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Oral history interview with Elmer Schooley, 1983 October 11

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Elmer Schooley on October 11, 1983. The interview took place in Roswell, New Mexico, and was conducted by Sharyn Rohlfsen Udall for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —New Mexico studio of Elmer Schooley adjacent to his home. This is Sharyn Udall conducting an oral history interview for the Archives of American Art. We are seated directly in front of a painting that you're working on right at the moment, Mr. Schooley, um—you are working on when I walked in the door. Tell me about this, this painting, how it began and what you're up to?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: This sort of thing is very intimidating because through my life I have attempted to avoid thinking of myself as an important person. And when someone comes from Santa Fe to hear what you have to say, it begins to make you think you are pretending to be an important person to an importance that probably you don't possess. So, uh, let's keep it as informal as possible.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Fine.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: I'm called Skinny by practically everybody. I always feel kind of put down when someone calls me Elmer, I suppose because I was always Skinny to my parents, and when I was Elmer, I had done something wrong [laughs]. I'm Mr. Schooley to practically no one. So let's keep it friendly, even if we aren't friendly. Well, I've been painting in the direction of this painting for approximately 12 or 13 years. I could look it up. As Casey Stengel used to say, "You could look it up." How I arrived at the beginning of this attitude is probably another story, but this one is really a continuation of a number of other paintings. [00:02:08] I started this one a year ago in August. I've been working on some sunflowers. You can see when you go down the museum this afternoon, they're there. That was the first painting I started when we moved to Roswell six years ago. Ironically, I wanted to do something I felt at home with. I brought the idea with me from Montezuma. I had done two smaller sunflower paintings previous to that, and I wanted to try one on this scale and see what it's like. So I wanted to have an easy success, and I came here to kind of move into the new situation.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: After all those years of teaching, I felt like an impostor coming down here on a painting grant, and I wanted to kind of sneak in the back door if I could instead of coming right up to the front. And I worked on it during that fall probably two or three months—and again, I have all this recorded—and I just couldn’t make the darn thing gel. So I went on with other paintings, and when we moved here, brought it along, and I scraped most of the top layer off and repainted it about three years ago. And then a year ago in August '82, that is, I started back in on that painting, repainting it entirely. I should have just started a new canvas as it were, but I'm too stingy to do that because with canvas, you've got to get about a hundred bucks in by the time [laughs] of the whole stretch. [00:04:03]

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: What's the dimension that you're working here about—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: This one's 80 x 90. That one was 84 x 94, a size I used to paint in, and I modified with this one because the 84 x 94 won't go through a doorway in the—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Practical—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —six-foot-eight-inch doorway—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —modification.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —diagonally. This will slide through. The 80 x 90, you have to take the door off and the screen door off, and the threshold off, and sometimes the moldings to get it to slide through. I hated to compromise, but finally, I did. I went down—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: To that extent?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —to 80 x 90. So a year ago—this August then I realized because I had been on that damn thing this for a year—and it was very hard on the nervous system—I would like to be productive.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: [Laughs.] Now what do you mean by that, hard on the nervous system?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, you get all jittered up, you know?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Just from so much exposure to the same—?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Can you imagine just putting little, yellow strokes on a painting for a year? This is not the way an artist works. It might be the way a draftsman works, but it's not the way an artist works.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: I see. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And, uh, just, you know, it gets to your nervous system. And I had to have some relief, so I started this one, a year ago in August, because as with the sunflowers, I wanted an easy success, [laughs] and I had been unsuccessful for so long with it. And I got some results, which I accepted and hung it on the wall over here by that big one that's there now. And then during the winter, this got so I could stand it less and less and less. And when I finished the sunflowers along in—I think it was about April, I started with then that one there. [00:06:02] Like you said you liked the dead grass.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: You're pointing to—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —the—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Heavily textured it.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —blues and violets?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And I started that one that's behind there that you can't see, and I got those that far, and then I came back to this painting because I just do. If I didn't get right at it, I'd probably never finish it, and, uh, I hate to be defeated. I was—I'm a baseball fan. Are you a baseball fan?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: To some extent. During the World Series time right now, I am.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well if you—if you want to really become a baseball fan, read Roger Angell, A-N-G-E-L-L. Have you ever read him?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: No.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: He's a great writer because what he's really writing about is love, not baseball, and I'm sure he's in your public library. He's a *New Yorker* writer, and I've read his stuff serially for years as it comes out in the *New Yorker*. I got a couple of books out of the library down here by Roger Angell. Bob Gibson, the great old Cardinals pitcher—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Pitcher, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —of the '60s said, "I have to win." He's a—Angell described him as a proud, fierce, and bitter man. He said, "I have to win." He said, "I played with my little daughter more than 200 games of tic-tac-toe, and she hasn't won yet. Well, I'm not that way [laughter] about everything, but I'm that way about painting.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: About painting.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: I can't let a painting defeat me, so I have to tickle it and tease it, and I—the only time I make a frontal attack is when I scrape it off [laughs]. But the rest of the time, I'm, kind of, sneaking up on it from the rear. It was sort of like it might be to seduce a woman. You might do better by pleasing them rather by—[00:08:05]

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: The indirect approach—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —forcing them.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. And that's the only way I can do a painting is by the indirect approach. When I try to say, "Take that, you son of a bitch," you know that and the Jackson Pollock way or the Pablo Picasso way, I get

