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Oral history interview with Richard Ayer, 1964 September 26

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Transcript

Interview

Interview with Richard Ayer
Conducted by Mary McChesney
In San Francisco, California
September 26, 1964

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Richard Ayer on September 26, 1964. The interview was conducted at 1321 19th Avenue San Francisco, California by Mary McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

MM: - Mary McChesney
RA: - Richard Ayer
RM: - Robert McChesney

MM: Dick, I would like to ask you first where were you born?

RA: In San Bernardino.

MM: That's in Southern California?

RA: That is in Southern California, yes.

MM: In what year was that?

RA: That was in 1909. Hardly a man is now alive. It hardly matters now.

MM: The date of the recording is September 26, 1964. Dick, where did you receive your art training?

RA: Well, I was largely self-taught most of my life and I studied some with Hilaire Hiler and I studied at the California School of Fine Art, as it was. And I don't know, picked up study with various people who were teaching on the WPA. I don't know, it was pretty haphazard but it came out pretty consistent.

MM: Where did you study with Hiler?

RA: Well, I worked with him on the Aquatic Park project and studied color with him on the outside.

MM: Oh.

RA: Pick up, you know, it was a friendly arrangement.

MM: How did you first get on any of the government art projects?

RA: Well, that's – let me think. Well, Hiler got the contract for – appointment, I should say – as supervisor for the Aquatic Park building and I think it was on the advice of Kenneth Rexroth that Hiler sent me a telegram and asked if I would care to work with him and so I got on the project. I had been on some sort of project before, and was assigned to Aquatic Park, along with several other people. And at that time it was just in the blueprint stage and nothing but a couple of bulldozed holes and a bunch of somewhat inaccurate blueprints. And that, that's the way it started.

MM: You remember what year that was?

RA: That was, I think it was 1935, '34 call it. That's pretty close.

MM: The latter part of 1934.

RA: Yes, I think that would be more accurate.

MM: You had been on government art projects or government projects previous to this?

RA: I had worked as an assistant to Victor Arnautoff, a very minor assistant, as a color grinder, you know, and things of that sort. On a fresco project he was doing for the Presidio of San Francisco, the chapel there. I didn't do much painting there, I did mostly routine tasks, I just filled in here and there. It was an interesting thing. He

was a nice guy to work for.

MM: Do you remember what year that was?

RA: Well, that must have been in 1930, 1932 or ’33. It’s the very first part of the WPA.

MM: That was WPA, not PWA.

RA: No. WPA.

MM: WPA. And I would like to talk about that mural. Can you tell me the size of it, do you have any idea how big it was?

RA: You mean Victor’s?

MM: Yes, the one you worked on with him.

RA: No, I couldn’t even hazard a guess, it wasn’t too large. It was in the patio of the chapel of the Presidio.

MM: What was the subject matter?

RA: It was a history of San Francisco. The central figure was a large statue of St. Francis and there were Indian figures, Spanish figures in the upper left as I recall, upper stage left that is. Arguello is it? Arguello - - I’ve forgotten the historical figures, the Spanish Occupation. Indian life and two or three historical incidents and the officers of the Presidio, many of which were portraits, approving the plans of the Golden Gate Bridge, yes, the Golden Gate Bridge. Then various little incidental things. It was a darn nice deal.

MM: Was this a fresco painting?

RA: Fresco – yes.

MM: Were there any other assistants who worked with you?

RA: Oh, well, I wasn’t the head. Yes, whose names I have long forgotten, that - - I was rather new in that situation.

MM: Didn’t Clay Spohn work on a mural out there at the Presidio too?

RA: I shouldn’t be at all surprised. Merlin Hardy worked there and …

MM: Merlin. M/e/r/l/i/n?

RA: Yes, Merlin.

MM: Hardy, and he was an assistant on this mural job?

RA: Yes. Then there were several people who, like me, just came in at various odd times and did touch-ups and things of that sort. We had no part in the design.

MM: No part of the design, Victor Arnautoff designed it and you were assistants.

RA: Absolutely.

MM: Did you do any of the actual painting or just the color grinding?

