nakian?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "My name is. . . ." I forget it. He was a regular Southern guy, and he. . . . He was a Southerner, you know, everyone's a pal. You know? You'd walk in, "Hi ya, pal!" And, you know, he goes around, he knocks at doors, and meets everybody. So he wanted to be a sculptor, he'd go and meet all the famous people. He'd walk in, "Hi!" and, you know, knock on doors, "Hi, I'm, my name is this," and, you know, "Come on in," and. . . . And then he used to hitchhike; he used to stand by the Holland Tunnel and hitchhike. He used to go to Georgia and come back, and he. . . . [laughs] What was I going to say about him? I don't know, I had his. . . . [laughing]

AVIS BERMAN: You were, that he was. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, you know, he goes around. . . . Oh yeah, then he wanted to write. You know, so, well, he needed a typewriter, so he went to. . . . There's a large typewriter company. What are they called?

AVIS BERMAN: Royal or Remington?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, Remington. So he went to the headquarters of Remington and introduced himself to the top man, the president. Says he's going to write the great American novel, and he'd like a typewriter. So, "Oh great!" So they gave him one of his best typewriters free, and never saw him before, he walks out with a typewriter. [both laugh] Well, when you got a talent like that, you can go places.

AVIS BERMAN: Chutzpah.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Now I didn't have that kind of talent. [chuckles] I wonder what happened to him?

DON ROSS: That wasn't the guy you did the head of, was it?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Huh?

DON ROSS: That wasn't the guy you did the head of?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no, no, I. . . .

DON ROSS: That was another guy who was going to write the great American novel.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, yeah, I made a. . . .

DON ROSS: Chuck Smith?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, Chuck Smith. Yeah, well, he was, he was into, you know, he was okay. But the other, you know, the Georgian, he was a character! And that's marvelous, you know, you walk in and knocking on the door, and getting chummy with people. You take 'em out to lunch, and friendly, and. . . . I know we were walking on Broadway and 50th downtown, he was talking to people. "Hi pal!" You know, anybody. [laughs] Gee, I wonder what happened to the poor son of a bitch.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you know Daniel Chester French?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I went to him for a job when I was looking for the sculptor job. Yeah, he was on Eighth Street, too, close to where the Whitneys were, and he was a sweet little and nice, kind man. I knocked on the door and asked if he wanted an apprentice, and he, in a sweet way, said no, and then, you know. . . . [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Did you see him?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I met him. He was a sweet guy.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you see him afterwards, when you were working for Manship?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no, no, even Fraser, you know, I never even told Fraser I got on with Manship, or. . . . Yeah, you know, I have no manners, you know, no manners. Yeah, I don't, you know, uneducated.

AVIS BERMAN: Now didn't Gutzon Borglum have his studio right here in Stamford?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. [Jamie's] father had it for about five years. He just sold it. I used to work for them. Yeah, he used to work there. Yeah, I made some of the pots in that studio. Did you ever see it? It's a huge. . . . It would cost a million dollars to build now. It's all out of this heavy granite. Tall. It's like the Grand Central Station.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you know the Borglums at all?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No. I knew his brother Solon Borglum. When I was at the Art Students League, he was the instructor there. I never met Gutzon, though.

AVIS BERMAN: What did you learn from Solon? Was he a good teacher?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't know. Well, you know what they did. There was a nude model, and you made a clay model about two feet high, and when the model turned, you copied that silhouette, and when it turned, you copied that. There was no teaching there. I mean, it's not how I see sculpture done nowadays, they all, you know, they don't know how to teach. You know they turn. . . . Copy silhouettes. That's, that's not sculpture. That's what they all do, you know, copy silhouettes. That doesn't have anything to do with sculpture.

AVIS BERMAN: What is sculpture, then?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't know. And if I knew, I wouldn't tell you.

AVIS BERMAN: Why?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: As Picasso said, "Someone who wants to know, you know, you don't worry about then. If I knew the answer, I wouldn't even tell you. I'd keep it to myself." [laughs] No, sculpture is architecture.

AVIS BERMAN: You went to the Art Students League in 1912 or so, so you were only fifteen, right?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. And I checked on that. They had me on the jury last month, so I happened to mention [it] to the woman up there, and she went in the office, and then she came out with two cards. And there it was, 1912, August, my address where I lived in West Hoboken. And then 1917, there was another card. They had me right there. [laughs] I can't get away from them. In 1912. How many years is that now?

AVIS BERMAN: Seventy years, seventy years ago, nearly.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't believe it. [laughter] You're pulling my leg. [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Next year, August 1982, will be seventy years.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Aah, Jesus, you're right! I don't know. Terrible.

AVIS BERMAN: Um hmm. Who did you have as a teacher at either of those times?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: With the League?

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Solon Borglum was the, you know. . . . And the other school, there was no instr[uctor]. I'd just sit on the stool, they didn't come around. But the other one, at the Independent Art School, there was a guy called Homer Boss. Did you ever hear that name?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He was a nice fella. I don't know what he painted like or anything. A nice guy, very quiet. There was no, there was no criticism. I had a little sketch book, and made magazine things that were coming out, you know. But it was the only school in New York. You had to go to the Academy, you know. And that was the only free thing. You know, they had heard about Cézanne and Van Gogh.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And then, then you also, you worked at The Century, under Will Bradley, right?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, not for The Century, but for Will Bradley, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Uh huh.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And he was the art editor at Century magazine for a while. I was with him for a year or two, before I got on with Manship. He was a nice. He was a nice fella. I was lucky. I met nice people when I was young, you know, that's. . . . I didn't go to grammar school. I was even let back twice. But that wasn't my. . . . It wasn't my fault. I used to know the answers, but because I stuttered, I didn't raise my hand up. And then we were moving then, and I was left back another year, so I graduated a year late. [chuckles] And that's it. I didn't go to high school or college or anything, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you regret not going to high school?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's goddamn fortunate! I'd have been an idiot if I had gone to high school or. . . . If I'd gone to Harvard, I would have been a goddamn moron.

AVIS BERMAN: I want to know what you were doing for Will Bradley.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I was doing lettering, and hanging, and I was the office boy. I used to take the manuscripts to illustrators. I met John Sloan that way and James Montgomery Flagg. And I met Lionel Barrymore. You know, the brother, did you ever hear he had a brother, Lionel Barrymore? I met him. And afterwards I met John Barrymore. I got a good story about John Barrymore.

AVIS BERMAN: Why don't you tell it?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: This was around 1917 when we were down in Washington Mews. Manship had made a portrait of him, and I had to bring the plaster model up to his theater on 45th Street, and so I brought it in. He knew me, because he used to be in the studio. So I brought it up to him, and they were going out in the taxi. He wanted me to come along, and I was too shy. I said, "Oh, no, no," and, you know. And then he gave me a two-dollar tip, and I didn't want it, but he put it in my coat pocket up here, you know. So I went down and I watched him, and watched him work. There was Lachaise working there, you know, and Manship wasn't there. And he was always broke. His wife nagged, you know, everything. So he said. . . . I remember his French accent. He said, "Roo-ban, can you loan me two dollar?" So I gave him the. . . . John Barrymore gave me two dollars. So I took it out this way and gave it to him [laughing]

AVIS BERMAN: So in five minutes the two dollars was gone.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, from John Barrymore to Gaston Lachaise.

AVIS BERMAN: He must have been astonished that you had it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [laughs] Oh, boy! Yeah, he had it hard. He was always broke. You know, he used to hock his small bronzes in a hock shop to get five or ten dollars to keep going.

AVIS BERMAN: Was that because he had difficulty selling, or because his wife was so extravagant, or what?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, in those days it was tough, you know. Manship was successful, but he [Lachaise—AB] wasn't. He was supposed to be modern, and he had a tough time. Well, he was getting along. But his wife lived in a hotel on Fifth Avenue, and money, and then she had a son I guess he had to support too, or something, and studio rent and. . . . He killed himself. He used to work. . . . I remember, he had to go up around 42nd Street and 10th Avenue, there was a place there, and he was copying a Greek plaque—one of the famous Greek statues of a couple of figures. He was carving it in granite or hard stone for some, you know, for some rich man, you know. Making a copy, you know. And that wasn't his art. Just to make money with a jackhammer, you know, carving. You know, he was an artist on his own, but he was. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: He had to live.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. And it was tough. It was tough in the old days. Unless you had independent money, being an artist was a pain in the ass. Anyone that hasn't got independent money is an idiot to become an artist. I didn't say that loud enough.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you stuck with it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, but I was an idiot. [both laugh] [sound of thunder] Hey, it's going to rain again, huh?

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you quit your job working for Will Bradley?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I guess it was over. He only had so much work, and he was having it tough too, you know. I remember my salary was six dollars a week.

AVIS BERMAN: How far did that go?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, it kept me going. [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: Were you living at home?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. I used to ride the 42nd Street ferry, and the ferry was three cents, and from there. . . . I didn't even take the trolley cars; I used to walk.

AVIS BERMAN: Also, you were going to the Beaux-Arts Academy, and you were studying there?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I went there for a, for a couple of months around 1915, when I was going to the other place. And it was clay modeling, so I got the hang of clay there, you know. I went there, ah, maybe six months. And these would be people, instructors come. I remember one was Jo Davidson—you've read of him. And there used to be about a half a dozen students. And there was a place there, and it was subsidized by the Beaux Arts, the Academy or something; it was free. And, you know, there was clay there, and I got to feel the clay, and it was. . . . You know, fool around a little bit. Got the smell of clay. That must have been around 1915.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you ever become, did you ever get to know Davidson better, say, or Jacob Epstein? During the period when you were doing portrait heads, did you ever get to know those sculptors who otherwise were doing portraits, like Epstein, or Jo Davidson, or some of these people?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I knew Jo Davidson. I'd see him when he was coming around to Manship. He was getting a lot of publicity. His picture, or, you know, photogenic, was always. . . . And he was a pusher, you know, making people that were in the public eye, and everything. I remember when I was in Washington, making the Washington heads, in the Commerce Building, where the NRA was situated, and Johnson's office nearby—he gave me an office for a studio, and I had half a dozen heads there. And I'd see Jo Davidson just passing by, and the door was open. You'd think he'd walk in and say, "Hey, what's this?" you know, "you know me." Not a thing. Glances in there and. . . . That's the kind of people, uh, you know. . . . That's not being an artist. I guess he was pissed off I was making, you know, getting publicity and making heads. That was his racket. He just walked right past me. And I guess he went around Washington telling my stuff was junk. I don't know. [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, let me see. I guess I want to know, when you were at Manship's studio, what sort of things did you learn, and if you felt the experience was valuable?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, it was a job, you know. I was paid, and it was all right. And Manship was awfully fond of me, you know. But they never used live models. They just used plasteline, and he was always doing thousands of things. He had thousands of photographs, reprints, and he used to look at them.

AVIS BERMAN: What kind of prints?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Alanario, these photographs that are for sale, you know. Sculpture. There were two: Anderson and Alanario. They're still in business now. You know these photographs you buy. You know, like brown prints, paintings. He had stacks of those he bought in Italy, you know. You know, he used to look at those. So it was all, it was all archaeology, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He was a tech. . . . He was successful in that right time, you know. There was, we weren't in a war, and there was a lot of money around, and he sold bronzes and was popular. He was successful and made some money, and he was able to hire two or three people to work for him. So I was lucky then to be working for him.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I was wondering if the techniques that you learned there, since the craft was good, if that was helpful at all?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well, I mean, you know, and then sculpture was going on, plaster, casting. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Did he ever instruct you himself, or was it mostly Lachaise you were learning from?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, there was no instruction, and now that you mention it, he said, "You can't, you know, you can't teach. All we should know is keep the things simple, simple but rich." That was, that's the only art explanation I ever got out of him. Keep the thing simple but rich. But you can't teach that. Nowadays, all the professors in schools are, Jesus, they can talk your ear off, you know, how to make art, you know. A whole vocabulary, you know. I read it, and I drop dead. And I can't teach at all. I don't know that. When I was teaching in the school in the Whitney place there—that's gone—I'd say, "Come on, get hot! Step on it." [slaps table or desk] "Come on, show some pep! What's the matter with you?" But the other academics were on a dais, they

were _____ _____. I don't know anything about that. Just get them into it. [laughing] So as a teacher, I don't know, I'm no teacher.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I don't know now, I'll ask you about this. Now didn't you teach at Pratt for a time?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I was the same way there too, you know, "Come on, get hot, do it."

AVIS BERMAN: And you taught in Newark for a while too, I mean. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well, it's the same way there. Well, the students would say, "Look. . . ." They were smart enough, they used to say, "Don't waste time on us," because I was making some of my things there, and they said, "We'll learn more from you, watching you work and how you change things. Every time you come, you change the composition." They said, "We learn ten times more from that than. . . ." They said, "Don't waste your time trying to come around teaching us. Just let us watch you when you work."

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. So you were really giving demonstrations when you were teaching?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, I was making my own. . . . Yeah, when I'd go around.

[Tape 1, side B]
[Much of this tape side is fuzzy—Trans.]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: . . . and it was an ideal position. It was a huge studio they had out there, and it was a lot of fun.

AVIS BERMAN: So you liked teaching?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It brought me back to life, you know, being with them, and they loved me cause I wasn't like an instructor. They had painting classes on the top floor, and they had German professors, you know, and I was altogether different. I used to, you know, I used to throw clay around, and. . . . We were on the ground floor in the back, and there was a bar nearby so I used to sneak out with them and take them to the bar for an hour and drink and then come back and paint. So we had quite a lot of fun.

AVIS BERMAN: So you liked teaching then?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, you know I liked being with people, you know. And it wasn't teaching. I'd just go around, you know. I'm not the academic, "Do this, do that." It was, "Yeah, fine. Yeah, pretty good."

AVIS BERMAN: Did you give up the teaching for any reason in particular?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, just. . . . Well, the last one was at Pratt Institute, and that was in the evening, and it was only twenty dollars for a session. I had go all the way from here, all the way out to Pratt. Had to change subways three times, and go there at night and then come back, take the train, come back, for a lousy twenty dollars. And that was in 1950. Well, I did it because I needed the money, I guess. I made a lousy twenty dollars, all the way out there and all the way back. I was in my sixties then, too, you know. Aah, it's a crazy world.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And then, you know, all the professors write about art. They don't know what an artist had to suffer to make art, and yet they'll go to a show and just slash and dash, and they can't draw a straight line themselves, you know. They don't know what I do, how an artist . . . struggles to live, and have a family and live, you need to do something. And they go around like they know it all, you know. The curators of museums, you know, they can't even talk to 'em. They won't talk to an artist, whoever, it is. . . . You know, we're slummy, you know, they have their own, their own circle, and they don't even come. . . . But they're living on us, and we suffer and had to fight without anyone giving a goddamn about us for years, and they get all the jobs. They get these grants from the conglomerates or corporations, and they even hang out with the millionaires, and they don't give a goddamn, you know. The only artists they like are the ones that kiss their ass, and all that shit, terrible. The art world is disgusting. I don't live with any of the artists of this age; I live with the great artists of the past. When I think of art, I think of Velázquez and Poussin, and RUEBENs and Titian and, you know, the ones I like. I don't think of . . . anybody. There's hardly anyone I respect in the art world that I'm entranced by or would love to meet or anything. Nobody. I don't look up, I'm always looking down, and I don't see anyone to really look up to. And that's bad, you know. I don't even have an artist to hang out with, you know, not. . . . I wish I had Lautrec, you know, go to the bars and get drunk with. Motherwell is living over here. He's an asshole as a neighbor. Do you think he'd stop in and see me? You know. Stupid snobs, you know. I'm an old artist. Do you think anyone would stop in and see what I'm doing, talk to me? Or a curator, or a director, or a collector? No. Fine, it's great that way. But it shows what they are. You know, I'm talking about humanity. [pauses] I'm talking about majesty, genius, nobility. It's scarce in this age. It's a great age for technology, which is marvelous. Which is great. Aesthetically it's. . . . Aesthetically, it's third class. Now, we've said enough, let's have a drink. Come on.

You got me. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Stop making an asshole of myself again.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you know Louis Schanker, who recently died?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, yeah. Oh, he died?

AVIS BERMAN: Just about two or three weeks ago.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, he did, did he? Yeah, he used to live out here. He was married to some millionaire. He had a nice little studio, which I never saw. I met him on the art project before he was married, and then he used to be out here. Then when she died, he moved to New York. He died? A couple of weeks ago. How old was he? In his seventies?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, he was about seventy-eight.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Seventy-eight, as old as that? Yeah, that's right. He was close to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Um hmm.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Seventy-eight, I'm six years older than he is. So he died, huh?

AVIS BERMAN: I was just wondering because, since he also lived out here in Stamford.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, yeah, he used to live here. You know, I don't read the papers or anything anymore, so I don't know what's going on. So Schanker died. Hmm. He was a nice fella.

AVIS BERMAN: Who were some of the other artists you knew while you were on the project?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, I don't know. If you named the names, I. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Well, did you know Rothko, for example?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Who?

AVIS BERMAN: Rothko?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I met him a couple times. I didn't meet him much. I used to be care. . . . Yeah, I was a sculptor, and everyone was a painter, and I was in, you know. . . . If I'd be in their circle, I'd be sitting by him. There'd be a Rothko or Gorky or, you know, all the others. They didn't take me as. . . . They were painters, so they didn't talk to me, you know, or take me seriously. You know, "That's crazy Nakian," you know. "He made Babe Ruth, or did this. He's all right, but. . . ." "But they're studying. . . ." You know, you know. They're thinking about other things. So they had their own group. So I didn't think much of them because I thought they were all copying Paris. I didn't have much respect even for Gorky. I thought he was kissing the ass of the French, you know. I didn't realize how good he was, because I didn't see his work. I thought it was. . . . Being a sculptor, I had my own problems. I didn't think of the problems they, of the painters. I had my own struggle, and it was all alone. [chuckling] Painters had company. They could talk and mix and, you know, and I didn't have friends that would buy a painting. Sculpture no one ever wanted, you know. It was all, it was crazy.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you say you wanted to stop for a couple of minutes?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, let's quit and have a drink.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.
[Interruption in taping]

AVIS BERMAN: Let me put this on. Okay. You met Louis Eilshemius then?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I met. . . . There's a bronze head of his in existence somewheres. I made a head, cast in bronze. He posed for me. That was when I got back from Washington in 1936. And he, he used to live on 57th Street between Madison and Third in a brownstone. I think they owned the building. And he had an older brother, when they were living there, and they had a servant, a German woman, taking care of them. There was an art dealer, I forget his name.

AVIS BERMAN: Valentine Dudensing.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hmm?

AVIS BERMAN: Dudensing?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He was originally from Philadelphia; I just can't think. That's where I met Gorky. We got friendly; he was showing in his gallery.