nowhere. So I just, uh—I just try to go along with the thing and find out what the painting wants to do. Well, to get back to the painting—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Would you take a second—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Now you see what I mean that this is going to take forever?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: [Laughs.] It'll take a while but we've got the time. For people who are listening to this and are not seeing this painting, let's have—can you give me a very brief description of, uh, what this painting is about?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Sure. It started out to be ponderosa pine that I had seen up in the Black Hills of South Dakota. There they have immense stems of almost pure ponderosa pines. We have none comparable to it here. We have ponderosa, the same species, but it isn't comparable.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And that must be a good deal wetter country than we are down here and possibly cooler. Of course, the—when you get that far north, they those long summer, growing days where the things grow and grow and grow, so the foliage is much denser than our ponderosa pine here. Here, you'll see a branch go out with bunches of needles on it, and one over here and up here and up here, and between it, you can see 30 other trees. But up there, they're dense enough that they almost close out the tree behind so they grow more like, say, Engelmann spruce do in our country than like ponderosa pines. Well, we have relatives, Gussie's sister and husband, in Black Hills, so we've been—or north of Black Hills, so we've been up there three or four times. [00:10:01] Every time, I have been stricken by those, and I had it in the back of my mind, I was going to do a Black Hills ponderosa. Then a couple of years ago, we were over at the Chiricahua forest in Arizona. We're both nature lovers, and we went over there bird-watching, but we had the bonus of a magnificent biome in the eastern part of the Chiricahua. I've never been anywhere comparable because it runs from almost lower Sonora into Hudsonian zone types of vegetation, and you just like ride an elevator up, and you just go right through all these things like a biological demonstration. And they had some real nice ponderosa pine there that set me going again, and that's what the painting is based on. Now, it's just going to come out a painting. I would like it to reek of ponderosa pine, but as André Malraux says, "Artists say what they want to do. They do what they can." I'm doing what I can, and you get started on a thing. Now paintings always start from a very, very specific thing.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: A visual image?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, yeah. And it's—perhaps corny phrasing—an instant of ecstasy and an ecstatic experience I have. And maybe these ecstatic experiences are unique to me. I don’t know anybody else that goes out and gets that same wallop I do of seeing some simple, little thing like this. Most people drive by and say, "Well, they're trees. After seeing one tree, you've seen them all." But—I believe I see everything in it. I see the forest, I see the clumps of foliage, I see the individual needles, I see the branches, I see the trunk, I see the whole damn thing. [00:12:07] And then I come in to my studio and have a finger [ph], a series of fingers [ph]. Now this, the first image I told you about that I worked on about three months, I ended up scraping that entire thing off right down to the canvas, and that's a pretty painful thing to do, three months of work. You know, it kind of like amputating a finger.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Wrenching, yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And then I started back in on it probably in June. I made them gray greens, and I had this whole thing gray green, and it was beautiful. It was rough. You know, it wasn't complete patterns. It was rough, but it had a great deal of beauty. This one, that was a fairly bright color. You see under there—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: So, oh, it must have been very muted—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, yeah—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —tonality overall?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —an extreme and—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Now when you say you've worked on something for three months, do you mean every day, day in and day out, all day long?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, no. I'm a farmer, you know we got all this property to take care of, and I mow the grass. Sometimes, I think we're crazy to do that. I ought to be in here painting. But in fact, I may paint all I have the strength for because it takes a terrific psychic strength to keep one of these things going.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, okay, yeah.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: You know, when you're working on something new every day and you're making these big changes, and I, the great artist will put this area in and take it up and move it over here and so on, you know, that's a lot of kicks, and you have this feeling of power. But I'm a craftsman. I'm just going along here making these little, tiny marks. And I make a decision, one decision may take me a month to carry out. [00:14:06] It may take me two months to carry out. And when I get the whole thing covered with that decision, it was a mistake, you know? So I go make another decision, and I go back and make another mistake for a month and so on. You see, so it's a—Cézanne said, "The realization of my sensations is very painful to me." I know exactly what he meant. And Gussie can't understand it. She says painting is fun. It isn't fun for me. It's just plain, hard work.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Your wife Gussie, you were referring to, of course, is the other artist in the family. Well, so the difficulty for you then—what I'm hearing you say, I seem to be hearing, is maintaining the level of intensity needed to complete this kind of thing when it goes on for so long, and it's done in small decisions and—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Forcing myself to work. Yeah. Realizing it's wrong. Not accepting what's there and saying, "Gee, that's swell," because many times, it's quite beautiful. Almost any time I'm working on—you looked at that painting and you said, "Oh, you're going to do more to it," see? Almost any painting I'm working on, a visitor will come in the studio and say, "Why isn't it finished?" No matter what stage I'm in. It always astonishes me, the stupidity of this remark—excuse me, [laughter] not calling you stupid. But why can't they understand that this isn't complete, that in Cézanne's terms, I have not realized my sensation.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But don’t you think that what is finished to you and to another person is somewhat subjective?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, very much so, but when they're looking at my paintings, they should try to get into my subjectivity instead of relying entirely on their own. [00:16:05]

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right, exactly, and hopefully we will get into a little more of that kind of subjectivity during the course of this interview. This is what I'd certainly like to get at.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well then, after that great painting, I scraped most of that off and did this painting. And in fact, this is going pretty fast because we were in California, in the Pacific Northwest. We were gone a month, which is the first vacation we've had like that in our married life. We're both workers, and not vacaters [ph]—I mean, we enjoy work more than we enjoy [laughs] vacation, and a very puritan attitude. We got back July 15th, and I still had some of that green work to do. I had that gray work to do I remember, so I probably didn’t start on this green until pretty close the first of August, so that's really only about two months work with that sort of—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Yes, and there are a lot of greens.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —that sort of [inaudible] of the other one that you see now and again. But really, it's not a significant part of the painting. Once in a while, it'll have one part where you put one thing over another and you want the underneath thing to show, but it didn’t do it much in this. So this is mostly what you see.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: The recent.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Now, the way I started the green one then was I decided that where those trees were placed were pretty good. You know, the scale is all right and the size of each individual clump of foliage was pretty good. So I came back and started repainting it, and I started at the bottom. That's my custom is to begin with the bottom and work to the top—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: And work up.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —like that. [00:18:00] So I started with one of these. I think probably this would—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: You're indicating one of the central—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —in this one—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —pre-shapes—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —over here—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —and or one of them, yeah.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —and put that idea down and then I started moving across the bottom and doing it. I was putting that blue in because I felt I needed some relief from the green. And you can notice the ones at the

bottom don’t have as much blue as where you move up. I always tended to do this. I put a little bit in, and as I move up, I tend to put more and more and more. It's awful hard keeping them even.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And I got up here on this tallest one with the blue, and boy, I didn't like blue because it's making both greens look like the same green. Each one of those clumps of foliage is made with a light green, something comparable to these at the top. They [inaudible] with the dark. And then I come back and put the darker green over here with that, and it's still showing. This is—this is the residue of the development of some of the lessons Bonnard taught me. You know I had a period in my work when I'm very strongly influenced by him. Your eyes are bluer than mine I think.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Contact lenses.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Huh?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Contact lenses.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Why, is the color in them, or does it intensify the color?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: It's in them—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, I see.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —in my eyes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. So when you look closely at these, you'd feel that difference in the green. And of course, the halo of orange around there, yellow orange tends to pull us closer together because of strong value change [inaudible] will do that. And then I put the blue in, it tends to kill light too, and it's like man, I didn’t want to do that. [00:20:01] It's killing my greens. So I think putting the blues in as I went up. Now I'm thinking I'm probably going to want to go back and get some blues.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —kind of add—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: But I just wanted to wait—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —add some—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —until I got up there you see.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: But these are—these are very subtle things, and it seems to me that your paintings are about subtlety. They're about—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Sure—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —very kind—subtle kinds of modulation in color and tonality and—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Small changes.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Small changes.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Where does this kind of subtlety come from? Has this always been a part of your work?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: No, I don’t think so. Let me get you a nice shade. I just took mine off, and I realized how that light glares in—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Thank you.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: You might want to shorten it up because I have kind of a big head— keep the center of your eyes.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Good. We were talking about subtlety.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: But, yeah, it probably started, oh, I don’t know, maybe off and on. We're all—many people are—there are a few of us that are just one person. We're all schizophrenic, if not committably [laughs]

so. And, uh, for years, I was torn this way and that in my work. You know, "Gee, I like the way this guy works, I like the way—and maybe that's the way art ought to be. Maybe it ought to be like that." And only gradually did I settle down and get so that I wasn't interested in—in other artists. I'm still interested in other artists to some extent but I find as I get older, very little. It used to be I liked everything. Now, I'm getting so that I like less and less and less.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Hmm, who do you still like? [00:22:00]