RA: Oh, I did a couple of little fill-in spots, you know, the panel contains a great deal of local vegetation too, you know, we did filling and painting leaves and that had to be accurate. Victor was very decided on that. It was quite a realistic deal. And California flora. Oh, all of the flora that could be picked up, it was accurate and correct, woven into a nice tapestry-like design.

MM: Is it still there?

RA: Oh, yes.

MM: Is it one wall?

RA: Just one wall, yes, it’s in a - - I don’t know how to describe it. It’s not exactly a patio though it’s the entry way of the chapel. One side is a vestry, on the other side is the general entrance for the congregation, whatever

you call it, but, you know, it's built in an inner part. I guess it would be called a patio, but it is not functional as such, I think right now. There's a hot dog stand there today.

MM: Was this after Victor came back from Mexico and was working with Rivera?

RA: Yes, that is right.

MM: Did he ever talk to you about Rivera?

RA: He talked to everybody about his experiences there.

RM: Yes, I bet he did.

RA: Yes, he had a time. He said Rivera was a perfectionist. And that one time he - - at this time Victor had a very thick Russian accent - - he still has a charming one, but this was thick.

RM: Yes.

RA: He said that he painted a whole five acres it seemed to him, of sky on a big archway and Rivera came in and looked at it and said, "Take it out." I don't know if I should be mentioning these tales out of school …

MM: How long had he been down there working with Rivera?

RA: I really don't know, I was never terribly intimate with him, I was just - - when I would see him, I would say "Hi." But, I mean, he wasn't, we were not closer than that artistically.

MM: How long did you work on the mural for the Presidio with Arnautoff?

RA: Oh, not very long, about three months I would say it would be.

MM: Three months?

RA: Yes, I came in when it was almost finished, I mean, when the scratch coat was on.

RM: Was this during a period of WPA when it was relief, when you had to get on relief?

RA: Yes, that is right. Everybody was on relief.

RM: Right at the beginning?

RA: It was right at the beginning.

MM: After you completed the mural with Arnautoff, what did you do next on the WPA?

RA: Let's see. That was a project where you would go to a central location and stay there all day and paint. And they would take easel paintings and I don't know, it was kind of amorphous until they got going. Then the next thing I knew, why the Aquatic Park deal came through and then everybody was very happy and - - at least, I was very happy because the feeling of rapport between the people was, by and large, was something good.

MM: Where was the easel painting project, where was it located when you went to it?

RA: I'm trying to think. It was out here in the avenues. It was an old school. I think it was on 24th Avenue. I was not living out here at the time. I was living on Telegraph Hill at the time in San Francisco.

RM: Did you live on Telegraph Hill too for a while?

RA: We had a place for eight dollars a night.

RM: A house or an apartment?

RA: A house!

RM: Yes.

RA: Yes, indeed. Four rooms, that was a shanty, I should say, but it was a big apartment building, you know.

MM: How long were you on the easel project? You must have been on that for a couple of years.

RA: No, it wouldn't be that - - I don't know.

MM: Not that long?

RA: No, I was on and off the project but, well, sometimes I had been getting ill for a time and I used to knock off.

MM: But you didn't paint in your studio, you went actually to this building?

RA: Had to go out there, yes, to this building.

MM: Who were the supervisors there, do you remember?

RA: Bill Gaskin, I think, so the - - oh, gee, I've forgotten.

MM: Do you remember any of the other painters who were there at the time?

RA: I think George Gaethke was out there. Maybe not, I guess he was making lithographs at the time, I was - - it was so long ago, and so - -

MM: It's hard to remember.

RA: Yes it is, especially with my sieve-like memory.

MM: What kind of painting were you doing?

RA: Oh, just everyday painting. It was very pedestrian - - and oils.

MM: Landscapes? Seascapes?

RA: Oh, I was trying to be an abstract painter and I didn't know what I was doing and some of this stuff was pretty ghastly.

MM: Did you ever have any exhibitions of your work?

RA: Here?

MM: At that time.

RA: Oh, no no no. Not at that time.