DON ROSS: Boyer?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, [Philip—AB] Boyer. Yeah, did you ever hear of him?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: So he was a friend of [Dikran—AB] Kelekian, so he got the money from Kelekian. Eilshemius was famous in those days. A lot of publicity about him, you know. So he got the money. . . . A few hundred dollars, I should, I should make a head of him. . . . Which I never got a penny of, I don't think. [chuckles] So I used to go there, you know, maybe half a dozen, ten times, and he was lying in a cot in the corner where his dog. . . . He was hit by a taxi, so he couldn't walk. And I used to have to kneel and model him and everything, you know. And. . . . It still hurts when I touch it. And he had pain, I guess, so every now and then, he'd holler, "Ouch! I give up, life is rotten!" While I'm modeling he's screaming. Five minutes later, again, "Ouch! I give up, life is rotten." [both laugh] Oh, I had that. . . . I always repeat that phrase when someone. . . . "Ouch! I give up, life is rotten!" He was a character.

AVIS BERMAN: He let you, he didn't mind you sculpting, though?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no, he was posing for me, yeah. No, he loved it. He loved publicity. . . . He was even saying, "See, I wrote this. I sent it to the papers." He said, "I'm smart. I know how to get publicity."

DON ROSS: Well, didn't he, wasn't he, didn't he have an article that he wrote, a weekly article or something?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He used to write on the editorial page of The Evening Sun. That was the, that was the paper then. That section, "Letters to the Editor." And he used to write them, and they were famous. And he used to call himself Mahatma, you know the Hindu name.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He thought that he was a great composer, a great musician, and he was as good as Shakespeare, and this and that. And they used to be long articles that he used to write. And everyone used to read about him, and I used to read 'em, before I knew who he was. So it got around, and I think also Marcel Duchamp and Lachaise got curious one day, and they visited his studio and they saw the stuff, and they said, "Hey, this stuff is good." Yeah, and that's one story. And then, you know, there have been shows of his in the fifties and sixties that, you know, almost every month.

DON ROSS: What was his favorite reading material?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hmm?

DON ROSS: What was his favorite reading matter?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, yeah, he used to have girlie magazines right next to his table, that's all he'd looked at, girlie magazines. [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you could tell that from his art.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [laughs] They were corny enough. They're not like what you get now. [both laugh]

AVIS BERMAN: I guess what I should ask you, because before I really didn't talk to you that much about your friendship and your working relationship with Lachaise and sharing that studio for two years.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. Well, after Manship went. . . . He closed his studio in 1920. Went to Paris, opened a studio there for a couple of years. So Lachaise. . . . Well, Lachaise used to have a studio on 14th Street. One of the old studio buildings, you know. But after Manship left, he got a studio on Sixth Avenue and Twelfth Street—Eleventh or Twelfth, you know. It's still there, you know. One of these two-story buildings. So I shared a studio

with him. I used to help him out, so I would pay the rent. So I was there from 1922 to 19. . . . 1921 to 1923. And I carved a couple of things there in stone, and I used to help him out a little bit.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you like his work then?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I was never too crazy about it. I'm classical Greek, and he was Hinduish, you know. It didn't agree with me too much.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, but sometimes people write that you're influenced by Lachaise. How do you feel about that?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, yeah, they all say that, and, well, I was fighting him. . . . I fought Manship, you know, and I'd fight anyone. And I fought Lachaise. I was, I was anti- his. . . . He had a one-woman concept of his work. You know, that one thing that's sort of Hinduish, you know. It wasn't modern at all, and in those days what was in the air was Picasso, Brancusi and this, and so he was. . . . He was looking backwards; he wasn't up with his times at all. And I know when I was working there I was making things, and he looked at me and he said, "Hey, you're an abstract artist," and I didn't even know the term then. [laughing] And he'd said, "Hey, you're an abstract guy." I didn't even know I was being abstract.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, he recognized. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: To me it, to me, is a high class Manship, you know. I'm not [terribly worried]. It's too naturalistic. You know, that Standing Woman there, that just, it's all flesh, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Um hmm.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hindu sculpture is the same thing, even better, you know. I don't know, he's all right. He was great to me, you know. He liked me, he helped me, and everything was fine.
But I was always an independent. If I didn't get inspired by it, I used to tell, tell people. When I was with Manship, he wanted me to go to the American Academy in Rome. I didn't have to compete, because he was the president, and that was within the studio. I answered one word: "No!" And he jumped back. You know, he could have fired me. I needed the job there. I said no, because I knew the Roman Academy was no place for me. I'd known about Cézanne, vanGogh. I mean, you know that. And I knew what the Rome Academy was. It was Manship. I said, "No!" [both chuckle] He jumped back. Can you imagine anyone else saying no when you could go to Rome for a couple of years, when you're taken care of—money and everything. I said no. He could never figure me out. And he respected me for it, I guess. Years later, when he came back, he came to Weehawken where I was carving stone animals. Wanted me to join him again, you know. And he was arguing, he said, "You know, this modern art stuff you are doing is all full of bunk." Brancusi, Picasso are just a fad. How're you going to earn your living? How're you going to take care of your father?" He came back, and he wanted. . . . He was all alone. He wanted, he didn't have Lachaise or anyone, he wanted me to come back with him. And I couldn't answer him. I just stayed quiet, and let him talk. Two or three hours. And I was being patronized by the Whitneys then, so I didn't a need job. And he was trying to get me back. And he never forgave me. I used to go and see him once in a while, but it was just like a little visit, you know. Strange, strange thing to have happened.

DON ROSS: Reuben knew Brancusi too.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I was getting to that.

DON ROSS: Oh, you were, okay.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. I'm trying to go somewhat chronologically here, because I've asked, because also at that time, I guess when you were with Manship and sharing the studio with Lachaise that you were doing animals, of course.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hmm?

AVIS BERMAN: You were an animal sculptor during that point?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I started out, you know, I stayed away from the figure. I figured, I think I was smart. Animals are decorative, you know. I trained myself in animals, then I went to. . . . Then after that, then all of a sudden, I made heads, and I made a statue of Babe Ruth. And that's without models, you know. When the, when the time came, I went to the figure. But I didn't force myself.

AVIS BERMAN: So I was going to ask you why, why you did the animals first, you see. You felt it was easier or more professional?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, animals are very sculptural and, you know, very sculptural. . . . And it was the right thing for me to do to get step-by-step. And I think I was smart in doing it.

DON ROSS: Not to mention the fact that you were influenced by that book on the Altamira cave drawings.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, oh, that was a great influence.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, when did you see that?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, the 1920s. I bought it. It was in a bookstore called Weyhe's—it was the only place where there were artbooks and exhibitions. He had it. And it was about a hundred bucks, so I asked him if he wanted to exchange a terra cotta for it. First time I made a terra cotta. So he says, "Sure." So I gave him a terra cotta, and I got the book. And that was a great, you know, those things are marvelous, and especially the way they were drawn by the. . . .

DON ROSS: [Royal, Broyall].

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [Royal, Broyall], the French, the archaeologist that wrote about them. He made these crayon drawings of them. They're better than the originals. [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: So when you. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I've got the book in the house somewheres. I ought to take it out and look at it once in a while. And that was a great influence.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, because you were doing the red chalk drawings with the bulls and all. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: . . . .and that was sort of some of that coming from there?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, inspired by those, I guess, yeah. That was a great influence.

AVIS BERMAN: Some of those ones that are in the Whitney that you did around '21 or so.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Someone came around a little while ago. Oh, yeah. I met a commercial artist at a party, and he said, "I own about twenty-five of your early drawings." He said, "When Mrs. Force died, they were auctioned, and someone bought them and game them to me." And I was into seeing 'em. So he came around a few months ago with 'em, and I got two or three he gave me. I exchanged the drawings, and he gave me two or three. But they were the ones I gave Mrs. Force. She gave a couple to the Whitney, and she kept the rest for herself. When she died, someone got them, and this guy contacted me and I saw the drawings. [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Did you like them?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Sure! I liked them. It's all modern. You know, in 1922 they were, you know, they're like modern art. I made 'em in 19. . . . And who was doing modern art in 1922 here, you know what I mean? Hardly anybody.

DON ROSS: I'll say one thing for them, Reuben. It's one of the few times in the last fifty years you used decent paper.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, that was. . . .

DON ROSS: Well, that was on good paper, I'd say!

RUEBEN NAKIAN: You know, that was handmade Chinese paper. That's what Lachaise used. We used to go down to Chinatown in the stores, and we had to explain we wanted. . . . And they came in, they were sort of folded up, and some were single and some were folded up, you know. It was Chinese, Chinese paper. I had to go to Chinatown and try to explain what I want and buy this paper. So that's good paper. I guess it's handmade Chinese paper, Don?

DON ROSS: It's gorgeous stuff, Reuben, gorgeous.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: That's fine. Yeah, 1922.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I guess I should ask you about how you got the stipend from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and how all that came about?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I'd heard about her through Lachaise and other ones, you know, and then, see, Mrs. Force. And then I had a picture in the Dial Magazine which Cynthia Jaffe [McCabe—AB] has, a picture of a jack rabbit, you know. And they even used it as a poster in those days, you know, to put around. So I took that and went to see her, and she said, "I would like to come to your studio." Then a week or so later, she came with Forbes—Forbes

Watson, the editor of The Arts magazine—you know, the two of them. And I was carving animals in Lachaise's studio, and then she had me come and she suggested that. . . . She says, well, I should get my own studio and they'd give me money and it was fine. And they kept it up for five years. And then I had a studio in Weehawken Heights, and she said, "Well you'd better come and have a studio in New York," so they found a place on Christopher Street, and then. . . . I know the rent was eighty-five dollars. That was a lot of money in those days. So I moved to Christopher Street.

AVIS BERMAN: How much did they used to give you?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't know, $200 or $250 or something and they also paid the rent.

AVIS BERMAN: $250 a month, then?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Every month, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Plus they paid the rent?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Quite generous.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I think I got around fifteen, twenty thousand dollars, and that was a lot of money in those days.

AVIS BERMAN: Certainly was. Now did you have to give them anything or do anything for this?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, they didn't want anything. I just gave them a few drawings. The sculpture I made I kept to myself. I never met Mrs. Whitney. She paid all the money, but she stayed in the background. All I saw was Mrs. Force. I don't know whether she was shy or what.

AVIS BERMAN: And Mrs. Force would visit the studio periodically?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hardly ever. I had to. . . . I had a show at the Whitney Studio, had my first show in 1925, [1923. The second show was in 1926—AB] . . .you know. I had a show of sculpture there. I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: Now did you ask to have it?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I was sort of independent. I didn't go around seeing much. Their club meetings I didn't go to. I was a mean son-of-a-bitch.

AVIS BERMAN: [chuckles] Did you ask for the shows, or did they say. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, they came out. I know once I spent a week in Mrs. Force's country place out in Jersey somewheres [Pennsylvania—AB]. She wanted me to spend a week there. I don't know who, or who took care of me, or what. It must have been a servant, what was. . . . I don't know. I have an awful memory.

DON ROSS: Did you write her a thank you note, Reuben?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, I didn't thank them. I didn't ever do anything.

DON ROSS: Ah, you're rotten.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Even after they dropped me, I didn't even thank 'em. I'm a savage.

DON ROSS: No kidding.

AVIS BERMAN: When you had those shows, did you install the work yourself, or what?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. Well, they did.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you pick which ones you wanted in or did they?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I didn't have many, just the few I had carved, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: During that time, in the twenties, were you ever interested in folk art? You know, a lot of the American artists were interested in the folk sculpture in the twenties, in the weather vanes and all that.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no, no. No, I never went for the folk stuff. I always had Michelangelo in the back of my

head, and he, he wasn't folksy.

AVIS BERMAN: Um hmm. Well, let me see. So, we were. . . . Don just mentioned the Brancusi before. So what, did you meet him through Joseph Brummer? Is that how you met him?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No. I used to see pictures of his in the advanced magazines. I thought they were great, you know. Inspired by them. And so he came to America, and they all knew—it was through contacts—that I was like a disciple of his. So when he came, he used my studio to store his things. He was either at the Brummer or the _____. It was twice, at the _____ and Brummer. I think the first time was at Brummer. So he was in my studio for a while until he found another place. And I went, and when he was putting up a show, I went to the Brummer and gave him a little hand or something. And then some years later he had a show at Wildenstein. I was handy with him, you know. So when I had the Guggenheim in 1930-31, I went to Paris, I stopped in to see him, and he recognized me and embraced me. So he went out shopping. He bought some lamb; he made a shishkabob and some [peasant] rolls, and we sat down and eat. And I saw that, the marvelous studio he had, you know. He couldn't speak English, I couldn't speak French, so he'd just [gesture]. . . . I don't know, we got along. [laughs] He was a little tiny fellow. So I saw him twice when I was in Paris. Oh, yeah, now, you know, then when I went there in 1930, anticipating, you know, the experience of seeing what he was doing, and I was disappointed. I saw what he was doing was like Arp's sculpture. He had a few ideas of. . . . That head of Mlle. Pogany and a few ideas. There are lots of, you know, know, he had three or four concepts and. . . . Simplicity, he did that, and then that got worn out, and he was making lumps and bumps, which Henry Moore and Arp and all those are doing, just like a bag of potatoes, you know, nothing. . . . You know, doughnut thing. And I saw that right away. I didn't say anything, but. . . . So I thought, "Oh, hell, that's out the window. The Brancusi business is. . . . It's finished." He had something and, you know. . . . Its like a mine. You know, you dig a mine, and you come to the bottom and there's no more nuggets. And I was smart. . . . You know, I must of had some intelligence, I was smart enough to. . . . I had some friends that were, that were in Italy. I went down to Italy, and I spent time at the Naples Museum looking at the Pompeiian frescoes and sculpture, looking at that stuff. I spent a half a day in Rome, and I never went back. And then I got sick of Italy, and I was supposed to have the Guggenheim for two years, but I sent a cablegram to Henry Allen Moe, who was the head of it, saying, "I'm an American artist. I'm sick of, sick of Europe, and I'm coming back." And that was the end. I didn't get a second year. So I came back. I made Babe Ruth, I made heads, and, you know, Americana.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [laughs] Went to Washington.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: NRA. [chuckles] Ah, Jesus Christ.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what, what did you like when you were in Europe?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I was a young guy. I went to the Louvre, you know, and all the sculpture they got, the millions of sculptures, paintings, and, you know, a young guy, looking around. I didn't see much modern sculpture, just looking at modern paintings around. And then hanging around the cafes, and oh, you know, a young guy. I was crazy about Paris when I first went there. After three months, I got bored with it. And so we went to Sorrento and lived there, and I used to go to Naples once in a while. I got bored there. Just dying to wait for the day so I could wait for a boat to take me back. When I came back to America, I went to Fourteenth Street, the Fourteenth Street Park. I kissed the ground. "Hooray, I'm back in America." So I began making heads of artists and Babe Ruth. You know, Americana was in the air then.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course. But you didn't go to Greece or the Aegean or any of those?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No I didn't. No I didn't go to Greece. I didn't even go back to Rome. I've never been to Florence, of which I'm glad. We were in Rome for one or two days. I didn't see much. I've even forgotten. I didn't even. . . . I saw the Sistine Chapel, but I didn't see the, I didn't see the Raphael rooms, which I'd like to see before I die. You know, the Raphael frescoes. But I might go back some day.

AVIS BERMAN: Have you been back to Europe since then?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, in. . . . When was it? Five, six, seven years ago, we, we had to go to Verona. We had some of our sculpture there, and The Goddess of the Golden Thighs was cast, so we had to go there and complete it. So we spent a month in Verona, and that was an interesting place. Then we took a train ride to Padua, and I saw the Giotto church, which is one of the greatest things in the world. And. . . . And where else have I been? I've been to Venice—there was a Biennale in 1968.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I spent a month in Venice, but I didn't even go the churches to see what the painting were. That was the time of the exhibition, the student riots. We had enough trouble with our sculpture, and I. . . . I was disgusted. I came back quick. The Italians are just as bad as Americans, a bunch of shitheads.

AVIS BERMAN: So you've never been to Greece or the Aegean?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, everyone was saying, "Go to Greece." And I had no desire. Greece, I see it when Pericles, when they were building the Parthenon. That's the way I see it. Now it's, now it's a greasy restaurant. [all chuckle]

AVIS BERMAN: So you just needed the. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't have to see it. All the things are in fragments. I've seen 'em all. I know what they look like.

DON ROSS: And he doesn't like mosquitoes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And I hate mosquitoes. See, we went to a place last week, a friend of ours, just eaten up. I got my hands scratched and my arms eaten up. The hell with the country. That's out, too.

AVIS BERMAN: I understand completely.

DON ROSS: From now on, huh, Reuben?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [laughs] I'm staying right here. [pounding for emphasis]

AVIS BERMAN: But you just needed the idea of Greece to inspire you, really?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I'm more Greek that the goddamn Greeks! I don't have to go there.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I guess, I guess I should ask you about that. When did you realize that, I guess the, you know, the idea of Greek art and what Greece stands for was so important to you?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Let's see, when I was a young kid, I found a book called Bullfinch's Greek Mythology, and that was my Bible, and they were all corny old, corny woodcuts, and the stories about, they're all of that. I went for that like a ton of bricks.

DON ROSS: And that's not the full version?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And that was bowdlerized, yeah. It was a corny thing. I don't know what happened to it. Geez, I guess it's gone. But then the only thing on Greek Mythology was Bullfinch's. [laughs] Now they have such marvelous, you know, books that really _____ _____. But gee, I went for those stories. You know, then the. . . . And the Metropolitan Museum was all full of plaster. You know, the main floor, it was all plaster casts, the Michelangelos, Greeks, the Parthenon, everything. And so I saw original casts of all the great sculptures. They didn't have to be in marble, because they were, they're actually copied from the marble. There was Donatello, the Italians, the Greeks, the French. You know, there was a Parthenon sculpture up inside—and everything. So that, my training was with the Metropolitan Museum, and then I used to go the Museum of Natural History, go to look at that. And I used to go to the public library, Forty-second Street in the art room. I think it was Room 315. And they had old-fashioned books, engravings. I used to go try to hunt up things. They were all corny engravings of the masters. So these were three places that were free. Did I tell you how I first. . . .? This is a cute story. It was around 1910, I heard that there's a place in New York called an art museum. Somebody mentioned it. "My god, yeah, what's that? An art museum. I'll have to go and see it." So I talked to another schoolmate of mine, who didn't give a damn. His father had a milk route, with cows and everything. You know, he was selling milk, and he was Scot, he was a Scotsman, a tall lanky, young guy. I said, "Come on, come with me." "Ah, I'll go with you." So we walked on Weehawken's, you know, the mountainous steps, you walk down the steps. Forty-second Street Ferry was three cents in those days, so it cost us. . . . And we stopped at Eleventh Avenue, so we're walking from Eleventh to Fifth, and then from Fifth up to Eighty-second Street. And I saw a beautiful marble building, so I started running up. But then in the door there was a sign saying, "Mondays and Fridays, 25 Cents. The rest of the week free." We happened to be on a Monday or a Friday. And my friend got mad, "Goddammit, you got me to come up here. We can't even go in." Twenty-five cents was like twenty. . . . You know. It was unthinkable for us. But I didn't give a damn. Next week, all by myself, I got down there, spent three cents on the ferry, walked up, went in the place with all these sculptures, Michelangelo. . . . And I felt I had known 'em all my life. I didn't have to learn 'em. Before all I used to see were cartoons, Mutt and Jeff. I thought that was art, and I saw Michelangelo and RUEBENs, you know. I felt I had known 'em all my life. It was just like that. Then, gee, I used to go there all the time, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Once you found it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And the place used to be empty, only half a dozen people wandering around. Now you can't get in the place. I hate it now. All these people moaning. What the fuck have they got to do with art? Why don't they stay home and get drunk?