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, there's too long a list. Bonnard, Cézanne, Rembrandt, Piero della Francesca, Pieter Bruegel, Jan van Eyck, any early Fleming almost, Rogier van der Weyden, a lot of people. But—I don't like modern art much.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: By modern art, you're talking about nonobjective, uh—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, just beginning about 1900. There are fewer and fewer people that I'm really insane for—that I would do anything for. Contemporary things, very, very few things in that way about. That doesn't mean I deride all of those things or say they're no good. I'm telling you here that I—as I've become more and more myself, I have less and less interest in other people's work. And really, I don't think I'm a competitive person when I say I have to win. Part of the reason I'm living in Roswell is to avoid competition. I don't want to get in the art racket. You know, I just want to paint for the right reasons because I need to paint, or I want to paint—I don't want to paint because I'm patted on the back or because the museum buys it or because somebody writes an article, or any of those foolish reasons. I want to paint because it's important. If it's not important, I won't paint. Why did I take off from there on that preaching?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Well, we we're talking about subtleties and then got into other artists. But let me go back to something that you're—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. So what I'm saying is that I've become myself. I've become less other people, that's all.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Let's go back to a time when you were—had to be yourself as a child. [00:24:02] Um, how did you first become interested in art? Where you always—does it have to do with—what—your self-described characterization as a nature lover for example. Were you always interested in nature as a child?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, you know, I don't think that's possible. I think everyone comes to art because they admire art. You don't—and this is—I'm the product of much reading because I taught school for years, and one of my favorites is Ernst Gombrich. Do you know him?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And I think it's he—it might have been Malraux who's not nearly so sound but in ways more exciting said, "We don't make a beautiful painting because we saw something beautiful in nature. We make it because we've seen a beautiful painting." Nobody invents painting. Maybe somebody did a long time ago, but now nobody invents painting. The best you can do is react to paintings who have gone before. If—it's like the old argument, nature versus nurture, the child brought up by wolves and what's he like when he comes in the civilization. The same way with art. The only way you do it is from art.

When I was a child, we lived on a farm. My father was an engineer, but he'd rather be a farmer, and we lived on the farm, and we lived as farm people not as engineering people living on a farm. I was brought up working, and I'm working in the garden and growing cotton and doing—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Where was this?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oklahoma. When I was a little kid. We had on our wall, a reproduction of a painting entitled *The End of the Trail* with an Indian sitting on his horse with his head down in this? [00:26:07] Yeah, and on the other wall—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: And he was all—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —we had a Maxfield Parrish, a couple of those ineffable Grecian maidens of his and an urn, and water, tree, and I thought these things—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Typical American—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —were wonderful.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —parlor, right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. It's the way I was brought up just like everybody else. There were not comic books in those days, but there were comic strips, and this was my experience of art. We went to Methodist church in a little town in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, near Tulsa, and I can remember the intense boredom and hatred I had for that place. You know that in the [ph] little—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: You're talking about the town or the church?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: The church. And I—but I remember once a man played the piano there. You know what a shock it was to me because the man played the piano. This is like the time I first saw a woman smoking a cigarette, that just, oh. You know it really did something to me that a man was playing the piano! The thought never entered my head that this was something men did. It was something women did.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: So this was the way I was brought up, and—but I used to draw. I can remember I wanted to be a cowboy. Actually, my next older brother and I once ran away to be cowboys in Arizona.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, really?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: [Laughs.] Yeah.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: At what age was that?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: I got as far as the front gate, which is a not far out from the house, but he got clear into Tulsa, which was 13 miles away. [Laughter.] We got to the gate, and we decided I'd stay there and he'd go there and be successful and send for me. [Laughs.]

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: What an adventures. [Laughs.]

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: So I used to draw horses all the time, and I remember that I always put them in grass because I couldn’t draw their hooves. [00:28:01] This was pretty difficult, so I have it standing there, there would be grass all around. [Laughter.] So, I've always drawn and my—well, I can remember a success I had in grade school and we moved from the farm into Tulsa. The art must have been taught by rote as was so typical in those days where they—well not a teacher by rote, you just stenciled, you color in. But this was copying a picture of a—what we thought was a Spanish hat. It was a flat brim, circular, kind of like the old-fashioned boater, the old straw hat?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: But it was black, and we had to make the ribbon coming down it. The teacher asked us to draw the ribbon on it, and I knew to do it in perspective to make the ribbon come down and go out this way and come down here. The other kids would just make it going straight down. So my drawing was called to the attention in the class. My triumph, [laughs] it was a recognition of perspective—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Earlier triumph, right?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. The next time I had any art class was in Boulder when we were there, Boulder, Colorado, where I went to school my senior year of high school. I had an art class there, and the teacher encouraged me a lot. Then I started school at the University of Colorado, and I had a good friend who's going to be a lawyer. I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I said, "Well, I'm a pre-law student," just like he did because he was a good friend and must be okay. The thought horrifies me now. And I took a beginning drawing course and from then on, I was an art major. I—we lived about two blocks from the campus, and I used to take my lunch to school and worked during noon hour while I was eating [laughs] lunch because I was real gung ho. [00:30:10]

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: What did you think of your art instruction at the university?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: At that time, I loved it. Now, I recognize that it was full of deficiencies and gave me a lot of conceptions that it took me years to overcome, because you have to realize this was in the antediluvian ages of art education. And, uh—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Let's be specific. We're talking about late '30s?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And all the standards at the University of Colorado were Renaissance.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Now, what do you mean by that specifically?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: You know their whole idea of how a painting should be done was description of three dimensions on a flat surface. If you could do this, you were successful. The more successful you were in describing these three dimensions and giving some palpable three-dimensional solidity to a form, the better you were. I was a fair-haired boy because this was—this is what I'd been building up to.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Instead of shaking me in my faith in this attitude, they reinforced my faith in this attitude, and I loved those people. They were awfully nice to me, and I still revere them and appreciate their efforts to help me, but now I think they were awfully misguided. I was talking to—well Don Anderson here in town who's the local Lorenzo de' Medici.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Laughs.]

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: He was at Purdue at a comparable time or possibly a little later studying engineering, but I think he took some art courses because he said it was the same way there. [00:32:01] So I'm sure this was the general attitude.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, it must have been.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah, this was not the result of some little academic incest thing here, but it was a generally held attitude. How old are you?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Thirty-seven.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah, it's hard for people brought up in modern art to realize how difficult this transitional period was. Well, all you have to do is look at the WPA and Frazier, department of procurement project, books of murals to realize what it was. Practically every one of those murals is with that attitude.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. So you can't blame these people at Boulder. They were trapped in their time just as we're trapped in ours. And we think ours is a little bit more open and more intelligent in its approaches. Maybe next generation will come along and say, "Those poor suckers trapped in that attitude." [Laughs.]