MM: Did they put a quota for you? Did you have to do a certain number of paintings a month?

RA: No, I don't think so. You were supposed to report your progress every, oh, every so often. Ask for materials, which were furnished. Then you'd go back to your little place, see what you could do.

RM: You say you actually worked in a building? There was a particular place where you could go and work? Did they have studios or something?

RA: No, it was an old school building and they - -

RM: I guess it was the same place Gaethke was speaking of.

RA: It was out on I think, 24th and - -

RM: No.

RA: No?

RM: Well, the one he said was - -

MM: On Turk Street, in that direction.

RM: Just off Fillmore Street.

RA: Well, I guess they probably had one there. Every available school building or dance hall or anything else like that was pressed into it. Sometimes they'd break it up so writers could have it; theaters could have it.

RM: They had that old one out there off Potrero, you know, that old red brick building.

RA: Yes, they did, come to think of it. That was before I lived out there.

MM: Then you went on to the Aquatic Park project with Hilaire Hiler.

RA: Yes.

MM: What did you do for him?

RA: Well, it was a good deal. I did - - as I say, when that thing started it was still in the blueprint stage and there was really quite a madhouse. But it looked good and everybody was excited about it. And, of course, there was quite a division of opinion about how to do it. Because everybody was painting frescos then. When you got Hiler as a supervisor, he said no, he said, “I wouldn’t supervise a fresco in earthquake country.” Until I pointed out a great deal of frescos have been painted in earthquake country. He had developed a particular medium that he was happy with, emulsified wax which gave a very nice matte effect to his painting mixed with oil.

RM: Is that what he used throughout that job?

RA: Almost throughout, yes.

RM: Oh yes.

RA: And he mixed it a couple of times but wax, basically wax medium, emulsified wax medium, like oil and regular oil paint or any kind of paint, just used as the medium, you see.

RM: Yes.

RA: The paint was not ground into it, fired into it or anything like that. It gave a nice glow to it, I thought. And he was a pleasant guy to work with. He knew what he was talking about. He’s a driver. Then I - - I got - - Ben Cunningham was out there at that time too, I mean he was more in a super-professional position.

RM: Yes, that’s right.

RA: But, for some reason or other I got to do the decorations on what is now the Maritime Museum. This was to be called the Banquet Hall and so I made designs for, at that time, I think rather modern sort of. It isn’t very shocking now but I used polyesters and plaster, plywood and just plain flat paint. Terrazzo floor, it was - - many bugs came up in that - - including the fact that since everybody else was painting frescos it was kind of amusing.

RM: Well, I think that is one of the things that is important about Hiler. He did break with the fresco tradition.

RA: Tradition.

RM: You know it would be - -

RA: It was in the saddle and that’s the way it was.

RM: Yes.

RA: Naturally, we had to have union plasterers and so the guy who plastered the room that I was decorating put in a beautiful flat wall, I mean, in the Mexican tradition. It was a lovely, lovely job of plastering but, it wasn’t up to what I wanted on my design which called for a broken - - what is the word I want - - a broken texture over - - over a part of this thing to go with certain parts in the design, and he flatly refused when he saw it. I made a scale model and he said, “No, that isn’t right.” He said, “I’ve been taught all my life to make a good beautiful wall and here you come and put a lot of sloppy plaster on it.” I said, “Well, just, just either cut bait or fish,” or words to that effect. So I got my way for a wonder, for once in my life. It turned out pretty good. It turned out darn good, as a matter of fact.

MM: Is it still there?

RA: Yes. It’s hidden behind photographs of the history of the Matson Navigation Company right now.

RM: No kidding.

RA: Yes.

MM: Which room is this in? You say it’s in the Banquet Hall, down on the main floor?

RA: It’s on the second story, second floor.

MM: Which end of the building, right or left?

RA: It's the complete length of the building, but it's - -

MM: Oh!

RA: - - overlooking the Bay. It's a good room, but it's - - it's pretty well shot. People, they used it as a dance hall for awhile. I mean a social hall and it got pretty well chipped off and there's no one to fuss with it. I think Herman Volz repaired part of it. I'm not sure.