DON ROSS: After all, if it's good enough for you, it's good enough them, right?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No. [laughter]

AVIS BERMAN: We were just talking about the Greeks. I was just wondering if you, when you got to the point when you really started thinking about approaching major themes in your work? I mean, when did you realize that, "Hey, you just don't do this or."

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I realized years ago, you know, looking at the Venus de Milo. It's a great masterpiece. Well, even when I was young, I realized it's been done. You can't do it again. You have to find a way how to, how to make another kind of Venus. I even realized that when I was young. You know, it's there, it's been done. Once a statement is great. . . . When Shakespeare wrote Henry IV or Hamlet, that's it. You can't improve on it, you know. You're stupid if you try to imitate it. I realized that years ago. So a man like the French sculptor. . . . What's his name, who made things in Greek fashion, you know, as well as. . . . After Rodin, what's his name? You know, after Rodin. A French sculptor, really. Greek naturalistic moods.

AVIS BERMAN: Maillol?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's almost something like Lachaise, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I think they're better, I'd rather be Maillol than Lachaise. But it's, it's imitation Greek. See, when I. . . . See these late things I made there? Did you see 'em?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: These are real Greek, and it's the first time since the Greek that I did the same thing but made an advance, so I made a synthesis of the synthesis of Greek sculpture. But yet they're pure Greek. They've got the innocence and the vitality of the way the Greeks made them. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: They're very personal.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: . . . and I synthesized them. Is that the word? Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: But they're real Greek. They've got the. . . . The passion and the inspiration were Greek, I think. So other sculpture is nice copies of them. You know, imitations. You know, there's thousands of wonderful sculptures done, but historically they'd be classified as a. . . . If you were to classify Cézanne, as [opposed to the junk]. There's a few paintings, a few sculptures. But. . . . I think the sculpture, even the ones I made in the Sixties, are. . . . It isn't going to be realized until a couple hundred years after I'm gone that, I took classic sculpture and made it alive, and yet it followed the tree. You know, the real thing, but yet it isn't imitation, you know. I made a new variation, you know, a new. . . . Well, I advanced it. These are advancements. I think of the old. . . . If Phidias saw those little things there, he'd appreciate it. He'd see it. You see, all the others. . . . You can take Michelangelo or any of the Greeks. It's stuff done by genius, but it is, but it is not a technical advancement in sculpture—which I think I've, fortunately, I think I've done. Michelangelo is great, but it's, but it's imitation. It's all muscles and flesh and, you know, great elements of _____ _____ and Donatello. But sculpturally, how to take pure sculpture and push it, squeeze the essence out of it, and yet still make it alive, and yet let it have a simpler. . . . And yet it isn't like a Brancusi, with just. . . . You see, Brancusi sculpture is like a foot. It's a fragment. I got a composition. I've got a story there. Three figures there. There's a male sex with a big instrument, and a female, and there's a spirit going up, it's a spirituality. It's a composition. It's got a story. It isn't a fragment. . . . Rodin, most of Rodin's things are so fragmented. His Walking Man, the composition in sculpture. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what I should ask you about Rodin, is when you came across him first and. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, I'd seen him at the Metropolitan Museum. They had all his marbles in the, in the court there. And, oh, that was, they were brilliant works. I was inspired by it. Now they've got most of them down in

the basement.

AVIS BERMAN: What did you like best about Rodin?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, the man's a genius. . . . You know, the things he handled in clay, I like his touch. You know, he's got passion and sex and stuff. He goes, he comes out of Michelangelo and Greece and everything, but he had juice. He's not a dry fag.

DON ROSS: Who's this?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Rodin.

DON ROSS: I didn't know there were any around who. . . . Who you thought of that way.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, we were talking before about meeting Brancusi and helping him with his show at the Brummer Gallery. Is that when you met Duchamp? Or did you know him before?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, I used to see Duchamp in restaurants, in an Italian restaurant in the Village, but I never spoke to him. So I'm, when I was making these heads. . . . Well, I was in Staten Island and married and out of the picture. After the Washington show, nothing happened. Came back broke, no sales, no nothing. I was out there all alone. Felt I had to come back to New York, get in the swing again, and took some play, with a wife and two kids, had no money. So I got a seventeen-dollar-a-month studio in MacDougal Street. "What shall I do? Well, the best thing is make heads." So I called up people, and I was making heads of friends of mine and maybe they'd buy it. I got two or three hundred dollars for 'em. I was in New York; they'd take me out to dinner, my friends. So, you know, I got famous people. So I called up Marcel Duchamp. He said, "Sure, I'll pose for you." He happened to live on. . . . That was in '43, during the war, and all the Jews in Germany were being taken to the gas chambers, and we didn't know anything about it. We were sitting here, and I was on Fourteenth Street and you know, there was a war but we, we were away from it, we didn't know anything about it, and I was thinking about art, and here's a man posing for me, and can you imagine what was going on? I'm so lucky I wasn't in Europe. I'm here trying to do art. So I used to see him in the morning, and we used to go across the street to a restaurant, have some eggs, eggs and coffee, and then come up and talk to me.

AVIS BERMAN: How long did it take to do that head?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, you know, I'd do things in three or four, five sittings.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: An hour and a half or two. So when, so when I was making. . . . He was a nice fellow. He had a marvelous studio, you know, a cheap place. So I asked him, "Why aren't you doing art anymore?" and he said, "Well," he said, "an artist has four or five ideas and you make 'em. I had four or five ideas and I made them." Then he said, "Besides that, I don't want to get in the hands of the art dealers. I want to be free. So I play chess. I'm free."

AVIS BERMAN: What did you think of that when you heard that?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: What he thought of it?

AVIS BERMAN: No, what did you think of what he said?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I thought it was logical. I thought he was limited. He just, he wasn't a true artist. He was a smart, intelligent guy, and he used modern art and he, he made half-a-dozen things that are good, but. . . . But he couldn't fight Picasso, so he was smart enough to quit. Picasso was a genius. He had talent.

AVIS BERMAN: Picasso is a great favorite of yours?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Huh?

AVIS BERMAN: Picasso is a great favorite of yours?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. I mean, he's very important. I don't look at his things. I don't look at his late things. You know, six eyes on one side of the face is. . . . But you know he was influenced by American cartoons like the Katzenjammer Kids. When I was a kid, we were too poor to get the Sunday paper, and I used to go to a friends house and get the Sunday paper so I could see the Katzenjammer Kids—which was drawn by a man called Rudolph Dirks, and, in his last years, during Prohibition, there was a club in MacDougal where the artists used to

go. . . .

Tape 2, side A

AVIS BERMAN: When you made that portrait of Duchamp, did you realize that that was a real breakthrough?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No. You know what it is? When I made the head, I made it, I copied him close, and he has a head like an Egyptian mummy, you know, a Pharaoic mummy, you know his type? And I had a. . . . The modeling was. . . . It was damn. . . . It was like a Rodin. It was damn good. But I had to go haywire, and after he posed, when I took a. . . . I had a studio on Thirteenth Street and Seventh Avenue, and I worked there. I zinged, banged, bipped, and abstracted it, you know. Then I had it for years. No one looked at it, no one thought about it. It was in the cellar, and I gave it to my students as a loan. They thought I gave it to 'em [laughs] but later on, I got it back.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And I don't know, you know, they were all, been cast in bronze, edition of seven or nine, and they were all fighting for 'em. And when I made that thing, you know, Gorky saw that; he didn't say anything about it. So that was done in '43. Then after that I made a head of Kelekian. See the bronze?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I think that's, that's even a greater head. That's, I made that head, and that was made on 57th Street in an office room, an empty office room, _____ _____. [laughing] And that was done in '44, maybe, a year later after the Duchamp heads. [laughs] Yeah, maybe. . . .
I made heads, I thought I could earn a living from it. But to make heads, you have to be academic, and you have to be on the right side of the street. You've gotta be in with the socialites, and even that's a pain in the ass. Even they don't go for it anymore, because photography has taken over; they can sit for a photograph. You know, it was a William Penn, or. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Irving Penn.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And you get ten thousand dollars for it. You sit on your ass, and he takes, it takes twenty minutes to make a photograph. The sculptor is passé. So I wasted years. Instead of doing abstraction. Well, you know, I was thinking about art, and I was trying to make. . . . You know, the. . . . My whole damn life was a fight for a living. And I don't know how I reached this stage. I'm still living, and I'm making art. Trying to make a living copying someone's mug, you know. I'm glad I did it. I think I made three or four very good heads. But it was a waste of time, because I used to make 'em, they wouldn't buy em, and I had to wait for them, they wouldn't show up, and. . . . Instead of being smart like Henry Moore, sitting down making lumps and bumps and getting in with the racket. Pushing himself. He wasn't, he didn't make any heads, or anything. He was just smart enough to make what the supply of the market wants, and he made it. You don't have to have genius for what he did. You need a smart talent, you know, be a businessman. I was trying to make, you know, art and. . . . The heads were good. They were too good for the market to sell. The society people won't take 'em. It was a little bit like van Gogh making art. So they didn't click. I used to make 'em, you know, and. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, they weren't quite Expressionist.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, expression, that's the word for it. And, you know, no money. So I spent, you know, fighting how to make a fuckin' living.

AVIS BERMAN: Just before you did the Duchamp heads, you said that you'd asked some of your friends to pose. Now who were some of the people you. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, the people I knew. You know, I knew a lot of the people who wanted to sit for me. People I'd meet. I think if they sat three times I had a head done. I couldn't do it now. I haven't made a head in twenty-five years. If I tried making a head now, geez, I'd have to start like an amateur. I wouldn't know what I'd do. But, make a nose, I was into it and, you know, people would come fast in the evening, and, you know, I'd sit down and throw out a head. And I made a lot of. . . . They're gone or smashed up or, you know, I don't know where. I even made a head of a grocery—vegetable store—man on Sixth Avenue when I had my studio on MacDougal Street. I used to go there to buy an apple or a fruit or something. And he was a nice Italian guy. He looked like Mussolini or somebody. So he found out I was an artist, so he said, "Hey, could you make a picture of me? Could you make a sculpture of me?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "How much?" I looked at him, and I said, "Seventy-five dollars." He said, "Okay." Can you imagine this? He had a fruit stand, you know. He was a serious-looking Italian, a nice little fruit stand. He wanted a sculpture of him made. Fine. So he used to come to my MacDougal place—right where the coffee shops are, you know, on the top floor, fourth floor up. And he used to come and. . . . And then he used to fall asleep, so after a while I was smart, and I made coffee. So he came three or four or five

times, and I made a goddamn good head of his, and I cast it in plaster and I gave it to him. So there's another head around. I don't know who or who he was or what I. . . . That was in, when I came to New York in '42 or '43, something like that. [laughs] Imagine. Oh, yeah! And that seventy-five dollars paid the rent for—it was around fifteen, sixteen dollars a month—four or five months. And that was important for me. So it wasn't Rockefeller or the Modern Museum or Alfred Barr or anyone that kept me that going. It was a poor peddler that enabled me to stay in New York and have a studio for six months. And all this bullshit about the art establishment, screw it. It's unknown innocent people that keep artists going. It isn't the goddamn corporations or establishments. Did you get that down on this thing?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: All right, keep it alive. That's from the horse's mouth. Or the horse's ass. Whichever way you want it. [laughter]

AVIS BERMAN: Speaking of collectors, did you ever meet John Quinn?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No. He was, he in the nineteen-teens and twenties. Maybe Lachaise could have met him. No, I was the innocent little. . . . I was a young guy then, you know, running around.

AVIS BERMAN: How. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Gaston Lachaise. . . . But I don't think he ever bought a Gaston Lachaise. There was another collector that used to come around for Lachaise. It's on the tip of my tongue. And then he began collecting a lot of Greek vases. Let's see, what was his name? He was a, he was famous. His grandfather was the Secretary of State during the Lincoln administration, or something. It's on the tip of my tongue. He was a powerful, important guy. I saw him a couple of times in Lachaise's studio. I don't know if I can think of his name. French descent. He was a big millionnaire, and I didn't know that he collected a lot of Greek vases. I'll bet the Metropolitan Museum got most of them, and I think he bought a couple of them. He was very powerful. He bought a couple of Lachaises. I can't think of his name. Maybe later on, it might come back to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. I want to know how you got Edith Halpert as a dealer.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, she opened a gallery down on Thirteenth Street, you know, American art, and I was with the Whitneys and one of the artists doing things, and she got anyone she knew that, to come into it, you know. And I, when I, well, I was with her before. . . . I used to make these seals.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: She had a show, and animals. I had a show of them at the Guggenheim, and went to Europe, and after I came back I made these heads, the ten artists, and she showed that.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And then she happened to meet someone, one of the Strauses, the Macy family that was working with Hugh Johnson in the NRA, and he said make a head of Johnson, so I got the commission. So I went to Washington to make the head of Johnson. He liked me, I liked him, and so I said, "Hey, what do you think of the idea that I make the whole cabinet?" He said, "God, it's a great idea!" So he got on the phone and he called up Cordell Hull—Secretary of State—Henry Wallace, everything, and said, "Hey, you got, we got an idea, we got to make portraits of the Cabinet, and you'll all pose." They said, "Okay." So all of a sudden. . . . Then my name got in the paper, a writeup in the paper, and I began saying that Hugh Johnson looks like Caesar, and the other one looks like Alexander Hamilton, all the bullshit and running around for a year. I had six pedestals. Actually three pedestals in their offices, and I think I was even using clay. I had to keep 'em wet. I used to go around. In their office there'd be a stand, and they were too busy. I used to go there, and they'd walk away. I'd go to another one, and, they, you know, they were doing their business, and, well, I'm the dumb artist. And I was able to walk in and out of their offices, and there used to be senators sitting out in the anteroom, and they used to look at me "Who's this guy walkin' in and out with his dirty clothes?" They couldn't figure who this. . . . They'd think that I was a janitor, or. . . . They'd look at me in amazement. They had to wait until they got called in. I used to walk into Johnson's place. To hell, once I even helped him put his pants on, or something; he was shaving. Whoo!

I know once they had a luncheon, a private luncheon, or secret luncheon, that Harry Hopkins, Bernard Baruch, Hugh Johnson, and the secretary, and someone else had a dinner. So I acted as a helper at the table, as a waiter. But Barney Baruch asked me, "Oh, I hear that you just got married." I'd just married Rose [St. John—AB]. So I said, "Yeah, I got married. I got tired of eating in cafeterias." So they all laughed. Then after it was all over, you know, they had the luncheon, talking business, and I'm around, you know, they had no fear of what they said to me, 'cause they knew I didn't give a goddamn. You know, no speaka da the English. [laughter] So after they went, I found on the table a penny, you know. They all left me one penny tip. [laughs] Aaah, boy.

AVIS BERMAN: So that came out of Edith.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, Edith Halpert, yeah, got this through Robert Straus, the Macy's family, you know, and I went there. I spent a year in Washington. I mean, I was running all around. Then we had a show at the Corcoran Gallery, and it was a big thing, no money. It was all over, no money. And I had to come back, throw a show in the Downtown Gallery, and collectors came, and they all hated the New Deal so they offered to Edith Halpert, how much, fifty dollars if they could throw rocks at the heads. That's what she told me. Said that they hated Roosevelt and the New Deal, and all the collectors buying art instead of buying it, they wanted, they'd go for the money if they could throw rocks at it. So Edith Halpert got so scared that she dropped me. I was making more publicity for her, with Babe Ruth, and this, and everything. She dropped me like a hot potato. Strange world, huh?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. How come none of those cabinet members bought their own heads?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Let's see, one of them did. I forgot his name. He took Johnson's job. Nice fella. He bought it, you know, $250, or something, a plaster head. Let's see, the Modern Museum owns a bronze head of. . . . Oh, I just mentioned the name, and, you know, my mind goes blank. And they own the plaster cast of one of the heads.

AVIS BERMAN: It's okay.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And we even have a bronze cast down in the basement of it. I made two heads of General Johnson. I got one, which I made at the Walter Reed Hospital when he was sick there, and I went there and made a second one when he was lying down on his bed. And it was awful funny—you know we mentioned about the Altamira cave drawings?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He happened to mention something about the Altamira cave drawings. I looked at him in amazement and so surprised. He said, "My god, what the hell do you know about the Altamira cave drawings?" then looked at me in a sort of guilty manner. "I. . . . I know about it." [laughter] He apologized. It was pleasant, like, "How the hell do you know about that?" Isn't it funny, we were just talking about the Altamira Cave drawings.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He was cute. He liked me, and I liked him. He was a nice fella. Straight. You know, no monkey business. Yeah, I met a lot of interesting personalities, you know. John Graham, and Gorky, Lachaise, and Manship, John Barrymore. . . . A couple nights ago, I just happened to turn on television. I was just going to go to bed, and I turned it on, and it was the life of Sarah Bernhardt, and some actress. . . . I asked my wife, and she said. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Lilly Palmer.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: . . . her name is Palmer. I had never seen her and she. . . . I saw the last performance of Sarah Bernhardt at the Palace, and they mentioned the date, 1916. All the hooplah about this, so I bought a ticket way up on the top floor of the balcony, and I saw her and she had a leg. . . . She was in a wheelchair, her leg was cut off. Heard her emote in French. Oh, great thing, Sarah Bernhardt. And I always mention that, you know, to show how old I am, that when I meet people, I brag. I said, "You know, I even saw Sarah Bernhardt when she was alive. They don't even know who the hell. . . . Here, I'm bragging, and they don't even, never even heard of Sarah Bernhardt. Even when I mention about John Barrymore, they go, "Who?" Oh yeah, I mentioned something about Caruso, you know. I was working in the Met, and he was watching me copy a sculpture, standing there watching me for ten, fifteen minutes, and I mentioned that to somebody, and then, "Who was Caruso?" The younger generation—so I'm going to shut up after this. You know, what they were, I'm not going to talk.

AVIS BERMAN: That's terrific. You said Caruso was there watching you copy? Did you know, at the time, did you know he was Caruso? Did you recognize. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I was scared. Manship made me go there, you know, to copy. . . . He said, "Reuben, you can draw like hell, but you're a lousy sculptor. Go up there and. . . ." you know. So I had to, and I hated having the audience and people; I had to do it. And I was making a thing about two feet high, a Greek sculpture in plaster cast. A lot of people around me. So I happened to turn around, and there was Caruso with a grin. He saw I was nervous as hell. He was telling me [that he would stay there]. Give me the. . . . I got so scared, I turned back right away. And after five minutes, I turned again, and he was gone. So I don't know how long he was watching me. But he was smart, but he must have noticed I was pissed off. I had to copy, and I turned around and I got scared. See, these are stories I mention to people. I mention this to someone, and nobody even knew

who I was, who Caruso was, so, geez, I'm not going to talk any more. It's just hopeless.