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Exactly.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: You know so it's an entire [inaudible]—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: So, you'd describe yourself as a pretty traditional painter when you finished at University of Colorado?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh very much so, and I can show some in slides there. Well, you saw Grandma in the bedroom.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right, the portrait of your grandmother doing the quilt, right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This wasn't like what my teachers were doing at Boulder, but it certainly was no strong in deviation and direction except perhaps technically. The actual technique of putting paint on canvas might have been different, but the basic aesthetic considerations no doubt were identical.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: So you were doing portraits then and what other kinds of things at that point?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Landscape and portrait, landscape and portrait, largely portraits. The—that one of Grandma in the house was done in my first teaching job at Lafayette, Colorado, which is between Boulder and Denver called there Laugh-e-ette [ph]. [00:34:03]

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Is that in the public schools?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. Yeah. I was grades three through seven, 10 classes a day, 35-minutes each class.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, my—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Never less than 30 students in a class, and I was the art teacher. That was—put a lot of muscle on me, and I certainly knew something was wrong [laughter] at the end of that year.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: The first experience teaching.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: That's when I went off to get my master's.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: No wonder.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: My grandma came there and lived with me and kept house for me. That's why the portrait of Grandma—I was Grandma's boy more than I was my mother's boy.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: So that was done during that first year out of University Colorado?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. And—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: And then you went and did your—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And we did mostly portraits that year. I did a few landscapes, but I'd get the students in to pose for me, you know my students at school and get them to try and pose for me. I did portrait, portrait, portrait, portrait. Of course, when you're teaching that kind of a teaching job, you don't have an awful lot of time. But I get sick of hearing these teachers say, "I don't have time for my own work" because I worked hard my whole life. I love to work. I like digging ditch, you know that? Well, I don't anymore because I don't—my hips won't do it anymore, but when I could do it, and I enjoyed digging a ditch. So, these guys saying, "I can't find the time for my own work." Well, bullshit, you can always find time if you want to work. The question, how much you want to work.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right. I'm sure.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Of course, you don't find enough time, but you find time.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Well after a schedule like that at Lafayette, a master's program must have seemed like a piece of cake.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Terrible.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Why? What do you mean?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, we went there. [00:36:01] This was August or probably August or September of '41 when I really started that term. I've forgotten. Gussie and I had just gotten married, and we went there and got our master's together.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Now, this is in the University of Iowa?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: The state University of Iowa. The reason we went there was that it was the only place we'd heard of. And I didn't know a thing about graduate school. You know, I just knew I—I just knew I didn't know enough, and I wanted to know more—not about teaching but about painting. The idea of a master's degree then was brand new, a master's degree in creative work. This, again, is hard for people to understand when every Podunk offers a master's degree in creative work. But there were only a few schools, and the University of Iowa was a pioneer in this.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Who did you work with there?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Philip Guston was our painting teacher. I also had some print courses with other less notable people, and I understand that Guston became an excellent teacher. I've talked to succeeding students of his, and he has a big reputation as a teacher, but he was just a terrible teacher when we were there because this was his first teaching job. And I believe he wasn't even a college graduate, which meant that he wasn't used to college ways, the way we had all been brought up, every one of the students, not just us. And so he had—and beside that, he was quite inarticulate. I remember once he wanted to talk to the whole group. He put some reproductions on the wall. I've forgotten but they probably Piero because he's the guy who introduced me to Piero, and his work was strongly influenced by Piero at that time. It's not the Guston you know.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: No. It must have been—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: This is early Guston.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —pre-Abstract Expressionist. [00:38:01]

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: This is even pre that *If This be Not I*. It goes back to much more rigorously formal things even than that. And he got us all together there to talk to us about these works. We all sat down, and he turned and looked at us, and he said, "I can't do it," and we were through. That was it. [Laughter.]

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: He couldn't find a thing to say about these.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, it just froze him up. You know, he just wasn't accustomed to the college situation. I guess later, he must have been because all during his career, I don't think he needed to teach because he always had critical popularity. So he must have made his living painting, you know, right?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: So it must have gotten so he enjoyed it and felt the need of it, that he continue to teach. Well, he was just terrible—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Well, other than introducing—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —you know, teaching—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —you to Piero, do you recall anything positive that came out of that experience with Guston?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Sure. I learned a lot about painting, but I was teaching myself. He gave me some good guys to look at, but he couldn't tell me why they were good. And the first—the first semester, I just felt like cutting my throat the whole time because I couldn't do a thing to please that man. Everything I did, he found fault, and now I know why, but he couldn't tell me why. All he could do was show me Piero.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: What do you think now in retrospect that he's objecting to in your work at that time?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Precisely what I objected to and the fact that my definition of art was if you can describe three dimensions on a flat surface, it's good. And no, that isn't art at all, see? But he couldn't tell me what it was, and he couldn't tell me how to go about it, but he did show me Piero. [00:40:00] And eventually, I figured it out for myself, not that year. I worked toward it that year, and now, I've worked through Piero. I don't say I'm better than Piero, but Piero is no longer relevant to my concern. But, man, I learned a lot from him then. He helped me define art and specifically helped me define painting, and I still admire him as a painter. God, I'd love to go to Italy and see them. I've seen one, and I think the Frick has one, and there's one in the National Gallery in London, but I'd love to see those big frescoes. Man, that must be a real kick to see those things, you know?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Well, superficially—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: But he's still one of my favorite artists but irrelevant. Okay. Bonnard's still relevant and Rembrandt is still relevant. Van Eyck is more relevant to me than Piero.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Now, why would that be? That's an interesting comment. They both would have seem to—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah, there was a kid over here—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —teach you some of the same things.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —on the grant last year, that I never got close to. There are certain people there that I've had very intimate relations with, but somehow, I never did with him. But he came in to look at one of my paintings one day, and he said a very perspicacious thing that really gave me a wallop. He said, "You've got to look at these the way you look at a van Eyck," and I had already thought that, but nobody had ever said it to me before. And I feel that very strongly.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Would you explain that a little more?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, you know van Eyck?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Sure.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And have you seen *The Arnolfini Wedding?*

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: In the original?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: No.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: It's in the National Gallery—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: National Gallery in London—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —in London.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right, but only the reproductions—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —van Eyck there?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: It almost requires microscopic examination. [00:42:03] In fact, I take a magnifying glass with me that folds in [inaudible]. Freddie O'Hara gave me that—to—when I go to galleries, and I whip this thing out to start looking at that, and the guard came right up and said, "Oh, I'm—" I said, "Oh, I'm sorry." This wasn't too long after the *Nightwatch* had been desecrated.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And he said, "I know, it's a nuisance, isn't it?" I don't know what's going to happen when those old guards all die, and they put in the hippies, you know? He was so nice and so British. "It's a—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Apologetic.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —nuisance, isn't it?"