RM: Volz?

RA: Yes. I'm not sure, somebody told me he did and that's just rumor.

RM: What, recently?

RA: Well, I don't know, let's see. Not too recently. I guess before the War - - gee, that isn't so recently.

MM: Oh.

RA: I mean World War II, not the Civil War. There are days when - -

MM: How large was the wall decoration that you did?

RA: Oh, I don't know.

MM: The whole length of the room?

RA: The whole length of the room. It's - -

MM: Forty feet?

RA: It's - - it's more than that. It's a series of - - I don't have a photograph of it, unfortunately. That was the stupidest thing I ever did.

RM: Yes, that's too bad.

RA: Yes, because it's very hard to describe, there are six or eight large columns that support the ceiling or roof, everything. And great windows overlooking the Bay. On these columns I decorated all the sides with marine motifs and anchor chains, sails and all kinds of various symbols, radio signals, signal flags, all that; anything that would pertain to that. It was all very modern. I mean, there were no cute little sailboats running around in there; there was enough of that on the Bay that you could see.

RM: Yes.

MM: Were these painted on the column?

RA: These particular ones were - - some were put in relief too, but the main decoration was all in, well, we'd leave a paint texture and more texture was provided by things, artificial marine rivets and I don't know. It looked pretty good at the time but it fades a little bit, but I don't think too much.

RM: I would like to see it, I think.

MM: We didn't go into that room the last time we were there. On the outside of that room is where they have that large unfinished tile.

RA: Oh yes. That was a - - well, in the floor of my room was one of the first abstract terrazzo floors put in around here. It was a mariner's, I mean, a sounding chart of the Bay, it really wasn't, but it was the subject of it. And I don't know, too many guys got into the act.

MM: Who did that, who did the floor?

RA: You mean who made the actual terrazzo? I designed the floor. I designed the whole room.

RM: Glad to know that.

MM: Besides Hiler, who else was working at Aquatic Park when you were there?

RA: Well Hiler, was the supervisor. But Sargent Johnson did all the sculpture. And I think he designed all the tile work on the back. There was a North African tile setter, an Arab, I guess, whose name I can't remember. And he

always kept getting in fights with guys because they would, in a friendly way, refer to his canine ancestry which you do not do with Arabs.

MM: Hardly!

RM: Bufano did not work on that job, did he?

RA: No, he tried to but he and Hiler had a meeting of minds and then he had, Bufano had to have every other project, I mean, generally speaking, another St. Francis. He wanted to put a big stainless steel sea serpent in Aquatic Park, and - - I suppose I'm talking out of turn now.

MM: No, no.

RM: Certainly not.

RA: Psychiatrist's couch.

MM: How long did you work on the Aquatic Park project?

RA: Well, according to the guys that were building it, too damn long. I guess it was, well, do you mean from the blueprint stage?

RM: Yes.

RA: Must have been three years. The actual work itself was quite long because one thing you can never convince contractors, and so on, that it takes concrete a little while to cure and that it takes paint a little while to dry, especially when you do five or six layers. Hiler was always exasperated at these guys. He had enough experience and enough know-how to keep them at bay. I ran around there pretty scared sometimes.

MM: Who was the architect who designed the building? It's in the shape of a ship, isn't it?

RA: Well roughly - - I can't think of his first name; it's a firm of architects. His father designed the Ghirardelli Building, Mooser. Mooser, I think. And his son is Mooser, Jr. and he designed Aquatic Park. He made the - - I don't know whether he or his firm or what. He and his father were always fighting. His father hated my guts. He's an old man with a nice gray beard. Very conservative. But we got along great after awhile. Hiler decorated a great part of it. A playful mood with the yacht club pennants, just for kicks you know, but - - the old man couldn't understand that. "Why, it looks like a kindergarten," he'd say. He would make those kind of little cracks anyway.

MM: Did you have any assistants working with you?

RA: Oh, sure. The whole project. Shirley Staschen was with me particularly. She was on. Luke Gibney, you remember him?

RM: Yes.

RA: He quit. He had - - he wanted a different project. He wanted easel painting. He got it.