AVIS BERMAN: That's wonderful, that he would stand there and look.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: I wonder if the other people who were watching you were watching him?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I don't know. There was, you know, a lot of people there, you know. Wow!

AVIS BERMAN: But you could still go to the Metropolitan today and you see people copying paintings and stuff, art students.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, that's good, great! You should go there and copy. Cézanne used to go in his old age to the Louvre and copy paintings. Can you imagine that? He was a shy guy. Can you imagine a shy guy going to the Louvre with people around copying? I can't figure it, can't figure it. He was so shy. But he used to do it.

AVIS BERMAN: Now did Edith ever pay you any kind of monthly stipend, or anything, that you remember?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, were you friendly at all with the Stieglitz group, like O'Keeffe, or Marin?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I never met O'Keeffe. I met Marin at a friend's place. We had luncheon together, I met him once, yeah. But I was a young sculptor. Everything was painting, you know. I'm on the outside. See, like we have a Thursday Club. They're all commercial artists, and they write for Hollywood and, you know, portrait paintings. We have the Thursday Club every two weeks. I stopped going there. But when I'd go, they really wanted me to go there, but they don't talk to me. They talk about Hollywood, or about business, or about this. . . . And so I sit there like a. . . . I don't fit! Like in the old days, you know, sculptors didn't fit in. Everyone was a painter.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, maybe I'm not naming the right people. You must have known the Zorachs, of course?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, yeah, we, yeah, we were good friends. I used to, I lived right nearby, and I actually carved. . . . He had a daughter. I carved an alabaster of her sitting down with a cat, or something. And they used to invite me to dinner at least twice a week, and his wife Marguerite was very sweet, and we were friends. But after a while, when I got publicity for Washington and Babe Ruth, he got jealous, and I didn't like him for it. We didn't see much of each other. But he was a good guy. I don't think much of him as a sculptor.

AVIS BERMAN: So you're saying probably after the mid-thirties you didn't see him anymore that much?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't know. I know it was after I came back from Washington, and he looked at me in anger. I was getting all this publicity about the New Deal. And then, then Halpert dropped me and she moved uptown, and she had Zorach again, and he was in, and I was out. So I stayed away. I moved to Staten Island. I don't give a damn. If people don't want me, screw 'em. I've never kissed anyone's ass in my life. I've insulted people, you know, I've never kissed their ass. I take after my wife, who's ferocious. She says I'm. . . . I'm mild compared to her. [laughs] She's like a wild tiger.

AVIS BERMAN: What did you and Zorach use to talk about? You were interested in direct carving for a while, and of course he was into that, and I was wondering if you talked about that?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, we never talked much. He was friendly. When I was with Gorky, we didn't talk much art. We'd just go down, you know, eat and sit down and have a little company. We were bored, you know, lonely. There was no society taking us up, no curators of museums asking us for advice or coming around. All the poor artists got together to kill an afternoon and have a cheap meal at the Automat. That's all it was. The Modern Museum was kissing the ass of Picasso, Matisse, and everything. All the money that was going to them; it wasn't coming to us struggling here. And all of a sudden, after Jackson Pollock, they were taking up American art as a gimmick. Madison Avenue saw they could make some money on it or something. But there's no real comprehension of art, it was just a, it's a new trick. They landed on a new. . . . And then in the sixties, all the art are tricks. Larry Poons makes a dot. This guy makes a zigzag. This guy makes a zoom-zoom. This man makes a red and a blue. It's all gimmicks. It's not art. Is there a Velázquez? Is there a Goya? Is there a van Gogh, a Michelangelo? No. Just goddamn decorations. That's all the art we've had in the last thirty years. It's all bullshit.

AVIS BERMAN: I haven't asked you yet how you met your wife and how you got married?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I met her on Eighth Street. At a party. And she came to Washington and I was making the New Deal heads there and we had an apartment. I think it was called "K" Street. It just comes back. Isn't it funny? I don't know. [laughing] It just comes back, "K" Street. [whistling]

AVIS BERMAN: Do you want to quit for today?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, I'm fine. You want to keep on yakking, go ahead? I have nothing to do.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, a little bit more. Just, we. . . .

DON ROSS: Yeah, you have time.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I've got my gin, and I got my pipe.

DON ROSS: You're set.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, was I drunk last night! I staggered home.

DON ROSS: When? Last night?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, God, Jesus, this goddamn stuff. Every man has to have a vice. I stay away from women—they're dangerous. But gin is a great protection.

AVIS BERMAN: Just another thing about Edith Halpert is, at the time when you had her, there are a lot of people who had commissions for Radio City and Rockefeller Center.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I didn't get 'em. What's his name got 'em—Zorach.

AVIS BERMAN: But were you, were you competing for that or anything?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I wasn't competing with anybody. But I. . . . I didn't meet people. I didn't go after anything. I'm just Rube the Boob. That's all. And I'm proud of it. I'm not apologizing.

AVIS BERMAN: And were you ever up in Woodstock, or go to any of the. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I went there once, and I was anti-Woodstock. It was an art colony, and I didn't like that idea either, that they all moved there and bought land and everything. But I stayed away from there. Even. . . . See, I can't even think of the name. Mrs. Whitney's secretary, what's her name?

AVIS BERMAN: Juliana Force.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Even Juliana Force used to go there, you know. George Bellows, who was alive then, I think, and he had a place there, and all the famous artists used to live out there then. And that was the place to go. But I didn't like it. Raoul Hague liked it. He moved out there and got a shack out there. Living all by himself. But I didn't like it.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, when did, and how did you meet Raoul Hague. You were friends, right?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, I met him years ago, yeah, in his studio, you know. He had just come from Egypt or Asia, and I recognized him as an Armenian immigrant, you know, a young guy and we'd hang around. He was a nice fella.

AVIS BERMAN: Was he doing those monumental wood trunks then?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He started that later. Before, he was making little things for years. I think he began doing that when he moved out to Woodstock.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you ever visit him in his shack there?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I went there once or twice, yeah. Yeah, he got me smoking again. I had quit smoking for five years. We went there and I was nervous about something, and he shoved a cigar in my face, said, "Come on, smoke this." I began smoking, and I got back to smoking again. He's a. . . .

DON ROSS: I thought you used to go up to Woodstock to see Joe Pollet.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, a couple of times, once or twice, we went to see. . . . Did you ever hear of Joe Pollet?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I hear he died too, didn't he?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, a year or two ago.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: A year or two ago. He was my exact age. You know, we were born around the same time. Yeah, he was a strange character. Yeah, he was supposed to be the white hope of, the van Gogh of America, according to John Sloan, in those days.

AVIS BERMAN: When you were visiting Raoul, did he have all the clocks up in his little shack?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [laughs] Yeah, yeah. I wish I had one of them. We have no clock here, and I was just talking to Don, "We ought to have a clock."

DON ROSS: Oh, we can't afford a clock, Reuben!

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He used to pick 'em up for twenty, thirty cents, they used to give 'em away for him, you know. You know, all the school houses. His house is tick-tock, tick-tock, all that. If you've never been there at the house, every room has a great big clock going tick-tock.

AVIS BERMAN: It's not just one. No, the living room area, it's every single wall space has nothing but clocks. There are about forty clocks.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, he has as many as those?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I visited him a couple years ago.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He's a clock collector.

AVIS BERMAN: And they're all hand-wound cuckoo-type clocks, and they're all up, and then there's just, you know, there's just nothing but noise because they're all going at once.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: And he still doesn't have any electricity or anything.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes and no. He's got a big Quonset hut for his sculpture, and he keeps them, you know, humidity-controlled, because they're wood.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, yeah, uh huh.

AVIS BERMAN: He's got it for the sculpture, but not for himself.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I hear he had some kind of heart attack or something, or what was it?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I don't know that. I saw him a couple of years ago when he was very robust.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: And you know he still chops all his own wood and all that.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.

DON ROSS: And he's not so young.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And he still shoots a raccoon for meat.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, yeah?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, that's what they, years ago, [I think]. [laughs] He's a character, yeah, Jesus Christ. Well, he's smart. He went up there and lived all alone. I remember we were on the art project. He said, "I'm getting out of New York." And he knew these people in Woodstock, and there was, there was writer up there called White, Hervey White, or something, and he got friendly with him and Hervey gave him his place when he died, you know. So he was living up there all alone.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. It's up on a hill, it's hard to find it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. Happy. . . . [So am I. It's real nice.] But look, he's getting old. When was he born? Around 1905, I think.

AVIS BERMAN: I think so.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: So he's eight years younger than I am, the son-of-a-bitch. I hate younger people. Aaah.

DON ROSS: Well, [sorry about that]. Nothing I can do about it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, you can change places, can't ya?

AVIS BERMAN: I guess also you were doing those artists, first you were doing those artists' portrait heads, but I guess. . . . When did the Depression really begin to hit you?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hmm, when did what?

AVIS BERMAN: When did the Depression really begin to hit you?

DON ROSS: He was always depressed.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: In 1929, at the, the day of the big crash, I was at 55 Christopher Street, and I was working on a life-size nude plaster model, and what's-his-name came round to see me. Dorothy Miller's husband, what was his name?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, Holger Cahill.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Holger Cahill. We were friends, and he came round to see me in the afternoon. And it happened to be the day of the crash. October '29, was when it was. I'd known him. . . . And he was a tall, lanky guy in a business suit and his face was all in a rash. He was nervous. He had a paper in his hand, folding it, walking up and down. So I said to him, "What the hell, what's the matter with you? You got ants in your pants? Sit down and have a drink." So he looked at me in disgust, opened up the paper, and shoved it in my face, said, "You dumb artists don't know what's going to hit you." And there was a big headline about the crash, stock market, and "I don't know, I didn't give a damn about it," I said. "You stupid [artists], you don't know what's going to hit you." [chuckles] You know who he was? The editor of the Wall Street Journal. [both chuckle] But then I was lucky. [laughing] I won the Guggenheim, and I went to Europe, and we had a villa in Sorrento for eight months. [laughs] Ahh, boy. I think I'd take another drink, but I'd better not. You shouldn't get drunk before four o'clock.

AVIS BERMAN: You've got 35 minutes left, but I could put my clock ahead.

DON ROSS: Is it twenty-five after?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, it is. Well, we'll stop now. To be continued.

Tape 2, side B not used
JUNE 17, 1981
[Tape 3, side A]

AVIS BERMAN: We're talking with Reuben Nakian in his studio in Stamford on June 17. I want to start with a couple questions from the thirties, and then I'll move into your recent work.
I wanted to ask you about—since you have that bust of Raphael Soyer over there—how did you get the idea to make the portraits of the artists that you made in about 1933? When you made Raphael, and Alex Brook, and Peggy Bacon, and. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well, I. . . . Let's see, 1933. . . . Well, I'd come back from the Guggenheim, and I was in. . . . I was in France and Italy for almost a year. And after I come back, what to do? And so I thought a practical thing, make portraits. I was with Edith Halpert then, in the Downtown Gallery, and so, "That's a swell idea." So we got in touch. . . . I got in touch with the artists who wanted to pose, and she got some literary people, I forget the big one.

AVIS BERMAN: Elmer Rice.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Elmer Rice, a couple other guys, so I made a set of ten, in that year, I guess it was '32, '31, I forget. I guess it was '32. And modeled them all in plaster, then I. . . . I patinated then. But I showed them in plaster.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And I did such a wonderful patina job. . . . Some of them looked like speckled granite and some like old Chinese bronze, I don't know, I was an expert on the technique of patining. And I know when she had the show, the art critic at the Times came around and said, "Gee, Nakian must be rich. He's having all these things carved in marble and bronze." Edith said, "No, they're all plaster," and he wouldn't believe it. So she had to take

a penknife and scratch the back of it to show him it was plaster. Then there was an article in the Times and most of the article was all about the patining. That was around 1932. [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Did you think of doing the patina as a joke or just because you, because you couldn't. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, no, to make it look like a finished product.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And, gee, I had some wonderful ones, you know. I think the Modern Museum bought one, the "Pop" Hart, you know, looked like speckled granite.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And I don't know how it looks now because they messed it up; I had to retouch it, but when it was an original it looked like a granite, it was amazing. I used shellac and alcohol instead of turpentine, and that makes a natural effect.

AVIS BERMAN: So you were satisfied? You liked those busts?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, for that time. I think I made a couple good ones. I think the one of Alexander Brook was good.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: We, I got one downstairs—it's been cast in bronze—of Gaston Longchamps. Did you ever hear of him?

AVIS BERMAN: No, who was he?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, he was a French guy, and he was an abstract painter. A very interesting fella. In fact he was one of the founders of the Washington Square outdoor show in the 1930s. I think he's dead by now. Well, I got a head of his. Have you seen it?

AVIS BERMAN: No, I never saw that one.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's cast in bronze down at. . . . And he has a fedora hat on. I did it with a hat. And I made two heads of "Pop" Hart, one I destroyed it when I was on Staten Island and I had to move. It was a bust of "Pop" Hart with a high hat and he had glasses on, you know. And it was fantastic—with a bow tie—and. . . . Actually, you could call that the first Pop Art. [laughter] And his name is "Pop" Hart, and so I made the first one in 1932. [chuckling] I wished I'd saved it.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: There's pictures of it. You know, I think I have photographs of it. Funny.
[Interruption in taping?]

AVIS BERMAN: Did you pick those artists for any reason in particular?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, in. . . . Well, there were only a few artists around New York, anyway, I mean.

AVIS BERMAN: Only ten, right. [laughs]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [chuckles] Yeah. You know, ten or fifteen. It wasn't in the hundred thousand they got now.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, then you also did Concetta Scaravaglione?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Were you friendly with her?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, at that time she was my girlfriend.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh. How'd you get along?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: On and off, on and off.

AVIS BERMAN: Can't imagine that—two very tempestuous personalities.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well. . . . [long pause] Did you ever meet her?

AVIS BERMAN: No, no, I didn't. I just, I guess she died about, what?, ten years ago?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, about five years, I guess.

AVIS BERMAN: I've got to ask you about Babe Ruth?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Who?

AVIS BERMAN: Babe Ruth.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, that guy. [chuckles] Well, after I made the heads, I made the Babe Ruth.

AVIS BERMAN: Was that your only full figure that you ever did?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, that was eight feet high. Yeah, it was the first big figure I made. That caused a sensation, because the first time, you know, a baseball player. . . . I remember when I made it, a fire inspector came into this, in the building, the studio, and he opened the door, and he saw the Babe Ruth. He was in ecstacy! It was the only time I got a thrill from an observer of art. And it was such a thrill, such a, you know, it's a high spot. It's one of the exceptions. You know, Babe Ruth's a big hero, you know, to the common man.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And it was a big statue, and it was just that. . . . [laughing] The great respect that the guy almost got on his knees. The only time I ever got a thrill from art exhibitions or anything. Everything else bores me, but this, it's sort of like awe. That man, the expression on his face when he looked, saw that. [still laughing] That was funny.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you ever meet Babe Ruth?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no. He didn't come or pose, never even came to see the show. Let's see, Lou Gehrig came to see the show. It was downtown, and he asked if Babe Ruth had come to see it and they said, "No, he hasn't seen it." So he said, "That jerk won't." [chuckles] Well, that was in the year that Babe Ruth was a big thing, and it happened the only time I ever went to a ball game was. . . . I don't remember whether it was 1926, '27. I went to Yankee Stadium, and that happened to be, that happened to be the day he knocked his sixtieth home run, which is his highest. So I saw that. [chuckles] Then a year or two later, I thought of the idea, you know, ... After coming back from Europe and looking at the Roman and Greek sculpture, you know, I had had it. You know, I wanted to be Americana, so how to be Americana was Babe Ruth, so I made Babe Ruth and it caused a sensation. But I never made a penny on any of my things, you know. As a sports, sport writers of the journals came around, and said, "Hey, geez, we gotta get this in a stadium. Let's raise the funds." You know in the paper, you know, raise the funds. "Great, go ahead." So they got in touch with the owner of the stadium. He said, "Nothing doing. I don't want a statue of Babe Ruth in there. I'm paying him enough already. [I don't] need a statue." [laughter] ["Can't] afford [to do] it." So that went down. And then, gee, that would have helped me to get that money for that. But I'm glad, you know, it was a corny piece of thing, so I'm glad.

AVIS BERMAN: Isn't it somewhere in Baltimore right now?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, then it was sent to the Baltimore Museum and an exhibition. I never bothered, never heard about it. I guess it's been destroyed. And it's funny. . . . Oh, about ten years ago, I was in Washington. We had an exhibition in a Washington gallery. Two ladies come up to me and said, "Oh, I guess you don't remember us, but we were the curators of the Baltimore museum when in 1934 you brought the Babe Ruth, and oh you. . . ." Said, "Wait a minute, wait a minute, where is it?" I said, "Oh, I don't know. I think we sent it to the orphanage where Babe Ruth used to live." [But] then two or three years later, the Baltimore Museum got in touch with us to say they were having a sports show, a sports exhibition, and can they have the loan of the Babe Ruth. So we told them, "Look, we sent it to you in 1934, and you had it, and where is it and what. . . .?" And they said, "No, we don't know anything about it." I said, "Forget it."

AVIS BERMAN: It doesn't seem possible that somebody. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I would have broken it up if it came back to me because I didn't want it.

DON ROSS: Well, we're offering $500 if you find it, Avis.
[Interruption in taping]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: But I couldn't afford to pay storage on it. If it came back to me, the first thing I'd have done was smash it up. So darn, you know, what the hell.

AVIS BERMAN: You also talked about doing Mae West. But you never did?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, at that time, when I was that crazy, I'd be, you know, I was in that mood. It didn't last long. I got over it, you know.

DON ROSS: Henry McBride thought you were Michelangelo.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: That's funny. Well, I was wondering because Mae West would have been closer to your Greek ladies of today.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I don't know. It lasted a couple years when I came back from Italy. It was Americana, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: What's his name, Thomas Benton, and all that, you know, everything American. So I was becoming. . . . It didn't last long and, zingo, I just quit.