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. [Laughter.] But I've studied a lot of paintings with that because every little detail of van Eyck adds to the whole. And the painting really is about those details. It's not necessarily about this big figure against this big figure, or two big figures in a room against the landscape, or something like that. It's about how all these little details add up, and my paintings are the same since. It disgusts me. When you're ready to walk in here and look at my painting for two minutes and say, "Okay, let's talk about it," shit, I have to—that's a year, and you're going to look at it in two minutes? When I have my exhibit down at the museum—I'm passionate about it these things, I'm sorry.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: No, it's good. It's okay.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: When I—at the end of the grant, each person has an exhibition at the museum. I was thrilled with mine. I didn't—it's the first time—there were only a couple of paintings that weren't this size, and it's the first time I'd ever seen a group of these in a room just like that. [00:44:00] And I've long thought—well I used to think, I don't know if I still do. I'd like to have a private museum, which was a room with four paintings in it. One on this wall and one here and one here and one here and maybe it came in through the floor. It's well-lighted, and you just sat there with those four paintings, and that's the way I'd like my work seen.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Unlike the collective effect?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. And those things, I saw them down there. I used to be down—I don't think I missed a day. That show was up a couple of months, and I'd go down almost every day for sure and sit in a different position and just look at those things. Trying to let them soak in and think what is it I'm doing, where are these going, where have I been, what do I want to do, you know, all these unanswerable questions. And Peter Hurd room's right next door to the gallery that mine was in, and you'd go down this what they call their print gallery. I call it the hall, which offends them [laughs]. You go down this long, narrow gallery they had at that time right past the door of this, and one of my paintings was hanging right outside the door, a five-by-six foot one. They'd stick their head in like that and pull it out and walk on. Like one in 10 people came in to see them. It wasn't my presence because I'd be way off in the corner you know. They wouldn't even see me. I've been to Europe this summer before we came here, my only time I was ever in Europe. Gussie gave it to me for a graduation present when I retired at Highlands. One of the most significant experiences of that trip was coming home. We were going around 35,000 feet or something over Greenland, and the pilot says, "Greenland is below," so he didn't have to tell me because I had kept watching for it because I knew we were going to go over it. [00:46:10] And people, "Oh, yeah," then they sit back down, and I just stared and stared and stared at that thing because it was like a magnificent piece of sculpture, the way it juts up out of the ocean and surrounded by icebergs. Then the ocean looked almost black in there, and the icebergs were just this little chunk of white with the sun glinting off them and then a strip of phthalocyanine green right beside, which I think must have been the iceberg seen through the water.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh—

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ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —paid no attention to anybody else—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: These were the icebergs.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —completely oblivious of purpose, of attention, of trying to impress anybody, of trying to be anything, just existing. And the thought that struck me after—well almost immediately when I went down and saw those paintings is they're just like a bunch of icebergs floating along there on the wall. Not that that they're that cool, but they just don't give a shit. They're just doing what they're supposed to do. You can like them or dislike them, or anything you want. You don't alter them. You only alter yourself. You're not altering those things at all. That's exactly the way they ought to be.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Have you ever thought of yourself as being like one of those icebergs?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: No. No, but maybe I am because, obviously, every one of these little self-portraits.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: That's an interesting comment.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: So, turning back, to the paintings for a minute, something puzzles me about them. They are tremendously detailed. They seem to demand, on one hand, close inspection, and that's what you have in mind for them, careful study of the individual parts. But by their scale, they also demand, on the other hand, stepping back to look at them to somehow take in the whole of it.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: This may shock you—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: What's the distance have to be?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —I don't give a damn what they look like back there. I don't even think about it.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Your intention is up close?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: My intention is that you'd be up close. I wouldn't mind hanging these in a hallway.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: That's what I was about to ask you. How large a room they—so they don't need a good space?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Each one of these is an environment. I don't want them to be a hole in the wall. Uh, I don't want them to be a decoration over a sofa. I don't want them to be hanging in a bank because now banks buy paintings. [00:02:01] Nothing like that. I want them to be where you have an intimate experience of them where you—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: And like you said—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —can't avoid experiencing them the way I do. The experience from back here, I'm always surprised when I see it. I have three paintings hanging now in the museum. Please look at them when you're down seeing Wendell [ph]. They're all this size and one is—two are this size and one's larger. They're quite strange to me from a distance when I walk up to them, and they aren't the way I want them to be at all. They're something . I'm not saying they're nothing, you know? But sometimes, they might as well be fabric. They might as well be curtains or a brocade or something. It's only when you get up here, you see?

SHARYN R. DALL: So the reason is—what I'm hearing you say is the reason for the size then is to enable the viewer to get into this environment and you have kind of a whole experience—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: The forcing. You can't avoid that son of a bitch. You know, and it's right here. That's what this four-walled room would do for you when the door is down and maybe there's a trapdoor, and somebody just locks you in, and you *have* to sit there. Now, the early ones I did had practically no self-conscious pattern. I can show you slides.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: What do you mean by that when you say no self-conscious pattern?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: They're just dots that I—by various suggestions, I turn into trees. In other words, here's a bunch of green dots, and I put white lines on them and say, "Uh-oh. Aspen." [ph] Okay?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Now, these are much more specifically trees and ponderosa pine, and I would love you to

smell that vanilla of the bark. Did you ever smell a ponderosa pine bark on a wet day? [00:04:00] You can walk in a ponderosa pine forest, and you'd swear somebody's baking cake almost because there's this rich odor that's almost like vanilla that exudes from the wet bark. Well, if you got that out of this painting, I'd love it.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Hmm, part of the whole environment?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, yeah. I'm a subject matter painter. My paintings are abstract only to a certain kind of person. I'm very concerned with the subject matter. I want—I don't want ponderosa pine to look like piñon. You know, I want it to be ponderosa pine. I'm not satisfied just say "tree" or just say "forest." I want it to reek of nature.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Because—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —go ahead.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —I'm painting them for nature, you know? People—I'm like a prince incognito down here. In Santa Fe, I'm a big shot, and that's one reason I was glad to move here because I'm not a big shot. People ask me what I do, and I say I'm a retired teacher, which is no lie. I am a retired teacher. But then somebody's maybe seen my stuff at the museum or maybe somebody's heard I am an "artist," now this awful word—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: That's a loaded word.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, Christ. And they say, "What do you paint?" and I say, "Landscape." But honestly, I'm a religious painter. I think that of myself, I'm a religious painter, and nature is my religion. I'm—I guess I'm an animist. I think God lives in all these things. If there is a God, here's where he is, and he's in my painting, too, if there—you know if this concept exists. [00:06:02] Why isn't he there? Why isn't he in a rock as well as he's in a human being? So, I really—but see, I don't tell people this. This is too big a claim and it loads the things too much because then they have to find religion in there, so I just say, "I paint landscape."

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: You can only ask a certain amount of the viewer.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And if I want to be nasty, I say, "I paint paintings."

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: [Laughs.] What you were saying about this painting, uh, I think applies equally to the painting behind you, and let's turn and look at that for just a minute. You were explaining this to me a bit before. The suggestion of where things start with the blue grama grass down below, and then that form seems to be carried out throughout the painting. Is this what you had in mind? Would you explain to me how this began?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, it began with a series of experiences in the autumn, which reached a climax two years ago. Two years ago, we had a [inaudible].