RM: He didn't stay on it very long though.

RA: No, he didn't.

RM: It wasn't you that pushed him out and got him on Volz's project?

RA: That really, gee, I hate to - - people move around you know, from place to place, time to time. Shirley was there steadily and then there were batteries of painters, plasterers and - -

RM: Phyllis, what was her name? Phyllis?

RA: Phyllis, Phyllis Rice. Yes.

RM: Wrightson.

MM: Phyllis Wrightson.

RM: Rice.

MM: Rice, oh, Ann Rice.

RA: No.

MM: Ann Rice O'Hanlon.

RA: Yes, Ann Rice was there.

MM: She did something, a little panel or something.

RA: Yes, she did, yes. She was a sweetheart, she really - - I got along fine with her.

MM: Were all the laborers who worked on the Aquatic Park project people who were on the WPA?

RA: No. The laborers yes, I think so. But the skilled workers, carpenters, plasterers, were all union men. Or at least they had to have a certain quota of professionals. I think there was a quota; if you painted a certain number of square feet you had to have a card. Do you know anything about that, Bob?

RM: I don't - - there was trouble over at the Fair.

RA: Oh yes.

RM: Volz said that they had a big beef at the Fair doing that job.

RA: That was a huge thing that Volz was doing there.

RM: Yes. That's all I can remember.

RA: Then came the Fair.

MM: I wanted to ask you something about Aquatic Park and now I forgot what it was.

RA: Oh, keep on, keep on. It's about the only thing I can remember very well.

MM: Oh, you mentioned Hilaire Hiler's color theory. The last time I was out there he had the color wheel painted on the ceiling of one of the rooms there.

RA: It was a project in itself.

MM: Who did that?

RA: Well, I did that, oh, everybody was on that. My God, that - -

RM: Where was that, the Ostwald theory or - - ?

RA: The derivative of the Ostwald theory.

MM: How do you spell that man's name? A/s/w/a/l/t?

RA: O/s/t/w/a/l/d.

MM: Ostwald. Who was he, where did he come from?

RA: He's long dead and well, he was an Austrian, German, I guess. German. And he developed this long, involved theory of - - well, are you familiar with color theories at all?

MM: I know very little about them.

RA: Well, I don't - - I mean, I can't - - the one that is mostly used by engravers now is the Munsel system. They all are basically the same, but the series of grays. Those set a cross-section of - - I can't explain it without - - a cross-section of values and the unmixed colors which are called hues are mixed in, roughly speaking, in an equatorial sort of thing, and those are the unmixed pure hues. And they are divided into their component parts, by which is the complementary of the other. The other one diagonally across ... diametrically across from a - - for example, yellow in Ostwald, from lemon yellow then right down through his circle to ultramarine blue, that's his thing. Most guys divide it into a different way, I don't know. So many a bashed head and slit throat and - - it's fascinating in a way.

MM: And Hilaire Hiler has developed a theory?

RA: He developed one. He still passes his on; he has taught in many schools. Good enough theories.

MM: Is he developed from Ostwald or did he follow Ostwald?

RA: I think he developed from Ostwald; he always refers to Ostwald. And his theory essentially and basically was the fact that certain amounts of grays and a certain series of grays, can so modify this color around it that each thing, that all the colors can be mixed from oh, a certain amount of basic color; I can't go into it without demonstration.

MM: He has written several books on this, hasn't he?

RA: Yes he has.

MM: Do you know where he is now?

RA: Well, I heard from him about two years ago. The last time I heard he was in Dublin, oh, teaching.

RM: I picked up a magazine, one of the art magazines, I think. There was a big spread on his show he's having.

RA: Oh good.

MM: I think it was Art International.

RM: It was abstracted, but it was the same meticulous - -

RA: Yes.

RM: - - notion of painting.

RA: Oh, Ben Cunningham paints a little like that now. Using the same system.

MM: Do you know where Ben Cunningham is now?

RA: Well, he was out here, when ...?

MM: Oh, that's right. He's in New York because I wrote him.

RA: Did you?

MM: Yes, I forgot now.