AVIS BERMAN: But it interests me that you never—considering your drawings now, when now you do work with the figure—then, when you were a totally representational sculptor, you weren't that interested in doing full figures. Is that correct, or did you just not have the opportunity?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I didn't have, I was always poor. It was always a struggle. No studio. You know, I even made Babe Ruth in someone else's studio. People used to say, "Oh, Nakian isn't doing anything." Well, I was so goddamn poor, I couldn't do anything. Instead of coming around and buying and helping you. I made the New Deal heads, with loads of publicity. Did anyone buy it? No. I had to almost hitchhike home from Washington. I made the Babe Ruth. There was publicity all over the country. No one bought, you know. Then they. . . . So if I stopped and, not having showed anything, you know, no studio, no this and that. And they blame you instead of them, the sons of bitches that don't come round and help you, you know. Then they blame you that you're, that you've quit, and that you're a bum. Oh, Jesus, it's an asshole world. Art is made in spite of everything. It isn't made with the help of the art world. They're the number one enemy of the true artist. Take van Gogh and Cézanne as an example.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: You know? That was the same old horseshit. If there's a work of art created, it's a miracle. Every great work of art is a miracle. If you look at Botticelli's Birth of Venus, the Venus de Milo, it's a miracle. Thank God we have them. You know? But it, it was done by a lonely. . . . Botticelli was a lonely artist. He created that, what a great man. And the one who made the Venus de Milo, we don't know who he is or what, if he was a hunchback, a dwarf, or. . . . Or even what year. We're not even sure about the century. So what does it matter—we got it. It's the only thing. We got van Gogh. He went crazy, cut his ear off, and he had to shoot himself, the poor guy. But he did great art. Thank God we got the art. I don't give a goddamn about his suffering. We've got his art. It's the only thing important about an artist. Gorky had to hang himself. Everything went wrong in a couple of years. All right, so what. He left some beautiful paintings. And the Guggenheim—I haven't seen it yet—has a big show [the Gorky retrospective—AB], and you had to wear a black tie, you know, to come in. When I knew Gorky, he used to eat at the Automat, he used to spend twenty-five cents.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Come on, let's go in the house have something to eat.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.
[Interruption in taping]

AVIS BERMAN: When we left off, I wanted to know about your work. It's so erotic and so sensual. Do you think that that stood in the way of you getting commissions or. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I don't know about commissions, but. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Did it make people hard to accept you?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, I think art should have a touch of the erotic. I think all great art, you know. . . . Botticelli's Birth of Venus is erotic, and, oh, things are, you know, things have to have blood and passion. You know, I'm anti Pop Art. You know, that for me is not art. It's anything but passion. And even El Greco's art is erotic in a way. It's flesh and blood.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess I want to know when you broke through, you realized that you wanted to do that sort of

thing, that you wanted to have passion and love and. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I think. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Well, to have the women and just to have that theme in your work and, you know, when you started to realize that?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, you know, as the kind of art I like, you know, Peter Paul RUEBENs, they had a couple of canvases in the Met, and, for me, that was it, you know. And Fragonard, Watteau. Anytime I saw them, I stopped, you know. It was just what I. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: That was when I liked them, and, you know, I thought it was art. Titian, Poussin, Goya. No, art has to be, it has to have life and blood and a little sex in it, you know. That's what life is. And I mean, life is sexy. And I'm the most _____ we have it, you know. Just. . . . I don't know, you know, just geometric, sheesh! It's all right, but it isn't my dish. And I like the human figure, and especially the female, passion. It was done by Titian and the Greeks, and I go with tradition. You have to have a subject matter, you've got to say something. Gee, I always made Herodias with the head of St. John, a lot of my things are. . . . Hecuba, I think started out as Herodias, and. . . . I changed it. I left out the head, and I changed the idea into Hecuba, you know. But you, I mean, I go for passion. I even found one of my old drawings of Herodias, a voluptuous, fat Herodias with the head of St. John, and a cat in his lap, you know. I said, "Geez, if I ought to make this big, but I'd better not go back to it," you know. [chuckling] You have to say something, you know. Shakespeare took old stories and he said something.

AVIS BERMAN: Before, we were mentioning Gorky, and I guess I want to know, I guess you became friendly with him in around 1935, and it seemed to be a very important friendship for you.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It was later—in 1936, I think, yeah. Yeah, it. . . . Well, he was intelligent and everything. And he went to, he had the French school stuff that was going on, and that was, you know. . . . The Abstract Expressionists, I was a member of it. And I did things like that for ten years, you know. My steel pieces, and I did that for years. Now I've gone back to the more naturalistic. I suppose it's "semi." [laughs] It isn't pure naturalism. But I come out of the old, the old school, you know. I mean, I come out of Greece, and the Renaissance and stuff like that.

AVIS BERMAN: But after talking to Gorky, though, about Picasso and Miró, didn't you start reassessing your own work?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, slightly in those days, because I had come back from Washington making naturalistic heads. So I lived in Staten Island and I was researching. Then Picasso had a show at the Modern Museum around 1940, and that was a great influence. I was inspired by him. You know, I'm inspired by all different things. And sculpture, though. . . . It was easier for a painter to. . . . Everything is painting, you know, they, you talk, and you grow from one another. In sculpture, there was no, there wasn't anyone I could grow from. There was Brancusi, but I knew it was a dead end and I dropped him long ago. And there was no sculpture, so I had to find my own way of creating sculpture, which I think more difficult than painters had to accomplish, because they had so many painters and you could study and copy. But there was no sculpture. Hardly anything I could copy. I had to. . . . That's why it took me a long time.

AVIS BERMAN: What about John Flannagan?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, Flannagan. Gee, a nice fella, but he didn't do much. He was a minor. . . . He used to come out to Connecticut for field stones like we have around here, and he used to carve little things, had little things on it. It's all right, but it's minor. You know, it isn't anything that you're gonna talk about.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He was a nice fella.

AVIS BERMAN: I was just wondering if you had ever talked with him or found him. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I did. What's his name, Raoul Hague was a friend of ours, and he used to come to me and say, "Come on, we have to go and see Flannagan. He's depressed." And I would say, "Okay." So I went a couple times, and I have a story that, and one of the. . . . I met him about twice, two or three times, and he was depressed, he was an alcoholic. He was sick and he wasn't creating anymore. And I was at a friend's house once, and he was sitting there and I began talking about art and everything. And then all of a sudden I said, "Well, there I go again, you know, yakking. Everytime I feel, everytime I leave, I feel like a jackass for talking, making a

fool of myself.” So he was sitting all that time, you know, not saying a word. So he looked up, raised his head, looked up at me in the eye and he says, “So what? So what, what does it matter?” You know? You know what the meaning was? You know, I was apologizing that I talked and made emotion and, you know, said something, and I felt like a fool when I left. So he said, “So what?” And that was the greatest lesson in my life. So since. . . . I realized it doesn’t matter. At that time, I felt like talking, and even if I, you know, said a lot of all kinds of things, and that was a lesson. So since then I don’t give a damn what I say, how I say it. That was the smartest, one of the greatest statements: “So what?” Is it going to offend a corporation head, isn’t going to like it? Or the president, what’s his name, isn’t going to like it, or a school teacher? Who the hell are they, and what the goddamn does it matter? I, we were talking about, we’re talking about art. But then I’d apologize, “Oh, why should I talk.” After I’d go home, I’d say, “Oh, yeah, you know, I should have shut up.” So he was listening. He wasn’t saying a word and I was. . . . And he must have enjoyed my enthusiasm, yeah, because he was, I guess he was finished, because he committed suicide a year later. So he looked up at me, and it was a serious look and said, “So what?” Just two words, “So what?” And that sunk in my head. So since then I make a fool, you know, I love making a fool of myself saying stupid things and doing anything. I don’t give a goddamn. . . . So what! I, at that moment I’m doing it, and it’s all right. I don’t give a goddamn. You put thumbs down on it or you don’t like it? To hell with you. Get lost; I don’t give a goddamn. [This monologue is quite upbeat in tone, even though it reads downbeat—Trans.] I’ve been that way with very important people. I don’t like ‘em, I just cut loose, you know. I insult em, or make a fool of myself. And it’s a bad thing, you know, for collectors, because they. . . . Men like Henry Moore, I presume, are very careful and use the right English. When I meet people, I act like a clown, act like an idiot, so they think I’m an idiot and they don’t buy my work because they’re stupid. They don’t, don’t look at my work, which is life and death when I make it, but after it’s done, I like to clown and glad to get drunk and piss in the streets and do any goddamn thing after I’m done. But when I’m making a work of art, it’s life and death with me, you know, I’m nervous. But after it’s done, I like to clown. I like to eat and drink and make a fool of myself and everything. That’s it. And he recognized that, see? And that was my, that’s one of the. . . . [chuckling] That’s great, I think. Just two words—”So what?” And it was tragic. After that he killed himself. He put his head in a gas furnace, killed himself, the poor guy. That was around 1942. I remember the time because I was depressed myself. It was a bad time. We were hard up, broke. So I was happy for him. I said, “Hooray!” when I heard it. You know, we’ve gone through tough times—the Depression and, you know, all those things about the museums, and the Whitney and the Guggenheim and the Modern. We didn’t have them in those days, you know, so it was something. Now it’s big business, you know. And it’s all snobbery. People that can’t draw a straight line control it all. And they get all the money out of it. Nothing to do with art!

AVIS BERMAN: I was interested how in that time, in the mid-thirties, how your work got more abstract and how that. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I’d, I would, I’d recognize anything that was going around. Some of my early animals, you know, see that wooden sculpture inside this, you know, that’s abstract. It’s like a Brancusi, and even, I think it’s even further than a Brancusi because I’ve got natural, I’ve got passion, and a subject matter in there. It isn’t just a standing fish or a pigeon or something. It’s even further. I discovered Cézanne by myself, you know, no one [talked to me], you know, I. . . . I read Vollard’s book on him around 1930. Inspired by him all the time. No, an artist is inspired by anything exciting. When he sees a Japanese print, he gets thrilled. Or . . . anything, you know. If you’re an artist, you see it, you know. I see a thing, I’m excited, so. . . . So it becomes a part of you.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I think it is more difficult to be an artist now, because you have to digest 20,000 years of art history. You have to know it all, before you can start doing your own. See, it took Gorky a long time to digest Cézanne, Picasso, Miró, everybody, until he made his own. And it’s easier for a painter, because you can go fast. These sculptures it takes longer. No one, there’s hardly anyone that really comprehends what sculpture is. Painting has taken over. No one thinks about. . . . They don’t know how to classify what’s great and what isn’t. That’s why a man like Henry Moore who’s only mediocre, they think is a great sculptor. Or even Giacometti, you know. They’re third class. They’re not masters; they’re just mediocre guys. In the 1800s there was a guy, Thorvaldsen.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He was the Michelangelo and the Phidias of the eighteenth century then. You know? You know, you take these good academic. . . . You know, who the hell thinks that? And there was Canova, an Italian. The Metropolitan got one of his things, and I could see. . . . Imitation of the antique, you know. It isn’t as good. . . . “Hey!” you know, “Canova, Jesus Christ!” it was, you know, Michelangelo. . . . He was even better than Michelangelo, I mean, you know, around 1800. And Thorvaldsen, Jesus Christ, you know! Whoever talks about him? That’s how Henry Moore’s going to be, you know, in a hundred years from now. I think. You know, I might be wrong. I have nothing against him, but that’s my judgment. And I’m liable to be wrong, but I don’t think so. Because if I know one thing, I know sculpture.

AVIS BERMAN: Who do you think will be remembered, besides yourself?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: In sculpture, I don't know. There might be people around I haven't seen. But I'm just thinking: Sculpture is very difficult. There's nice, neat things being done, but there's no great. I think I'm made two or three things that will stand up.

AVIS BERMAN: What do you think? Maybe the Goddess of the Golden Thighs? I'd like to know what works you are proudest of.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I think the ones that'll stand up is some of the old ones I made in the sixties like The Rape of Lucrece will, and a couple of the steel pieces, and the Goddess and Birth of Venus, and, you know, a couple, some of my old ones. My new ones will, the new ones I'm making now will.
[Interruption in taping]

AVIS BERMAN: Everybody always says that you were influenced by Lachaise and you disagree, so. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I know. I fought him a lot. I was, I was anti, and he even knew about it. He was Hindu, and I'm classical. They say, they, you know, people don't know anything.

AVIS BERMAN: But even the eroticism in Lachaise?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I got that before I knew Lachaise, yeah. I had RUEBENs and, you know, I knew art history before I met Lachaise. And I met him in 1916.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, does that anger you when people say that?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, you know, like the. . . . I didn't come out of him at all; I was actually anti-him. I didn't like his things and was. . . . I recognized it was Hindu, and it was a one-style, one-woman concept. It wasn't classical Greek; it wasn't modern. He didn't have anything of Picasso, Brancusi. I felt that he was . . . a Hindu maverick.

AVIS BERMAN: [chuckles]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He was swell, he was, you know, we were good friends, he was wonderful to me, and everything, but when it comes to art, I'm frank.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, did. . . . So you've always been attracted. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: See, Manship was swell to me, but I got sick of that. I recognized what he was.

AVIS BERMAN: When you became interested in these archetypes?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: In the what?

AVIS BERMAN: Archetypes, in these classical sorts of figures and archetypes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: What do you mean, the subject matter, or. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, because. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I knew classical mythology and sculpture. It's like a painter: you paint a landscape or anything. A sculptor's got. . . . You make portraits or the human figure or animal figures. It's concentrated. Form. You have no color. You can't claim that. . . . You can't make a sculpture look like a flower pot. I mean, you can paint it, but you don't do it. So I do subject matter. That is, the swan and a nude makes a composition. Bull, or a Jupiter, or a god with a. . . . Instead of a man and a woman making love, which would be pornographic, I can make a swan have intercourse with a woman and it isn't pornographic—it's aesthetic. It's poetic. It's a composition. It's mythology. It's a god changed himself into a bird, and making, you know, so it's, it's clean. It's clean that way. And a bull is majestic and decorative and a subject. You can have dolphins, waves, cupids. It's great, and a great subject matter. And the goats making love, chasing after the woman. There's male and female sexuality, the goats are sexy, and the. . . . And a woman running away from a goat. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: [chuckles]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's got humor and subject matter and. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: It's very rich.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. And, and all the sculptors now have no subject matter, so they take angles, lines, and, you know, just like Bauhaus decorations, you know. It's stupid. [chuckles] You know, Jesus, it's what all the

young people are doing. They don't know what to. . . . They can't do the other kind; it takes years to get the figure down. So everyone, hundreds of thousands are making angle lines in [near] proportions of, you know, a line this way, a line that way and a box and this, you know. It isn't sculpture. It's decoration, that's all it is, but they call it sculpture. Everybody's a sculptor now.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, when you were doing these themes in the fifties, was it accepted to have such subject matter? Was it considered passé?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Ah, no one did, no one gave a damn. I don't know, I didn't give a damn. I wasn't taken too seriously. I wasn't in with the crowd; I didn't mix. You're only accepted if you mix and you're a friend of people and you hang out with 'em and you know how to flatter 'em. I was always alone. They knew about me, but they never met me and I didn't give a damn for them and they didn't give a damn for me, so that's the way it was.

AVIS BERMAN: And in the late forties, how did you react to this when people said your sculpture paralleled the paintings of deKooning?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, they always. . . . That's something I don't like, too. They compare, and I was influenced by deKooning, which I wasn't. I only saw a few of his, and I was doing deKooning kind of art. Even my old animal drawings in 1922 are abstract. You know, the way they were drawn. And he wasn't even born, you know. He hadn't even taken up art yet. People say things, aah, a bunch of jerks.

AVIS BERMAN: But I was wondering if you. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I was influenced with Abstract Expression, so I took over and I think I made it damn good. I gave body to it, and there's subject matter and there's sensuality in mine, and all the rest is just decoration, just spots of color, I think. When I made the Abstract Expressionism, there's a woman in there; there was sex, and there was geometry. I took it over. Michelangelo said he steals, when he steals he kills.

AVIS BERMAN: [chuckles]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: If I steal, I do the same thing; I kill.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I didn't mean that you were influenced by deKooning, but I was wondering that, if you felt that there was a similarity in appearance between his subject matter. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, when you've got Picasso, why do I need, why do I need deKooning? Or even Gorky? When you got Picasso. He did it way before them, he did it greater, and I knew all about Picasso. I've seen, you know, I didn't go see his show because I didn't have to. I had enough. I didn't want anymore. Yeah, I knew all about Picasso, and I was influenced by him. So why do I need deKooning? And, you know, they're child's play compared to Picasso. What the hell, he did it fifty years before they were born! When you've got Cézanne and Picasso and people like that, what the. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: [chuckles]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Look what. . . . There's a butterfly.

AVIS BERMAN: Um hmm.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, there's, you know, what the hell, when you got Goya, even Constantin Guys. You know, I'm influenced by him. Who talks about him? Great style. Toulouse-Lautrec is my strongest influence. You know, my goats are all Toulouse-Lautrec, his sense of irony and humor, you know. What the hell, when you got Lautrec and Cézanne, and you got Goya and this, what, so what do you need any Jackson Pollock or David Smith, or you name it. They're just kids compared to 'em. And I was influenced, I was influenced by the giants. I wasn't influenced by the second-rate people. So they try to say I'm influenced by the second-rate people. I didn't need it, and I wasn't. So you can't stop horseshit, it's all around you. So if they do it, they do it, I don't give a damn.

AVIS BERMAN: It seems to me also that there's been so much, that drawing has been absolutely central to your work, too.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well, I think drawing, as Ingres said, is 85 percent painting. I think if you have a good drawing, you make a good drawing, line drawing, you don't need modeling or anything. If you just make a good. . . . When you look at a great drawing, that's all it needs. It's doesn't need shading, modeling, or anything. Just one exquisite line does it all. Picasso did it, and. . . . One of his series of etchings of things. They're so marvelous, you know, they're just steel, steel lines. If you look at a line drawing, his portraits. But then, any of the great, the early Renaissance—Botticelli and that school, you know. Pisanello. You know, line, oh boy. See, you could learn how to paint, if you learn how to use colors. There's three or four colors and you know how to mix and have good taste. But drawing can't be taught. You've got to work for it. You either have to have talent for it and you've got

to work for it. And I've been drawing, making thousands of drawings. I draw all the time.

AVIS BERMAN: It seems to be the basis for a lot of the placques that you're doing. I mean, of lot of what you're doing now is incised drawings and. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, it's like the etchings or lithographs. If you make a good one, that's it. You know, things have to have life. They have to fill a composition up, got to be spontaneous, decorative, simple, good taste, all the ingredients that makes a work of art.

AVIS BERMAN: It reminds me of Daumier, I guess, because Daumier. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, he's one of my favorites. He's great. Actually, I think he was the greatest Frenchman. What he did in his lithographs for the papers every day is out of this world.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I mean, no other artist could have done that. You know, set down every day, taken drawings of his times, and making himself great. You know, can you imagine Cézanne or anyone else sitting down, making subject matter for the papers, and drawing it on stone, and send it to the printer, and so powerful. No other artist could have done it. Even Michelangelo couldn't have done it. He's done everything they can do. A great illustration and just hand them out. He'd turn them out in big batches. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, and he also. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Balzac said he's a Michelangelo, you know, he recognized it. No, Daumier is my favorite. He's a, he's terrific.

AVIS BERMAN: And of course he painted. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: His painting is still great and his. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: His sculpture, his busts, are great.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, isn't that marvelous? No, he was a. . . . And he was unrecognized. He lost his job, he was starving, and if it wasn't for Corot, they would have thrown him out of the house he was living in. No one gave a damn for him while he was alive, and he was. . . . His name was before the public for twenty-five, thirty years. When they dropped him, they don't give a damn, if he was starving or not.
[Thumbing through some papers:] There's one of my old animals. . . . See, that's sexual, too.