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right. Let's continue.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Two years ago, we had a marvelous rainy summer. We had almost double annual rainfall, over 20 inches. It must have been true all over the Rocky Mountains because that September, we went up to visit Gussie's sister in Spearfish where she was dying of cancer, and all the way, there's knee-high grass, you just couldn't believe it. Just grass, grass, grass, grass, grass. I walk our old dog Bobo every morning out here in this empty field, and I see the grass a lot. [00:08:06] And that painting came from that field, that painting came from that field, the one behind it came from that field. This one came from that field. The one in the museum, that came from that field. And you look at it and you'd think, "What a hunk of trash," you know, just grass and wheat and, uh—

[Audio Break.]

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: That summer culminated with our trip to Spearfish and all this grass and all this grass, and God, it just about killed me. Oh, it's so beautiful, you know? And here's the whole principle of growth. Well again, it's religion, you know, the whole damn thing. And, uh, so I stretched up this big canvas, which is the second biggest one I've done. The biggest one I did, it's down in the museum. They own it and this and this. Something like eight-foot-two by 115 inches because the canvas I get from Utrecht comes 121. You've got to have a certain amount to wrap around the edges. And as I told you, I'm a craftsman, and I build my own stretcher and, jeez, you ought to look at the thing behind. It's like an airplane wing and just lovely, lovely surface. They're a little intimidating when they're that big and that perfect, and that beautiful. So, lately, I've been starting a painting by pouring paint on a surface just to get something happening, so it's no longer white, and, uh—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Did you do that here?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. And I—and I did that some years ago before I started painting this way. I was doing some poured paintings, so this is sort of a little feedback from that. So I had that flat, and you see the blue stripes through there? [00:10:04]

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: There was all that blue. And then I poured out sort of—well, actually, it was an orange, but it looks kind of purple there.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Yes, it does.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Over that and tilted it so that it ran. And I mean that was a gorgeous painting just that way. It was just a beautiful surface, and I had it hanging over there for, oh, shoot, maybe a year, and a terrible temptation just to leave it, you know? But it wasn't my painting. It wasn't what I was looking for at all. So, last winter sometime for a little break from the sunflowers that I told you about, I came back and put these grama grass heads on them, and I did that from an old school thing. Did you ever do potato prints when you were a kid —

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —in school? Well, those are potato prints except I used an artist's kneadable eraser and shaped it. I made about a dozen of those shapes, you see? And then I just dipped it in the paint and put it up there just to get something happening in a hurry, and they were all made that way. And then I wanted a paint to pop up on the surface. You don’t know my work well enough to realize that the sun doesn’t shine in them usually, this one's different.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: But you see there's no sunshine in that one?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: They're all flat-like paintings. The sun doesn’t shine in that one. And I said, "In this one, I'm going to bring the sun into it." I want the light glinting in there. Now, there's a good reason the sun doesn’t shine in it. When you have high-value contrast, that's what you'd see. High value contrast kills hue contrast and intensity contrast. [00:12:03] And with this lesson, I just—it was a lesson from Bonnard here, just one of the things I learned from him. So, I'm very interested in color and what color can do. But I thought, In this one, I want the sunshine, and in order to do that, I've got to use heavy paint, impasto and things like—well that one there, did I tell you it's named *Autobiography*?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: No, you didn’t.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Okay. Now you know.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Do you usually give titles to your paintings?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: They're mostly afterthoughts. A bunch of titles will occur to me as I'm going along, and that's what occurred to me there.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: You said that was one of your favorites.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: *The* favorite.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: *The* favorite.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. And, uh—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Does this one have a title yet?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: No.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: No? Okay.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: I haven't worked on it. It's—I'm outside it. I haven't gotten inside it yet. It's not intimate enough yet for a title and—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: You were talking about the sun shining, wanting the sun to shine on it, in it.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: That's a marvelous thing about sex is it's so intimate, I think, as much of the sensation as the intimacy. And you never—I'd—I like to be that intimate with my painting as if it were the sexual act, because you never get as intimate with a man as you had been with a woman unless maybe—well, if you're a homosexual, which I alarmingly am not. [Laughs.] It's only possible—well as I say, it may be possible a homosexual, right, no judgment there, but this intimacy is only possible between a man and a woman, and it isn't possible every time, you know? [00:14:08] I would like each of my paintings to be very intimate. Yeah, that feeling—and so the way I painted my *Autobiography*, there's very thin paint. Have you painted?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: With a #1 round, red sable brush. Here's such a brush. Can you imagine painting 80 x 90 square inches with that brush?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: With this tiny, pinpoint, little brush?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, I may have cheated and used a #3. I think in fact, I did use a #3, but a #3 is not a lot larger, and I'm not trying to prove anything. I'm not trying to say, "I can do that." It's just what I wanted, demanded that.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Right. And there's a three. It's been worn down quite a bit, but you can see that—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Not much bigger—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —there's not a hell of a lot progress [laughs] from size there. But if you're going to make an impasto line, you've got to get a little paint on here and draw a quarter of an inch and get some more paint, and another and another and another. If you're painting thin, liquid paint as I did there, you can get quite a lot before you pick it up. Well, that has a lot going for it because this produces a certain nervous tension between you and the brush, and the paint, and the canvas and the grass, which possibly is conveyed to the perceptive viewer, certainly not to everyone. [00:16:08] Jeez, it's slow, and that's a something like 75 square feet. And I knew I was staring at three years' work if I did that, so I decided I'd try a different way of doing it. So I made some rollers out of washers.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Rollers?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Rollers, yeah, little narrow rollers for—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, I see.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Like this, it's just a disc. And you can get your paint to nicely—consistency there and roll out across it, and it'll pick up the paint if you don't press down too hard. And then you can roll it on the canvas, and it'll come off on the canvas, again, if you're sensitive to the way it feels, and you get a nice long line. Well, those lines are made that way. They're the light on the grass. And—but it's a completely different line because it's like the line in an engraving, that wiry quality that engraving has, you know, as opposed to the brushstroke line?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And also, it has that same purposeful, and the feeling I'm going there whether you want me to or not.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: It's not tentative—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —quality there that engraving had. It didn't have that nervous, palpitating quality that a brush line has, which maybe—well, that has some things going for it too. And so, this is done with a roller. It doesn't have a brush touched on it yet, but well, yeah, that little flower I put in to see if I wanted it, and now I'm pretty sure I don't. I just haven't gotten around to doing anything about it. I'm getting kind of anxious to work on that one in fact. Well, you can see how it is. I've got—one, two, three, one—four starts here. [00:18:05] It's five years' work easy.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Easily? Oh, God. [Laughs.]

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: You know, I'm 67, when am I going to do all these? I've got a list of paintings that long. Every time I go outside, I see a new painting.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: And you don’t have any—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: What am I going to do?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —intention of slowing down I presume?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, inevitably, you do slow down, you know, because I'd slowed down [laughs].