AVIS BERMAN: That's very beautiful.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: 1923, see, that's sex in it, too. Passion.

AVIS BERMAN: What's the name of that one?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's called Adolescent. A young bull hopping on a calf.

AVIS BERMAN: Yep, running away. [said with a smile]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, so I, I guess I was a little sensual, I don't know why. Can't explain it. I'm not a sexy guy, you know. I'm just normal, you know, I'm not. . . . [chuckling] But seeing I do it in art. I do it in art because it's, it's a subject matter, you know. In sculpture there isn't much. You either have to do religious art or do pagan art, that's all. And I made a few of religious art.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you've also been able to proceed as if masterpieces are still possible to make. How do you keep the faith that it's possible to make masterpieces after all this time?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: We keep on fighting, and if you land on something good, you keep it. If you don't, you take an axe and break it up. I've broken up a lot of even good things that I pushed it too far.

AVIS BERMAN: How did you learn so much about art history?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I'd read anything I could come across. I always went to the museums. I used to always go to the Met. Anything, you know. When I was a young kid, I used to go to the public library, room 315. There was an art room there, and I used to go there every night. Go through the art books and . . . [chuckling] and they weren't so hot. They were steel engravings, they were lousy, but they were all we got. But I used to hunt and try to find stuff I had never seen.

DON ROSS: You've still got a lot of interesting old books.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, the art books they have now, they're out of this world. You don't have to travel. You go to the museum, there's a crowd of people, you can't look at it. And there in the churches they're way up, and they're dark, and you can't find them. Here you've got an art book, and they're just. . . . They've got details and clean color and you can see it better in an art book than you can in the museums. So you can get the art books at a library and buy them; they're only twenty dollars or something.

AVIS BERMAN: Not any more.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, fifty dollars or. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: How did you meet Kelekian, and you were working for Kelekian, too, before you did the head.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, I was at. . . . No, I didn't work for him. He never gave me. . . . I worked for Brummer. I was repairing his antiques. He gave me jobs. Kelekian did. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: No, I thought maybe you did restoration for Kelekian.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, only for Brummer.

[Tape 3, side B]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: This was in 1930s, maybe 1933, right after I come back from Europe. And I used to repair, you know, to make money, I used to go up to Brummer, and he used to give me a little sculpture, and I used to out to Long Island, get bases, marble bases, have them cut and mounted and, you know, do repair jobs on his antiques. So one day he called me up and said, "Oh, we've got a couple of important jobs, but I can't take 'em on. I've got to work [on 'em] in this gallery." I said, "Okay." You know, have you ever seen his place on Fifth Avenue? It's the Renaissance Building.

AVIS BERMAN: No.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's taken over by dress designers now, or something. That was a famous place, you know. Because he was the first one to sell Brancusi, along with the French artists. He used to have shows two or three times a year. Anyway, it's a four- or five-story building. On the top floor, it's a long room, you know. There was two heads in marble. The fourteenth century Italian, Sicilian sculptor. Della Francesco? No, that would. . . .

DON ROSS: Della Robia?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, Franc. . . . Gee, it's on the tip of my tongue. He made these smooth heads, you know. Very, _____ modern, and very delicate, you know. The modeling of the eyes and the lips and the. . . . Oh yeah, Loana.

AVIS BERMAN: Um hmm.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: You've seen his things in art books.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He has these heads. Well, he had two heads. One was a, one was just a head, and that was in good condition. It was a beautiful thing. The other one was a bust. And that needed a lot of work. You know, these are six hundred years old, they were made around 1400. So I was made a price, how much this was gonna cost before I would get the work done. It was a certain price, two or three hundred dollars to repair it. So I was, you know, that's it. So I spent a week on it, and it was a Saturday, a hot day, as it is now. And I needed the money and I was all through and all I had to do was, have him go up and look at it, and give me a check and then beat it. It was all redone. I'd put pieces of marble in and there was tar in it. Half of the one with the bust was a repair, something about half of it [chuckling] was. So anyhow, I had to patina it, you know, to make it look like marble. But then I wasn't satisfied. It looked opaque, the patina, and so I said, "Let's try to make it look more translucent," you know, so I took alcohol and started washing this spot. And, you know, so that washed away too much, and then I kept washing it, it got bigger and bigger, said, "Oh, my god, I'll have to do this all over again." So I got disgusted, so I poured alcohol all over the whole damn head, then scrubbed the whole head, and what came out! The whole head was all repaired; it was black tar and pieces. It was a wreck. And this was Saturday afternoon, around four o'clock, and I should have got my check and gone home. And just then the elevator started moving, I said, "Oh, my god." You know, everything was dripping. Now I wanted to cut my throat. And so I said, "Oh, my god, if he comes up and. . . ." And well, I said, "I hope he stops at the first floor." No, it went up to the first floor, and then, "Oh, thank god, he's not coming." Then it started again, I wanted to say, "Oh, my god, I hopes he stops at the second floor." Well, he came up to the top floor, and he opened the door, and he looked down and he saw this head, which was a wreck. It was all dripping, and a horrible mess. He

froze, his eyes popped out of his head. He was a short Jewish guy. He had a Jewish accent and. . . . I think I can almost imitate him. And how does that go? Yeah, he speak with a hoarse voice. He said, “Nakian! You’ve ruined me! Mrs. Rockefeller is going to sue you for one million, five hundred thousand dollars!”
He took the elevator down, way down, and that goddamn thing is dripping, it’s a hot office. I needed the money to go home. I had to fuck it up. So I stood there for, I looked at him for a minute. He looked at me for a minute. We were frozen. [laughs] Then I said, “I can fix it.” So he gave me a good look to be sure, and he went down. Then I had to spend three or four days going over the whole goddamn thing again. And, oh, I made it, I scrubbed it and made a beautiful color on it. And I was happy about it. Do you think he. . . . You know. I had to tell him, “Hey, isn’t it great and everything?” He said, “Yeah, I’m going to tell Mrs. Rockefeller.” But he even congratulated me. I improved the whole damn thing. It was, you know, a beautiful color. Well, that’s why, that’s the story of Mrs. Rockefeller. . . . You know, I didn’t mind the one million, because I had it.

AVIS BERMAN: [laughs]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: But the extra five hundred thousand dollars got me. [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: [laughs] That’s terrific. Well, you got out of that one. You had tremendous technical skill, though, to be able to do it, because you were telling me all these different things with patining. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I learned that when I was with Manship. He was a technician and, you know, with Lachaise, you know, we knew, we knew all the tangles. [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Right, the tricks. Well, they served you in good stead.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I’ve forgotten most of it, but thank god, the boys are taking, they’re taking them up. [laughing]

DON ROSS: Now all the old tricks have been lost forever.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, when you start, when you start doing those portrait busts of great, you know, Victory in the Arms of the People, the public square stuff. . . .

DON ROSS: I suppose if everybody who owned antiquities, their antique sculptures, if they had them x-rayed, forget it. Maybe the tip of the nose is for real, but that’s all. By the, in the course of five hundred years, so much gets banged around.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Right. _____ and a lot of stuff. [RN and DR speaking at same time.]

DON ROSS: . . . fakes and. . . . Unbelievable.

AVIS BERMAN: Certainly.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I guess with paintings, too, they’re. . . .

DON ROSS: They’re all repainted, right?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Ninety percent are repainted, I guess a lot of paintings. Don’t you think so?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I would think so.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don’t know.

AVIS BERMAN: Especially during the turn of the century to the twenties when there were a lot of millionaires who were acquiring these paintings—American millionaires—and they wanted them to look new and shiny. They didn’t understand, so a lot of these dealers had them repainted to make them look prettier.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. Yeah, I guess the artist wouldn’t recognize it.

AVIS BERMAN: No, I don’t think so. Because they were much more cavalier about cleaning and restoring. You didn’t have a dealer between Edith Halpert and Charles Egan, is that correct?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, there was a guy that showed for a year of two. His name was Hacker, and he had the Chinese Gallery. And I showed a lot of the terra-cottas there. But he was subsidized and his guy quit, and he had to give up. Then I went to Egan.

AVIS BERMAN: How’d you meet him?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I met him the first time, when he was working for. . . . Oh, one of the best. . . .

DON ROSS: J. B. Neumann.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Neumann, yeah, that's right, Neumann. Neumann, have you heard about him?

AVIS BERMAN: Jacob Neumann, yeah.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, he was good. And he had some of my, he had some of my drawings in conte crayon, you know, colors. I used to make pastels in those days, too. So Egan was working there, and so I met him there.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And afterwards he opened up his own gallery, and he used to come down to my studio in Washington Square. And then I began showing, I don't know, about in 1948, '49, I guess. I was teaching out north then, you know, and I think about '48 or '50 I went with showing there.

AVIS BERMAN: Neumann had Greek antiquities then, too, didn't he?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, after a while, he. . . . Well, he handled everything. I think, I never saw, I never. . . . At the end, he even told me, said, "Geez, I've had enough of modern art, and I've got to make a living." He said, "I'm selling anything." [both chuckle] I remember him telling me that. Yeah, we're tough.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He was a nice fellow, very German.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, he had a lot of different artists. I think even around 1940 he had Mark Rothko and, you know, a real mixed bag. And Greeks and Brancusi and all sorts of people.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: There was John Graham. He was very interesting. He was one, he was smart like Gorky, he was terrific.

AVIS BERMAN: What did you two use to talk about?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't know. Even with Gorky, we didn't talk much art. We'd just go, you know, sit around friendly, because we didn't have the Rockefellers stopping in to talk to us. There was only the poor artists would drop around. So we'd go to a cheap Armenian restaurant, and we'd sit down and once in a while we'd talk about art. Arshile Gorky, he didn't have his things around, only one painting on a canvas; everything was hidden. You know, I didn't know what he did until after he died. I saw the shows, you know. All those drawings, he never showed them to me. And I wasn't interested. I had a different world, you know. Sculpture was a different world. So we were friendly there, that's all.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that's interesting because, say, around '37, '38, '39 he was doing a lot of those portraits of his family, those very beautiful portraits of his mother.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I just. . . . I. . . . Well, I saw that. He had a couple of variations of it. But he had one canvas there and it was about three inches thick. You know, he kept on painting and painting. And that'd annoy me. I said, "Geez, why don't you throw it away and just make a fresh one?" About three inches thick of paint. You know, so I looked at it and, gee, the guy's like a student. He's still struggling, you know, copying something. [chuckling] You know, copying Cézanne. I wasn't, I wasn't enthused.

AVIS BERMAN: It took him a long time to find himself.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He had a wonderful place, three or four rooms. He had a wonderful studio, you know. And he kept it very spick and span. He used to scrub the floor and, you know. . . . And he only had one painting there, or something. And then I'd say, "Come on, let's go to a restaurant, or stop and see friends, or do something" with him.

AVIS BERMAN: Where was that studio of his?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It was on University Place, on around 16th, 17th Street. It's torn down now. They've got an apartment building there.

DON ROSS: Gorky did a portrait of Reuben, and I don't think it's ever been identified as such.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh really?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: You mean the drawing?

DON ROSS: Yeah. It's just, it's always listed as Portrait of a Man, but it's definitely of Reuben.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh really? Is it in the Gorky show now?

DON ROSS: I don't know, because I haven't seen the show. There was an old drawing catalogue of Gorky's about this thick, you know, it's the old standby volume of Gorky drawings.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I think I made a sculpture of him in plaster and gave it to the. . . . What was it called?

DON ROSS: WPA.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: WPA. I'm pretty sure I did it. It might not be so bad. And that's when he could have made a drawing of me when I was making his head.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, because. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I've got a bad memory, I forget things, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I think you're doing pretty well. Well, I guess about that time also you did that Europa and the Bull, your first, one of your first forays into that subject. Now you've got thirty. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, that was on Staten Island. That was my first, you know, when I began studying again. You know, I spent a couple of years and it got to be. . . . It was mixed up with clay, plaster, plasteline, and everything. And that was my influence from Picasso, you know. And that started me off.

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you destroy it?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [pauses] Well, you know, you weren't a hundred percent satisfied with a thing after it gets done. And I was moving from Staten Island to here, so instead of trucking, you know, break it up. You know, it's what you learn; it isn't what you get.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: So that was then. Yeah, after making the Washington heads and everything. I'm still learning, picking up art. You know, the reason I made heads was I tried to earn a living. I told you I, that held me up for getting into the figure, you know, I was trying to make a buck, and I thought the only was is get portrait commissions. But I wasn't smart enough to know the only way to get portrait commissions, you have to be in society. You've got to be a society artist. And you've got to make it as they like it. You know, make things that were, weren't too academic. So I spent years making heads, and I didn't get any money out of it. I was always, I was always struggling for a living, you know, trying to make a buck.

AVIS BERMAN: I like that: "It isn't what you get, it's what you learn."

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, that's the whole thing.

AVIS BERMAN: What did that look like, that Europa and the Bull?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hmm? Well, it was a half woman and a half bull. That was made out of plasteline or plaster, clay, I don't know, you know, I was struggling. Well, changing it all the time. I drove my wife crazy.

DON ROSS: Did you photograph it?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No.

AVIS BERMAN: I was just wondering how abstract. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, this was 1940, so now it's 1981, forty years ago. Way past this. . . . [pauses]

AVIS BERMAN: Did you like Staten Island when you were out there?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I used to love it. It was like a piece of Europe. And the ride on the ferry, the twenty-five-minute ride, was great. We lived in a first-floor _____ there, and all the neighbors were farmers: Greeks, Italians, Yugoslavians, and everything. Like a, it was like a piece of Italy there. It was nice. I loved it. And then we were just married, we had a couple of kids. I haven't been back since. I don't think it's the same anymore since they built the bridge.

DON ROSS: I'm sure.

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you move away from there?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, my wife was lonely. She had relatives in New Haven and Hartford, so she thought it'd be nearer, be all right. And it was a good move, coming out here.

AVIS BERMAN: So you moved from Staten Island here to Stamford?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. In 1945. That was when the war ended.

AVIS BERMAN: And then when you moved here, you gave up your studio in New York? Or did you have a. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, I had a place in Washington Square. And I think I stayed there until '48. I was there from '44 to '48. That's where the Loeb Student Center is. You know, where that sculpture of mine. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Yes!

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's right on the spot, on the second floor, where I had my studios. [chuckling] My sculpture is where my studio was.

AVIS BERMAN: That sculpture has so much activity. That's one thing I've always noticed about your sculpture: You've always been able to get in a lot of movement.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And that's Peter Paul RUEBENs, all his things are moving. Poussin's things are static. RUEBENs's are moving.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess at times that some of your sculpture does seem very baroque at times.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hmm?

AVIS BERMAN: Sometimes your sculpture does seem very baroque.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I think I'm very baroque. Yeah! Yeah, I think I'm baroque.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you like Bernini?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I like his idea. I'm not too crazy. . . . He's too academic, you know, too facile and naturalistic. But I like his fire and his audacity.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you have, did you have difficulty moving, say, from the heads and the small things you were doing in the thirties and early forties, moving into doing these big works? How did you adjust yourself to the scale?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, I don't know, you decide to make a big thing, so you build an armature so. . . . You have to work with your material, you know. And size, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: If you make a small thing, you have to know. . . . If you're working in clay, you have to know how to handle clay. If you're working with plaster, how to handle plaster. Working with steel, how to handle steel. You have to know your material. And that's the whole secret. If you comprehend your material, it works for itself.

DON ROSS: Reuben.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.

DON ROSS: Don't you think though that working at the, at the Newark School, at least, it exposed you to a lot of different. . . . You had opportunities to work differently because you had the access to the kilns and. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.

DON ROSS: . . . anything you wanted and also help, labor.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, a lot of students there, and they pumped me up, we used to get drunk together. See, I didn't use clay; I used plasteline, and so I had to cast my things, and there they had tons of clay. I made a couple of big things there in the classroom.

AVIS BERMAN: You had the kiln, too.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, and they had a walk-in kiln and a lot of students. Yeah, that was a great. . . . That brought me back to life, because I was isolated and had no money, and they had all the material, the students were a lot of fun. Yeah, that was a great thing, no doubt.

AVIS BERMAN: So that's how you started getting involved with terra cotta?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. When I was with Manship, he used plasteline, never used clay. Clay has got life. Plasteline is all right, but it's not life. But clay is the real thing.

AVIS BERMAN: With terra cotta also you get. . . . You get the Greek feeling and then also you get the feeling of Fragonard, too.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, and you don't have to cast it. When you cast, things are lost. Things are as you leave it. You put it in the kiln, and it's got the thumbprints. They're still in there. It's a great medium.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, how did you teach yourself to work in steel? That was a complete departure.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I had a little shack downtown that was a barn. So I was, I was alone, I had this assistant, Larry McCabe. So we were doing things and I was making abstractions, and I was making them out of burlap and pillows using colors and everything. Then it was too heavy and clumsy. I couldn't get it into the gallery. There happened to be a shop downtown where they worked in steel, a steel shop. I saw this great big steel plate on a table. You know, the right thickness and, oh boy, that's just it, so let's make 'em in steel, because we didn't have the money to cast. You can't show 'em in plaster.

AVIS BERMAN: You could now.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, but in those days. . . . And even in those days, I had to buy a sheet at a time or you'd buy enough for, you know. . . . [phone rings; DR answers]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: So I had this young worker with me, and we made these things in steel. And I used the steel as it should be. I made three and I thought that was enough.

AVIS BERMAN: But you lost, you'd lost some of the texture and some of the feel of the fingers in that. Did that bother you?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, but that had its own character, its own character. Did you ever see the one in Los Angeles of _____?

AVIS BERMAN: I've seen pictures of it. I've never seen it in person.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I saw it for the first time in years. It's shown there, you know. Geez, it's beautiful. Clean-cut, nice.

AVIS BERMAN: The photos are lovely.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, they're good photos. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Do you want to stop for a minute?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.
[Interruption in taping]

AVIS BERMAN: You were just saying that an artist has to go into exile?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. You know, it's Moses and Jesus, went into exile, they had to go and be reborn and come back.

AVIS BERMAN: To regain strength or regroup?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, you have to regroup. I said that in a newspaper article. I was interviewed in Staten Island when I came back from Washington, and I said about the same idea: "I'm gonna sit down now and, you know, restudy, take my time and restudy art." [chuckles]

DON ROSS: I've got that interview.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, isn't there something like that in that statement? I remember it was a woman came around, too.

DON ROSS: That was 1931.

AVIS BERMAN: No, that's too early for Staten Island.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no, that was after. . . .

DON ROSS: Or '38, '38.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: . . . after I came back from Washington, yeah. But he. . . .

DON ROSS: '38, yeah.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, '38 when we were, that's Staten Island.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, when did you start getting really satisfied with your art, that it was really not corny or you liked it, since you're pretty self-critical.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Eh, Jesus. Well, on and off, as you like, you know, you think, when I made that, and I liked that — [pointing] What was that, twenties? Geez, I don't know. See Staten Island I was experimenting for years, and then I came back to New York. We were trying to get back into activity, and that. . . . I made the head of Marcel Duchamp. And Kelekian was a good head, yes. That was done '43, '44.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, those are terrific.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And then I was fooling around in a studio in New York. I made a little bronze abstract thing. Then when I went to Newark, you know, I got clay and that. . . . But that sort of freed me. And after that when I came to Stamford here in the little studio downtown, then made an abstract standing Venus, which I broke. And, oh yes, then I made the Empty Chamber, and I started cutting loose. And after that the Rape of Lucrece and Hecuba, and returning to my past.

DON ROSS: He didn't cut loose till he was in his fifties. Really. It's amazing. Really amazing.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Do you consider that good that it took that long to happen?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well, it's. . . . It came out of experience. It didn't come out of an idea. No, I can see Henry Moore got the idea of. . . . See, Picasso did. . . . Picasso's bone drawings. You know, The Cry of the Ox. I got that copy in 1922. You must have seen that. And there's a lot of holes. He got the idea of making a sculpture with holes. Because before that he used to do like Mexican art.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: So Henry Moore got one little idea and he just stuck to it, you know. You know, except that he was smart enough to make it. It was something easy to do, you know, you make a lump and put a hole in it. So that wasn't big enough for me. I didn't give a damn for a thing like that, you know. So I grew naturally. I grew what. . . . And when I made an abstraction, it came from a naturalistic drawing. I had the clay model. I was more naturalistic. But when I started making a big [sculpture], I knew that, that medium and that size [had] to make its own sculpture. And when you start a sculpture, there's a skeleton, so I keep the skeleton, instead of adding on the flesh. I let the size show me what to do, you know. I'd discard my clay model and just let this, the thing, what it needed. It called on its own in what had to be done, you know. So it made itself. There's bad art, and there's arty art. Arty art for me is even worse than bad art. Henry Moore is arty, and Lipchitz is arty. You know, on the whole, you know. So I don't know, I'm talking again.

AVIS BERMAN: No, that's the idea. Well, why is arty art worse?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Any time I leave a place like these, I feel like a fool for talking. You should say, "So what?" [laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, that's not my job. My job is to say, "More, more!" Well, why is arty art worse to you than bad art?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, arty art isn't real art. It's affected. I can only smell it. . . . You know, that's why a goddamn collector can't tell. . . . Hirshhorn and a lot of the collectors can't tell arty art from real art. And they prefer arty art because it's easier, it's nearer, it has stature. But real art, especially in sculpture, few people can smell a real genuine great piece of sculpture from a phony copy. In Rembrandt's old age, he wasn't selling, but his students were selling their work, because it was easier. And it was more easily understood. I know art history.

AVIS BERMAN: You certainly do. Well, do you think you're freer now than you were, say, in the fifties and sixties when you first started in. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I guess I'm freer now. I mean to say I don't give a damn. Yeah, I just want to keep busy. I don't know, I get a little tired. I go through phases. I haven't got enthusiasm anymore. I had it about six, eight months ago when I was making these little terra cottas. I was turning them out like hotcakes. And now I work just because I have to keep on producing. So if I have enough energy, if it comes out good, it's fine. But as soon as I finish a thing it bores me. I gotta start another one. As soon as I finish something, I've gotta start. . . . Soon as I finish that, I'm bored with that, I start another one. It's just crazy. It's like having cancer. You can't get rid of it. [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: That's an interesting simile. [chuckles]

DON ROSS: He's only saying art is a disease.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's a virus. [all laugh]

DON ROSS: It's chronic.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: A chronic virus.

DON ROSS: It's terminal.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I guess I'd like to know what you think are the major advantages of having all of this experience.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Pardon, what did you say?

AVIS BERMAN: The advantage of having all this experience, of being able to look back and see so much.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Ahh, it's been, it's been a long life, and, you know, I started. . . . Let's see, I came to New York in 1913 [1914—AB], you know, when the war was on. I remember these. . . . They didn't have radio then. It was just newspapers. And when there was anything special, there'd be kids in the street hollering, "Extra! Extra! Read all about it." And in those days, they were hollering out "Kaiser declares war!" You know, instead of Germany, the Kaiser. He was a big thing, you know. "Kaiser," I remember "Kaiser declares war" in the streets. And I was with Will Bradley then, on 23rd Street and Lexington Avenue, and I remember when we went out to see, "Kaiser declares war!" Now I remember that. '13 or '14?

AVIS BERMAN: '14.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: '14.

AVIS BERMAN: August.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: "Kaiser declares war." And there were still horses in the street. There weren't many automobiles then. And the newspapers were a penny. Even the New York Times was one penny, I think. I'm not sure, I think so. [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: How do you keep it fresh?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Huh?

AVIS BERMAN: How do you keep your art fresh, to do this sort of thing?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Fresh?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't know. I'm like a kid; I never grow old. I'm just like I was when I was a kid, in my nature. Well, I think the secret was I, I didn't have an education so I'm, I'm still a virgin.

DON ROSS: "An innocent abroad."

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: What'd he say?

AVIS BERMAN: He said, "An innocent abroad."

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [laughs] Yeah. Did you ever read that by Mark Twain?

AVIS BERMAN: No, I haven't.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [emphatic, almost shouting:] Read it!

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, geez, what he says about Europe. He went to the art gallery, you know. He's funny as hell. He was. . . . You're gonna read it; it's a marvelous book. I wish I could read, I could. . . . See, I can't read those things again. I could pass my time reading those things. There's all the fun. . . . He went with a group. He was, he corresponded on that excursion ship. It was right after Abe Lincoln, the Civil War was over, you know. And when they were, and when they were in Italy, they were going to museums, and they had a guide. So the guide would come and tell them, "I show you something special now? The Great Columbo." So they got sick of the guide so they—Twain was with a doctor—so they made believe they were naive. And they said, "Columbo, who's he?" "You know, the great Christofo Columbo, he discovered America." They said, "America. Where's that?" And they were driving this guy crazy. So he'd they told him, "Here's the bust." So instead of being enthusiastic, they'd just stand and look at it for about ten minutes, and then they'd say, "Which is the bust, and which is the pedestal?" You know? [laughing] Funny things like that. That's just one part of it. [laughing] And then he, he said. . . . He wasn't impressed by the paintings, which was true because all they saw was all the second-class stuff. The, you know, the few masterpieces they didn't know in those days, you couldn't see 'em. So he was seeing saints and putti, you know, same old crappy stuff, you know, third-rate art. And he wasn't impressed. So when we went there, and the most sophisticated who knew art on the ship were saying, you know, he should stay quiet. He shouldn't be talking his mouth off because these are great works of art. Well, he likes that, too. He says, "Well, that's the way I think about it." [laughs] You have to read that. It's marvelous. [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: I should.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: You know, that part of, that guard, they drove him nuts.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I bet they did, had a good time doing it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Christofo Columbo, never heard of him, who is he?

AVIS BERMAN: In the late forties, when you were making this sort of breakthrough with your work—or in the fifties—and cutting loose, were you, were you aware that all of a sudden you were doing something really different, really new, and really important, or did it just happen accidentally?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, it. . . . See, in the forties I got back from. . . . I got screwed up making these naturalistic heads. I got through with that and, you know, no sales, no nothing. The only began, you know, then Picasso [his show] and his, you know. We got married and we were living on Staten Island, I had a studio there on the ground floor, and I was younger then, and so I began rethinking. I was struggling. I had good times and bad times, but when I had bad times it never got me down. It was, I felt like committing suicide a couple of times, but it was always a struggle, it was tough. Especially being a sculptor. That was a pain. You know, take Raphael Soyer. He didn't have any trouble, because you can always sell a painting. You could always sell a lithograph or a drawing. Who in the hell wants a sculpture? They're tough.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you work. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: But I managed just. . . . I must be, I must be made out of iron, I suspect. [chuckles] I didn't die, I guess.

DON ROSS: Your stomach was, if nothing else.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, Jesus, I can still drink gin. But I guess the gods are with me; otherwise I'd long have have been dead.

DON ROSS: You're pickled, Reuben. It has nothing to do with God.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Heh?

DON ROSS: It has nothing to do with God; you're just pickled.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Anyway, it's tough, but it's better than being a dentist or having a job in a grocery store or standing behind a counter, or something like that, huh? Isn't it?

AVIS BERMAN: That's for sure. You did, well, in the late forties, early fifties, you did a sculpture originally called

Hiroshima, and then you changed the title to Hecuba.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, after a while I made a Hiroshima, which the Modern Museum has.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, that seems to be very uncharacteristic of you, to do such a tragic thing.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, I've got a tragic nature in me.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, most of the time you're celebrating life and procreation. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, I don't. . . . You know. I was very inspired by Euripides' Hecuba. And the one I made, you know, was on my mind. I got one on Salome. I could. . . . And the story of Salome and the. . . . Salome and [his] mother, head of St. John, was a great subject matter. I even got a Hebuba drawing. You know, I was thinking of doing it over again but I got enough. No, I like to have the subject matter. I just don't like to have a thing called Abstraction, or Number 1, Number 2, or Number 3.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: You know, Shakespeare had a subject matter: Romeo and Juliet, and he went to Hamlet, and he went to Henry IV. You have to say something. You can't be like who is that—e.e. cummings. He wrote things and did a lot of capital letters, or something, that was supposed to be the poem. I think that's horseshit. You have to say something.

AVIS BERMAN: I was just surprised. . . . Of course, well, here, I'm looking at, you've got a Deposition from the Cross theme, right, that I'm looking at, but I guess it seems so much, you did so many sculptures on positive aspects, on, you know, sexuality, on life, Leda and the swan—the birth of life—and I was wondering if it was just a period that you were going through or you wanted to. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, you want to got to. . . . You have to have passion, I think, you've got to make a thing interesting. You should say something. See, Lautrec said something. He was in the bars and cafes, he'd see a certain type of thing. He didn't make society, you see. He saw a slut, but she had character. And if you look at the photographs of her, the ones he painted, they weren't so hot. But what he did to them! He saw the essence. He knew how to make a work of. . . . You have to know how to make a work of art out of something. You've got to be smart enough to take. . . . Cézanne was always saying, he was always talking about a motif. You know, he'd go out in the country and then he said if he sat this way it was a wonderful motif. If he turned around a little bit, there was another motif. When he found a motif, he was able to create an interesting canvas that said something. He just wouldn't go in front of any damn landscape and start a painting. He saw a thing that made a composition. The subject matter. Something that hadn't till he. . . . When he arranged apples on a plate, there was a great meaning to it. There was an architectural concept. It was like a Parthenon maybe. You know, in the skeleton. It wasn't just apples thrown any old place like the average does. You have to be, you have to be an architect. In painting and sculpture. See, what holds us up, our bone structure. You know? [chuckles] That's the main thing in us, is our bone structure. So, in art you have to have the bone structure.

AVIS BERMAN: You mentioned Larry McCabe before. Was he your first assistant?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. Oh, he was with me for years. He was a crazy artist. He was the one that got me started in the drink, an alcoholic. No, he was great in the old days. He used to come out here, and we used to work together, get drunk, funny. And then he married. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Cynthia Jaffe.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Cynthia, they'd met, you know, Cynthia. She wrote up her thesis on me. That's how she got her thesis, because she wrote about me, and once they didn't give it to her. And so, you know, they got married. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: That's how they met. Here.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He left me when they got the Hirshhorn job, they said goodbye. He was a bigshot. He went to Washington with her. Now they're divorced after ten years. It broke up. Strange character. But he was great for years. He was with me for years. And afterwards he got sour and, you know, it got stupid, you know. He was a bigshot. [According to him—AB], he built the Hirshhorn Museum, he and. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Was he a sculptor, too?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He didn't do much, but he was a great assistant. And then when he'd try to do things on his own, he didn't do anything.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what was he doing in those days, when you were working with him.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He used to enlarge my things, you know. Armatures and plaster. . . . He used to work with me on everything. I had to force him at times, but. . . . When he wasn't drunk. But we were young and had a lot of fun. We had a little shack. It was a little, it was a pony stable. It was all full of holes, had no toilet, no nothing. We worked there for ten years. And the rent was ten dollars a month.

AVIS BERMAN: That's terrific.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: We were poor as hell, but we managed. We made all these things.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, did he use to do the welding and all?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, we learned how to weld, and we bought a welding machine in Sears Roebuck instead of the regular place. We bought a cheaper one. [chuckles]

DON ROSS: I'm surprised Rose didn't pick one up at a tag sale.

AVIS BERMAN: When you're talking about some of the—let's say a large-scale work that would be cast in bronze eventually—what would be the typical process you'd go through from start to finish? You can pick an example of something you did, if that's easier for you.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: See, styrofoam was something new. It just came out a few years ago. So before that, you made an armature to hold it up, and then you took chicken wire. You built that for your form, and then you, then you get burlap and plaster, and you start putting it on, and then getting your shapes, and then putting plaster on that. And taking off and putting on, and you had a plaster model. From that, it would go to the foundry.

AVIS BERMAN: Would you have to go to the foundry to supervise the casting?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no, no. I don't know anything about it, how casting is, bronze casting, I don't know much about it. The boys knew all about it. I'm not interested. I just wanted to see the finished product. They used the sculpture to make a good copy. And then when the patina comes, it got, you know, I'd go, and I'm not satisfied with the patina, change it, do this and that, you know. But I'd. . . . When it's in the foundry, it's their job. Technically, I hardly know anything about that. I'm not interested. Don knows all about it. You know, all the lacquers. You know, I don't care. I want the. . . . "Here it is. Give me the finished product. I don't care how you do it."

AVIS BERMAN: Well, do you start with a drawing? Or go through several?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yes, thousands of drawings. I've can, I've got drawings, you know, I've got drawings that are small. Like they're six inches. See, that's my ideas going back twenty years. Then I enlarge it to this size. Then I make a new size, then this size. So now I don't have to think. When I want to make to make something new, I go through all of my old drawings in the last twenty-five years, and all the drawings were made for ideas. They weren't made for drawings.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's concept, you know. Motifs, as Cézanne would say. So it's all my drawings there. It can be the same subject matter, but the compositions are different. So even now, I go through all of my. . . . And if I'm making a vase, it's gotta be a certain kind of drawing that would fit on the, have the shape of the vase. So I go looking at [here] what to do, and through my old drawings. I don't have to sit down and think or make any new compositions. You know, I have a drawing. Or if it's a different kind, or if it's abstract, we've kept thousands of. . . .

Tape 4, side A

RUEBEN NAKIAN: . . . same pedestal at the same time, and the. . . . There's no difference. I'm not conscious I'm being naturalistic or I'm being abstract, that I'm making, you know, I'm making. . . . I think I just said something like art is architecture. A construction, so that's it.

AVIS BERMAN: So do you think, so as a rule, would you tend. . . . In other words, you tend not to make a new drawing if you were going to do something. You would tend to go back to your older drawings.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I'd make new drawings. . . . You know, I sit down, I can sit down and make a drawing. But I really don't have to because I've got these thousands of sketches I haven't used and. . . . Even lately, I just went through my old small drawings, for the vases I have to make. I have them all ready. I got 'em in a stack there, so when the vases come, I don't have to look around. I've got 'em all. . . . I say these are good; they'll fit on a vase. I've just, these are made for vases. You know, I can use them as vase art. So when the vases come, I don't have to, don't have to lose time. I just grab the drawings, say I'll make this one, just go ahead and do it,

you know.

AVIS BERMAN: So then do you copy the drawing?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: So it paid off. All these old drawings. I used to sit down at night when I was bored and didn't know what to do, I'd sit down, made a drawing, and I saved them. So now I. . . . Because making a composition isn't easy. Even if you have an idea, you have to redraw, redraw it to make the composition. I don't have to, because the compositions, they're all solid, and these are all drawings I made in the last twenty years. I got about a thousand of them. So when I want something, I just go through them. And then some drawings, I used to have, I didn't think much of them, I'll look at it now and say, "Wait! Hey, this is it!" You know, some drawings have a flavor that you didn't recognize. So I look at some of these that I used to pass by. When I really look at them and say, "Hey, this is great for. . . ." You know, for this and that, so I use it. So it's fun, you know, I'm having fun that way, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, when you go to the vase and, you know, you have the drawing, say, and say, "Oh, that will fit the vase," do you just take the drawing and then you copy it onto the vase? Incise it?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, you know, I, well, I change a lot, too. Sometimes when I draw the vase, the line gets, isn't, my hand slips, doesn't go in the right place, so for that composition, I can't complete it, because the line is too high or too low. It won't go, so I change the composition. Instead of having the swan over here, or, I'll change it around, or. . . . If it isn't, if I'm making a swan I'll change it into a bull. I'll save the drawing I have, you know, I can switch the one to another, you know, so I can finish it.

AVIS BERMAN: Um hmm. So when you're making those, in other words, you can't stop and fix it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, these are all. . . . No, no fixing. They're all done in five minutes. Same as the etchings. Your etching, lithographs, they're all made in about three minutes. I think they timed me. Five minutes for the lithographs. See, they have to be drawn quickly. You know, that's the charm of my things. They've got, like the Japanese, they've got—Chinese art—they, the sweep of the brush, has charm. It's got life, and that's great. And that's why it's good to make things fast. And, but to make things fast, it takes you years to know how to draw to make it fast. It takes years.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, to simplify, of course, and select.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, to simplify and with a swoop of the brush. Like everyone seems to like this. I'm not so crazy about it, but. . . . [showing a drawing] You know, the swoop of the brush'll get it, you know. Is that a new one you, we. . . .
[Interruption in taping]

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you were just saying that Manship told you that people, you have to give people their money's worth. Is that one reason you like bronze so much?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no. [chuckles] That had nothing to do with it. He meant, you know, the, that it should have a lot of detail ornament and, you know, make the thing look rich. [chuckles] You know, give them their money's worth. When they buy a bronze, there should be a lot of stuff on it.

AVIS BERMAN: Is bronze your, the medium you like the most?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, it isn't. I wish I had my things in marble. I think it's better.

DON ROSS: Yeah. No kidding. I mean, look at that. He wouldn't have his hand in it. He could have held half these things in marble. No fingerprints in marble.

AVIS BERMAN: That's true.

DON ROSS: It's a lot less personal.

AVIS BERMAN: That's true. You do get a lot more intimacy with terra cotta.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: It's more flexible to use clay.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Your bronze'll get your handling and what you're doing, you know.

DON ROSS: You can actually get Reuben. . . . I mean, Reuben's fingerprints are in a lot of pieces.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, do you strive for that? I mean, did you. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hmm?