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Are you intending to paint—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: I can't work the way I used to—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —less?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, no. I never intend to, but I know it'll happen. You just don’t have the strength. You can't imagine—artists are always moaning about their hard lot, you know that, but you can't imagine the psychic strength that these things take. I can go out and work in the yard, well if my hips didn’t bother me, so I could work all day in the yard and be all right. Sit down and do that eight hours straight? I'd be jumping through the roof.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I'm sure.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: The psychic intensity is a good expression. Now tell me—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: —how are you going to get this painting out of your studio?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, I anticipated that. You see that door over there?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: That long board that runs up there? That opens, and there's another door on the outside, and you just slide them out.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, wonderful.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Now, the problem is—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: I'm glad you put that in there—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —how somebody else gets it in, but that's their problem. I'm not worried about their problems.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: That's right [laughs].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: I'm only worried about mine.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: You've solved your own technical problems here.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah. I did that because of Montezuma. [Laughs.] You know why it's in the Santa Fe Museum, the one on this side?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: That's 80 x 90 inches. That's the first one of the large ones that I did. The big one before that had been five by six feet, and I got it out of the door in my Montezuma studio, which is on a hillside, and the door opened right into the hillside. [00:20:01] The hill came down this way as well as that way. And there's a sidewalk here about three feet, and I got that out of there and got it over to the museum there. Then I decided I wanted to paint another one [inaudible], but I remember this is 84 x 94 instead of 80 x 90. Of course, I built a stretcher in the studio and stretched the canvas, and everything is going along great. Then when I went to take that thing out of there, I had to excavate about four feet outside that mountainside to get that thing out of there.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, my. [Laughs.]

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, so then I thought, There's got to be a better way than this, and I thought a way of

taking a window out in front and making it removable, so I could get it out that window because the front of the studio was all windows. It was a lovely studio but much smaller than—and then we moved down here. So when I built the studio [laughs], that was the first consideration was that I had a door that anything I could build in this studio, any painting I could build in this studio would go out that door. So I made it as high as the wall. The wall is 12 feet there, and because of construction, it's probably 11-foot-eight that'll go out there. But I think this is the last one that big I'll do. I think I'll stick to this size, you know, 80 x 90—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: [Cross talk.]

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —because, holy smoke, the wear and tear on the human psyche that it puts on you, so.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: I'm sure. Well, you've described walking your dogs in the area and the experience of walking, moving through these fields and how they become paintings. But what was it like for you to move from an essentially hilly, mountainous area around Las Vegas, New Mexico, where you had lived for 30 years to a country that is essentially flat? [00:22:03]

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: It was difficult, right? You have to realize that, not only did we live in an essentially hilly country, but we had an absolutely beautiful establishment because we're both gardeners, and I love to build things. We had a latilla fence there that's maybe the most beautiful work I ever did in my life because everything in it was crooked, and I made them all fit. You know, I found pieces, and I'd take my time, and make them so they all work together and had made this really—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: The craftsman again.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —oh, God, it was beautiful. I used to sit on the front porch and just look at that fence for half an hour sometimes, the same way I look at my paintings and enjoy it every time. Not the ego thing you know the that, by God, I did that. It was just so beautiful. You see I'm a 19th-century man or sometimes I think maybe 13th. I'm working backward in time because my paintings are about beauty. Modern art isn't about beauty. Modern art is about what you hate. My paintings are about what I love. So I'm not a contemporary man. Oh, you know, I have a phonograph and I have an automobile and all, but in most ways, I think I'm in a time warp. I'm like *Alley Oop,* or something. [Laughter.] Well, we had this gorgeous place that I loved. Oh, man, that's a—I built myself right into that place, you know that. I knew every square foot of that thing and what was there, and I remodeled the house, and I built my studio. I don't mean I hired somebody to come build it. I built it out of rammed earth with walls 18-inches thick. I think it's the only rammed-earth building in New Mexico because—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: What is rammed earth? I don’t even know what that is.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, you take dirt, which has the right constituents of loam, sand and clay, make it into a dust and pound it into a form. [00:24:08] And it becomes as hard as concrete, and it's reputed to have much better insulating qualities than adobe. It's called *terre pisé* in France, and it's a very old method. There's a building in Virginia that goes back something like 16th century or 17th century. And there's—there are many old buildings in France made that way and maybe other places. But it's strictly a poor man's way to build because labor, labor, labor, so. But I'd always wanted to build one, so I did. I love building, and I just like making things. Anyhow, I love that place. I had kids born there, and a kid died, and you know, just was our history. It was our home. There's few people today who really have a home. They call it home, but it was our home. And then I retired and then I spent three weeks that summer in Europe, a very intense experience. I didn’t go to fancy restaurants or anything like that. I went to museums and churches, and museums, and churches, that's all, every day, day after day after day. I'd pick up something from whatever they're selling along the street and eat it on the run. The only sat-down meals I had where when I was in Gunsbach at Albert Schweitzer's house for four days, and I was their guest, and they fed me and there and Alsace. Have you been in Alsace?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: No.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Have you been to Colmar and seen the Grünewald?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: No. Never Grünewald.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Oh, you owe that to yourself if you love art. There's nothing like that Grünewald. [00:26:01] And these ladies at Schweitzer house we had known them, pen pals for years, and they just treated me like I was a prince royal. They'd take me all around the countryside. And there—in New Mexico or in northern New Mexico, you might look out from the top of the hill and you see a house here and way off there is a house, you know? Well, there when you look on top of the hill, here's a village, and there's a village, and there's a village, and there's a city, and there's a village, there's a village and a farm, you know, just intimate. Awesome in the fact that you think Attila the Hun stood here or somebody like that, [laughs] you know? These generations, these millions of untold, unknown people who've had this experience you've had. I've been place after place in New Mexico where I thought, I'm the only man that ever set foot right here. And probably nobody else has ever

had his foot right in this spot—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: This particular spot, right.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —in New Mexico and Colorado. Nowhere in Europe like that that I can imagine. I imagine even in the Alps, you think, well. Well, we came down here, and we came here only two months or a little less after I had returned from Europe. Believe me, this was bleak. This one really looked bleak, and I've never told Gussie this so don't you tell her. I looked—well, maybe I have. I looked on this as my exile. We still own the Montezuma house, and I didn't really want to come here, but I came so she could have this experience. I could paint there, but she wanted to get out from under all the business of keeping house and all this and that and that and just devote herself to painting, and I respected that. [00:28:00] So I came with her, and we got down here, and it was pretty lonesome in spite of all the people there because I was a good teacher, and I loved teaching, and I love my students. Many of my students love me. I think I don't misunderstand them. And to get down here and not have that ego-building thing, you know it's like the busy business man that's put in the hospital where he's an object instead of a decision maker.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: And it was pretty hard going for me, much harder going for me than for Gussie, I think. I didn't tell her that, but I kept right on working, but—and then—but I found that it was quite nice, and the refuge out here is so marvelous. We've visited the refuge before we ever came here. We've been in refuge a couple of times because we're longtime bird-watchers. Anytime we're close, we'd go out there. And gradually, I found a great deal of beauty here, and things that I had never experienced that way before. We have 360 degrees of sky horizontally and 180 degrees vertically. There's tremendous hemisphere of sky. In Montezuma, we'd see a little hunk of sky between the trees. We never really experienced the sky there. Here, we've got all this glorious sky. Somebody asked me a couple of years ago why I stayed in Roswell, and I said, "There's just so much nothing here." That's what I like about it. Quite different than any place—not different than any place I've been but any place that I've lived and come to know intimately. It's quite different. [00:30:00] And—the thing that saved me my entire life as a painter is that I have the capacity for growth, which most people snuff out consciously or subconsciously, or unconsciously at some stage of their development.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Usually very early.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: I'm still growing, and I think my paintings would have continued to grow at Montezuma. We don't know what might have happened. All we know is what did happen, and I know I have grown being here. And perhaps all these grass paintings—you know, before I was on one mountain looking at the site of another mountain. Now, I'm right up in the thing. Well, I don't know if that's better or worse. This is a moot point, but it's certainly a development from my previous attitude. The paintings I was doing when I came down here, now look like sketches to me.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Hmm.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: These, [inaudible] the complete painting. My *Autobiography* is a complete painting. And all—well, almost everything previous to it is irrelevant. You know, I could destroy all the rest and just have that.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Do you feel that to some extent with every painting that you make, that it makes something that's gone before irrelevant?

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Well, yeah, that could be. You know, I could destroy everything before I started painting this way and be around [ph] them. But people have them, and I like them. I like—I still love my Bonnard. Yeah. Those in the house, that you saw. I still love it, yeah, but they're really—they're historical. [00:32:00] These are immediate. They're—but I'm struggling to learn. These are me in a way that those aren't. Because here I'm leaning on nobody just myself. I'm, if it's possible, autonomous. I no longer think how would Cézanne solve those problems, how would Piero solve them, how would Bonnard, how would Seurat, how would any of these guys? I mean, what am I going to do with this son of the bitch, you know? How am I going to get with this? How have I misunderstood my sensation that this beautiful experience turned into this horrible mess. Every one of them is a failure in a way because none of them are as nice as nature. But I just make a mistake and go on piling mistakes on top of mistakes, and finally it's a painting. It's about all you can say.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: And that's strictly comparable to nature. You're not as nice as nature but different from—

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: Yeah, different from. Yeah.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: It's something else.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: You know, that famous saying of Cézanne's art—what is it—it's a thing. It's a sensation I think, a sensation parallel to that of nature. Not nature, it's the sensation parallel to that in nature. Cézanne is one of my great gods. I'm still of that generation. Bonnard is a later thing with me. Bonnard didn't come until 1965. [00:34:00] No, 1958. I'd never been to New York City, and here were all these guys at Highlands always going off on a trip here and there and the school was paying for it—meetings and one thing or another or something for the school. I went to the president, and I said, "If you should ever need an emissary to New York City for any kind of an official function, I wish you'd send me because I'd like to have the opportunity to go there and see some museums. I've—my experience is all provincial and reproduction." Well, I guess he liked me because he had me invent a proposal that would take me there. And I made a proposal to, I think it was, Ford Foundation and made very warm friend in the Ford Foundation. Now, my proposal didn't go through but I—we were talking like you and I were, and I guess he liked me, and I heard from him for several years [laughs] after that. I never did get my proposal but—and there, it was just like Europe. I stayed at—in those days, you could stay in a YMCA hotel for three dollars a night. I stayed in one of those YMCA hotels with my door barricaded against the homosexuals. [Laughter.] And I wasn't—I was kind of a vigorous-looking, young specimen in those days, you know? And among the things I saw was the Edward G. Robinson collection. Have you ever heard of that?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: That he sold to one of the Greek shipping magnates. I forget if it was Onassis or Niarchos, but those were the two Greek shipping magnates in those days. And this guy was so proud of it, he lent it to the Kennedy Galleries to show for cystic fibrosis or something, you know, and they charged an admission fee? [00:36:00] And I mean that Robinson must—he had an eye. He wasn't just a collector to say, "I own something." He must have really loved the painting, and you know the story was that he and his wife were divorced, and they couldn't decide how to divide up the paintings. He said, "Okay, we'll sell it," and they sold it, and they started collecting again, I think. Just a masterpiece after masterpiece, I mean, practically all modern French. There was an El Greco. The painting that struck me most there and here's *La Berceuse* by van Gogh and you know this kind of thing. The painting that struck me most is the little painting about this size, it was hung between two windows on column in between of a half-peeled orange on the windowsill, Bonnard. The first Bonnard I ever saw. This was in 1958. Well then in '65, I heard that—I read that the Museum of Modern Art organized a big Bonnard exhibition. That was going to be in LA and Chicago ultimately. And so, again I—by this time, I was getting smarter about the ropes, and I just said, "Going to see an exhibition to an artist is comparable to attending a meeting for a chemist. Give me the doe to go to this meeting," so they did. Not all of it, but they paid for transportation, again the YMCA hotel. I went and saw that Bonnard show. I was there four days, and I lived in that show. He changed my life—just, it's like a person with a religious conversion. Up until that time, and I had studied Cézanne, you know I [inaudible]. [00:38:01] In fact, the painting I have in the Museum of Modern Art was already there at this time. My one claim to fame is that painting in the Museum of Modern Art. I saw him, and I thought, Man, you're nothing but a primitive about myself. You don't know anything about color or about painting. You're just doing colored drawing.

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Hmm.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: I had my magnifier there, and they weren't scared at that time. [Laughs.] I could use it, and they had that in what was then a new wing of the building. It's old now I assume, that was '65. You'd walk out of that and up the stairs, and you're right in that gallery where they've got their marvelous modern Frenchman, you know like with the *Grand Jatte* and all that stuff. Do you know the institute?

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Yes.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: They've got a wonderful modern French collection, something like 20 Manets—I'm not crazy for him—a bunch of Cézannes. Oh, God, they've got some lovely Cézannes, and I'd go up and look at those, all those paintings looked dull, visually dull—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Compared to the Bonnard.

ELMER W. SCHOOLEY: —compared to Bonnard. That guy is a magician with color. There's a—there's never been, I don't think, another colorist that can touch him. It's absolute magic. Well, and it isn't just the color. It's art. You know, you could like color for technical reasons, but you see he envelopes you with love, anti-Modernism. You just have the greatest feeling of warm love, nothing mushy. It's a celestial, a supernal thing, his love. He just loved life, every—those, and just a long, long, long love letter to the world, his career as a painter. [00:40:07] God, what an attitude, and it's an attitude that usually you expect only in a great religious leader like Gandhi or Schweitzer, or Jesus, or somebody like that. You don't expect it in an artist at all. Maybe you have to be able to interpret it because it's not in words. And I—well you can tell how I was affected—

SHARYN ROHLFSEN UDALL: Oh, obviously, you're very deeply moved by it, and I hope we can talk more about

this at some other point. I think we do need to stop for the day. Thank you very much.

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