AVIS BERMAN: Do you like that, having your fingerprints. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no, I don't think about it. We just happened to mention that [when] you cast a thing, it's just as you left it, you know. See, Rodin's things that are carved in marble, he didn't do them. They haven't got his, you know, not so good. But anything he touched, he had a feeling for it, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: In clay, and they would. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: I guess during the early sixties, that was probably some of your, your most productive period in terms of big works, is that right?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, there was a lot of excitement. We had a show in Sao Paulo. We had to go there. The Modern Museum used to ship my things to Europe. The show at the Rodin, you know, I had one at the Rodin Museum, and then one in Germany, another one in England, and they shipped it to Los Angeles, and, you know, there were a lot of things going on. For ten years. From '60 to '70. Then Egan closed his gallery in '70 and I was left alone out here all by myself. I was working on the Descent from the Cross all by myself. And then things were quiet for, for years.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, did that excite you, did that stimulate you? Did you feel that that helped your work?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, it wasn't the excitement. Exhibitions and people and the art world didn't impress me at all. You know, I look at their faces. I'm not impressed by any, people in the art world. It's just you need to create, that's all.

AVIS BERMAN: Then you also, you got a grant from the Ford Foundation?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. You know, they gave a lousy ten thousand dollars in installments, and you had to swear away your life; you were a pauper, a bum, a warmonger, and everything, for a lousy ten thousand dollars. If they'd give it to me now, I'd tell them to shove up you know where.

DON ROSS: Besides, his Ford Foundation grant just went to pay for his son's college education anyway.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I thought that that might have made it possible for you to cast in bronze.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, no, it hasn't.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, looking back on things, do you have any regrets about things you didn't get around to or didn't do?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Aah, everything was fine. I didn't have to give up my art and become a butcher or a candlestick maker or something. I made some good things in the last twenty—ten, twenty, thirty years. I'm still living, I'm still drinking gin. If I get bored, I sit down and make a sexy drawing of a goat screwing a female. If that bores me, I have another drink of gin.

DON ROSS: What do you do if that bores you?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Then I go have a whiskey. Then I take up a bloody mary. Aah, you know. Make another drawing. Then I get stinkin' drunk and go to bed. [laughs] So what else is there in life? What's a stockbroker do? Now tell me. When he quits a five o'clock, what does he do?

DON ROSS: He has a martini.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He has a martini. And then he plays golluf. What do you call it, golluf?

AVIS BERMAN: Golf?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Golf. Well, I call it golluf.

DON ROSS: Hey, Reuben, golf's a great sport, come on.

AVIS BERMAN: Didn't you ever have any hobbies, Reuben?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Ahh, I had some pigeons in my studio. A half a dozen pigeons in the old days, flying around, that was my hobby. When I was in Christopher Street. [chuckling] Gosh, it could, then the studio I had in Stamford I had, what do you call it? These small parrot birds. What do you call them?

AVIS BERMAN: Parakeets?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, parakeets. Used to have half a dozen flying around. I'm always on the verge of getting some birds in here. [chuckles]

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, Rose would kill you.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Because there's a bird store downtown, they got all the exotic birds. You know, toucan, the one with the big beak.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: If I ever go there, I'm afraid I'll. . . .

DON ROSS: Come back with that bird.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: . . . I'll come back with that bird. And, geez, then I've got a problem. You've gotta clean the cage and you've got a big bird, and, geez, they squawk and everything. But I need a, I need a pet.

AVIS BERMAN: You're a bird lover?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: How about a cat?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: We've got a cat. [said flatly] He has no affection. He's a cold-blooded son-of- a-bitch.

AVIS BERMAN: And you find birds are more affectionate?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, we can put them in a cage. If you have a dog or you got a cat, I don't know. [Interruption in taping]

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you go back to the, recently go back to the red chalk drawings? You hadn't done red chalk for many years, and then you went. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Use red chalk?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. You hadn't done it for fifty years. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, that. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: . . . and then what happened?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, just lately, about a couple months, about two months ago. And that's the only thing I love doing when I work. I knew Watteau, French stuff, in 1913 and everything. And I used to make them on and off and. . . . So I got new ink and the brush and, and everything, and I. . . . Because today you've gotta fix them, you know, use fixative, or it's trouble. So I didn't. . . . And I used to love the ink, the ink drawings, and all the sort of stuff. So it's, I don't know, it was always. . . . Two or three months ago, I found some red chalk there and I made one and said, "Hey! Let's go back to red chalk." So in the next couple of months I made about two hundred of them. And they're selling, and they sold in Philadelphia. I love doing them. All you gotta do is have them, add that fixative, which I got, and so I fix them, and they're fine. They won't smudge. See, the ink, when they dry, there's no smudging. So now I got fixative, and I love doing. . . . I love to have a small chunk. . . . You know, I draw with a little chunk in my fingers, and it's fun that way. I made about two hundred in the last couple months. And then Hugh McKay came with a big ream of the most expensive paper, which I've never considered buying in the old days.

AVIS BERMAN: Um hmm.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: So he has the most expensive French paper, with a hundred sheets. I don't give a damn anymore, I sit down and use it. I used to be shy about the expensive paper. After drawing on the copper plates, too, you know, it. . . . And I don't think I . . . I ruined one. On the copper plates I can hardly see what I'm doing, make about fifty of those. They all come out pretty good. But anyway, I'm having fun. I have no complaints.

AVIS BERMAN: You're talking about the lithographs you're making.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, they come out good, too, you know, they. . . . It begins with these big sheets. We have some six feet long, I have to put on the floor and draw on the floor. And they turn out good, too.

AVIS BERMAN: Had you ever done lithographs before a few years ago?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, you know, what's a little funny? I found something at the house sometime and put it away. Tom Hess, around twenty years ago, came with some other art dealer. I forget his name. He had a small gallery in our village. And he said, "Make lithographs, make drawings, make etchings." Because he just liked my drawings. I was always against it because I felt I, thought that if I could make a drawing in five minutes, why sit down and make a lot of prints. So anyway, they came with, it was an old fashioned way of making lithographs. I had the book around here somewheres. And I sketched some on this kind of paper that they can take and print from, you know. It was a certain kind of. . . . Well, it isn't anything like what they have now, when they have it on aluminum sheets with a certain zinc coating on top that's like soap. I love it. But that, but I know twenty years ago, Tom Hess wanted me to make lithographs. And I made a few, but I never gave one to him. [chuckles] And I happened to find them in the house a little while ago and, I don't know, I put them somewheres.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you like them now when you look at them?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, what I'm doing now, yeah, these great big ones and, yeah, I'm proud of the ones I've got now. I think a lot about them. They're great. You have some tremendous ones, about two feet, I've got some big ones, and. . . . And they're all done quickly, but they turn good. They're fine.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And I've only made one or two clunkers, maybe. All those came out good. [chuckles] See, they come out here. He comes out with a, with his assistant and his secretary and three or four people and with a bottle of Bombay gin. They get me all drunk and just an hour before they have to go back to New York, they say, "Well, come on, let's see, you think you can make something?" I said, "Well, I'm warmed up enough." So they bring out the plate. So I give them a bunch of drawings and I say, "Which one do you want?" So they go through them, and they say, "Nah, that one's no good." So I go through, I pick out a drawing, and they bring out the plates and have another drink. And zing, bang, they make that quick. [laughing] And my eyes are not so good; I'm not sure. And I say, "How are they? Any good? What shall, shall I work on it more?" They look at it, say, "No, don't touch it!" "Take it away, all right, give me another one." You ought to be here when they're doing it; it's crazy! He hasn't been here for a month. I miss it. I miss all that fun, you know. [laughs] Aah, I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: That's terrific, because I'll bet you were originally hesitant. I bet you didn't want to do it at first.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well, I was against it. They, he, they used to come around and beg me. "Aah, screw, I can make a drawing in, you know, why have a. . . ." I was anti. But they come around and they got me into it, and I love it. Geez, it's great. They come out and have a lot of fun.

AVIS BERMAN: So they approached you originally. Did you know Hugh at all?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: No, someone brought him, and so we had a lot of fun.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [to DON ROSS:] What's that?

DON ROSS: I just shot a picture of that sculpture.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: This one? Let me see.

DON ROSS: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: So you took an insta-print here?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Hey, that's nice. Hey, it's got the same pink quality. You got the color.

DON ROSS: Well, close.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: What do you mean close? It's exact!

AVIS BERMAN: It's a little sandier on the reproduction. There's. . . .

DON ROSS: It's close. It's very hard to control the color of the Polaroid.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DON ROSS: It's very antsy. Filtration is very heavy.

AVIS BERMAN: You're just taking this for documentary purposes, right?

DON ROSS: It's for documentary, and it's really for, it's for our inventory.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's good, because I'm sure before you started this, there were hardly any photographs at all, if any.

DON ROSS: Yes, and, I mean, the number of photographs that we've given away in the last six months. . . . I mean, it's thousands of dollars worth of photographs. Simply because people need them. It's the only way you can sell sculpture.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course.

DON ROSS: We need it for sales all the time and, I mean, you give somebody one of those. They look at it, they say, "Good." If they get a crummy little print that you took with your Instamatic, they look at it and they're not interested. It makes a hell of a difference.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's more professional, certainly.

DON ROSS: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, for example, how many, how many exposures are you aiming to take of that?

DON ROSS: I'm just going to do two of these. They're, these are for, these are strictly for documentation purposes. Yeah, these. . . . None of the old pieces that Reuben still has in possession are for sale. They're just too, too few and far between.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, certainly. Well, you want, you'd want to hang on to them, for family.

DON ROSS: Yeah, keep them in the family and someday they'll wind up in a museum. I wonder what'll happen? I suppose they'll wait for him to be in his grave six months before they come out here and say, "Gee, wasn't Reuben a great artist?" It's sort of strange, because he's had a hell of a lot of acclaim within his lifetime, and yet he's very isolated.

AVIS BERMAN: But some of that purposely, much of that purposely so, wouldn't you agree, Reuben?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's the best thing. They way I have it, I have a little recognition and everything, but I, they stay away from me and I'm free. And if they, I'm not contaminated, contaminated with the goddamn business end of it.

DON ROSS: Yeah.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I can still experiment, do what I goddamn please, I don't give a damn. And we're getting along. Well, I think it's ideal.

DON ROSS: Well, it has its good points and its bad points.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what do you think are some of the bad points, Don?

DON ROSS: Well, one glaring bad point is that Reuben's never had a commission for a fountain. I consider that a very bad point, and, simply because his work lends itself so much to something like that, that kind of idea. A project that big is as much a political endeavor as it is artistic, getting all the people together, and the money, and all the other stuff that goes with it. It's just too bad that the kind of people that could make something like that happen just aren't around. I don't know how else to put it. I mean, it's good that Nakian isn't a household name, but in a way it's too bad that more people don't know who he is.

AVIS BERMAN: How do you feel about that, Reuben?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Aah, it doesn't matter, I don't care. I'm not inspired by, I'm not inspired by. . . . Aesthetically I'm not inspired by my contemporaries. When I think of anything great, I go back to the great masters. I don't think of anybody, corporation presidents, Harvard, Yale, whatever, they're all bullshit. I don't give a damn. I have no respect for them. I don't look up to them.

DON ROSS: Yeah, but wouldn't you like the opportunity to do a fountain? I mean, that'd be nice, you know.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, if they make. . . .

[RN and DR talk at the same time:]

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I think it [unclear which piece—AB] might be nice for that fountain piece. So we'll do it in plaster, and I'll put it in my backyard.

DON ROSS: Yeah, that's one way of doing it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And we'll cast it in hydrocore, which is a hard plaster. It'll last for years. And a hundred years after I'm dead, they'll cast it in bronze.

DON ROSS: Avis, you should see this piece downtown. It's that one there.

AVIS BERMAN: The photograph alone is just beautiful.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: How does it look? I haven't seen it. How does it look? Is it coming good?

DON ROSS: Yeah, it is. It's huge. It's twenty-two feet long. They had to take a panel out of the wall to, because the feet go right through the wall, it's so big.

AVIS BERMAN: What's the name of that one again?

DON ROSS: I don't know. What are you calling it?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, the other one's The Garden of the Gods, so this'll be a part. It'll be a set of two. Or [even, in] this one, we can add this to it: The Garden of the Gods, there'll be three. You know, madness. That, and that would be in a semicircle on a plaza of Malborough.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: This'll be in bronze right in the middle of it. So it'll be a group of The Garden of the Gods.

AVIS BERMAN: So I'll be able to see that next fall, in other words.

DON ROSS: Oh, sure.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, great, because I'd like to. Because I, actually, I come and I look at this photograph in admiration everytime I come, so it'd be nice to see it translated.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Isn't that a wonderful photograph?

AVIS BERMAN: It is, it's beautiful.

DON ROSS: It's a big piece. I mean, it's bigger than, it's bigger than this whole space in here.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Its dimensions, well, this is about the length of it, maybe?

DON ROSS: Yeah, it's about the length of it, but it's as high as up to the middle of the windows.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: It's how, to how, is it nine feet, you say?

DON ROSS: No, it's ten something.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, my God! [laughs]

DON ROSS: [laughs] Reuben, it already weighs two tons.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: [laughs]

DON ROSS: In plaster.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: And it's a good job. You ought to see the structure that they worked with, all of steel, all welding.

DON ROSS: It's pretty amazing.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Oh, they made a wonderful, strong. . . . It was a work of art in itself.

DON ROSS: It's because it all has to be able to be in sections.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course, to move it.

DON ROSS: Yeah, so it's all dowled together, with a welded armature.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: They're doing a tremendous job.

DON ROSS: It took about three months to make the armature and to figure it out, put it together, and. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I told them to take their time now, finish it.

DON ROSS: Yeah, well. . . . It's all covered with plaster. I mean, all the forms are they, and now it's, now it's up to Basil [Racheotes].

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I guess I'll have to do little finishing touches on it, huh?

DON ROSS: Yeah, well, I think you should go down and look at it in case you want anything changed.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Who's Basil?

DON ROSS: Basil's another one of Reuben's assistants.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He's the one who throws up these things. See, this thing, I hardly ever touched this.

DON ROSS: You see that. . . . I'll show you something. I'll bring it out.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: He's a talented sculptor on his own, you know.

DON ROSS: It's real good. His own work is out of this world.

AVIS BERMAN: What's his last name?

DON ROSS: Racheotes.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess that's a Greek name?

DON ROSS: Yeah. See this little piece?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DON ROSS: See that piece there?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DON ROSS: That's a photograph of the piece when it's eight feet high. And it was made from this maquette.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, and he did it?

DON ROSS: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: That's so delicate! He really did a lovely job.

DON ROSS: It's, I mean, it's phenomenal! It's crazy.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: See, how he copied that plaque with the goat's head? It looked just like my model on there. He's amazing.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, to have been able to just enlarge to scale and not to lose it, lose the essence of it.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Show her the little sculpture we have of his upstairs.

DON ROSS: Nah, that's not a good one of his. You liked it, but it's not. . . . It's. . . . I'll show it to you, but it's really something he did when he was. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, it's something I like.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what sort of work does he do?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, you ought to go and see his work. He's very good.

DON ROSS: All of his work is in terra cotta. He's only done a couple things in bronze. But wild colors. He paints everything with underglazes. And. . . . I mean, they're earth colors. They're not garish, or anything like that. Figurative work. Mostly either female or mythological figures. I mean, he's definitely influenced by Reuben. How could he not be?

AVIS BERMAN: Of course.

DON ROSS: Working for him so close. But. . . . I'd say Mary Frank, he had a little bit of Frank in him too.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh. Well, I always think that Mary Frank has been influenced by Reuben, don't you think?

DON ROSS: Well, she has been, she has been.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: She's mentioned that I'm one. . . . "Rodin, Nakian, and. . . ." Stuff like that. [chuckling]

AVIS BERMAN: Have you met her, do you know her?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I met her once, yeah. I haven't seen her work. I've only seen one of her things.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Her monotypes are almost like these drawings and prints, too, with the flowing line.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, I haven't seen those either.

DON ROSS: She's good, she's real good. I like her work.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't go around, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: That's right, she definitely has been influenced by you. Also in those, the women that she does, and also doing it in terra cotta, sort of the swerving. . . .

DON ROSS: Oh, she's really got something.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, she's got something on her own too, certainly.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah. I met her once. She's very sweet. I like her. But I only saw one of her things, in an exhibition over here in Greenwich. I haven't seen her work, you know.

DON ROSS: She's one of the very few people who's doing something that I really like with terra cotta. I mean, when you see good work in terra cotta, it's just fantastic.

AVIS BERMAN: Is she married to Robert Frank?

DON ROSS: She used to be. She's divorced. That was when. . . . She was married to him when she was sixteen years old, or something.

AVIS BERMAN: Hmm, she must have been very pr. . . . What do I want to say?

DON ROSS: Precocious?

AVIS BERMAN: Precocious, right. Because she was working in all that time as a sculptor, too.

DON ROSS: Yeah, she's had a, she's had a hard life, in a way. She had two kids when she was young.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: One died in an airplane crash.

DON ROSS: One died in an airplane crash couple of years ago, and her, she has a son who's my age. He's almost thirty.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: So how old is she then?

DON ROSS: She's about forty-seven or forty-eight.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Well, she had the kid when she was seventeen?

DON ROSS: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: [I] think she's younger than that.

DON ROSS: But she isn't.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh.

DON ROSS: Because her son is my age, I know. There's no way she was younger than that. And I know she was married to Robert Frank.

AVIS BERMAN: No, you're right. When she was about seventeen.

DON ROSS: But he has cancer.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, God. It's very tragic. Well, before, when you were saying that Reuben hadn't gotten a fountain or hadn't been as recognized as he deserves to be, do you think that's because it's always, that people have not been able to classify your work or stick a lot of labels on? I mean, do you think it's. . . .

RUEBEN NAKIAN: I don't know. Now look, we had the show at the Modern Museum. Did you see that show?

AVIS BERMAN: No, that was before my time. That was what, '66?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Yeah, well, that was a great show. And I don't think even the Modern Museum saw it, or the art critics didn't see it. I think it was one of the best shows they ever had there. And there was no sales, no commotion, and, what's his name, the art critic at the time, you know, John Canaday, who we know doesn't like my work so he got some. . . .

DON ROSS: He hates your guts.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: . . . so he got some female to write it up, and she did it real casual. You know, the. . . . It was a great show, you know, better than the Rodin, you know, I think it was, you know, important stuff there. And I haven't heard since. . . . 1966 and the Modern Museum hasn't gotten in touch with me or written me a letter, or. . . . Or that, they're not talking about it.

DON ROSS: They don't even send him a membership or invite him to an opening or anything. I mean. . . .

AVIS BERMAN: Sounds bizarre.

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Same with the Whitney. The goddamn Whitney, they don't like to show my work. So screw 'em. They're a bunch of idiots. But I seem them as moronic parasites. That's my, that's my viewpoint of the art world. I have no respect for them. So great! I don't need them. I'm getting along fine.

AVIS BERMAN: Why didn't Canaday like your work?

RUEBEN NAKIAN: Because he's an asshole.

DON ROSS: You should have read what he wrote. Oh, Jesus, is he. . . . There, can you hold this for me?

DON ROSS: Avis, how'd you like to be a photographic assistant?

AVIS BERMAN: I'd be happy to. Hold on.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *May 19, 2003*