RA: I think he's been in New York for some time.

MM: I got the name mixed up with someone else.

RA: How about Rueben Kadish?

MM: He's in New York. We saw him there two years ago.

RA: Oh, did you?

MM: Was he working on Aquatic Park?

RA: No, he had, I think, a project of his own in lithography at that time. I didn't know him too well.

MM: What was Hilaire Hiler's background? Where is he from?

RA: Oh, God, where - -

MM: Is he European, I was just wondering if he was.

RA: Oh no. He was born, I think in Pennsylvania. He lived in Paris for the formative period of his life, just after World War I. He and his father and mother. His father is a great old guy and he paints too. When he introduces himself, he says, "I am Milar Hiler and this is my son, Hilaire, who also paints."

RM: Yes, his father was a primitive, wasn't he?

RA: Yes. He was about as primitive, for God's sakes, as Da Vinci. But at least he had that meticulous style. And that is all I know about his early background, he wrote some biographical material.

MM: Did he do any other large projects in San Francisco? Any other murals?

RA: Did a lot of private decoration. He did a lot in Los Angeles, but what they were, I don't know.

RM: Did one for La Rocca's Corner.

RA: He sure did. And he did one for the Black Cat bar in the early days in San Francisco when it was a good place, which was probably painted out by some clown and a bunch of Swiss yodelers put in.

MM: That one at La Rocca's is gone too, isn't it?

RA: Oh yes.

RM: Yes, it's gone.

RA: Oh, my God, yes. It's got nothing there but photographs of - -

RM: I was talking to one of the Roccas - -

RA: - - places change.

RM: … fellows, he said that the painting practically fell off the wall. The rope got so dirty, so crummy.

MM: Is that the one of the boat with the rope coming out of it?

RA: Oh yes, that's right. James Budd Dixon used to retouch that every so often.

RM: And then there was, I think there was a door and a few other things in it.

RA: It was nailed on the wall.

RM: It was a collage, yes.

MM: You were a friend when you studied with him at the time that you were working at Aquatic Park and you also took private lessons from him?

RA: Oh, no. Just working with him. I wouldn't say it was formal. It was no formal study at all. Conversation and the studio work, boy, we worked like the devil. It was everybody, practically everybody that worked at the place was crazy about it. He had been real devoted. Oh, and you better mention Charles Nunemaker on that Aquatic Park project. I don't know where he is.

MM: Oh. How do you spell his last name?

RA: Oh God!

MM: Nunnermaker?

RA: N/u/n/e/m/a/k/e/r.

MM: Oh, that's right. He did some of the little color - -

RA: Cubism, he was a man of - - Jack of all, not Jack of all trades, but he was - - did a lot of work. He worked with Sargent Johnson on the sculpture. He had a panel of his own in a ladies' public room. But I never saw it.

MM: Was there any other sculptor besides Sargent working on the project?

RA: I don't know who his assistants were in sculpture. It was mostly farmed out. Sargent did most of his own cutting. That front of the thing was all done by him. It was quite an innovation and quite a daring thing at that time especially. Hiler said, "What should we put on the front here, Sargent, what are we going to do, do you want to put a mosaic up here?" And Sargent said, "My God, no more mosaics." He said, "They could get a child to do that." At this time everybody in San Francisco was going "chip, chip, chip." So he said, "I want something carved. Hand carved." Hiler said, "Who are the best carvers, who do you think, Sargent?" "Well," he said, "the Egyptians." Hiler said, "Well, what is the best medium that they used?" Sargent said, "Slate." Hiler said, "Where are we going to get any slate?" So Sargent said, "I'll find out for you." So he got boxcar-loads of beautiful green slate. I don't know where.

RM: Yes, it's a handsome thing.

MM: It's beautiful. It really is.

RA: He did a lot of hard work on that so everybody was shifted from moving lumber and stuff to working with him. I wish I had worked with him. I didn't get a chance. But he was happy, boy, he putzed around. He was an awfully nice guy.

MM: After the Aquatic Park project was finished you went over to the Treasure Island?

RA: Treasure Island, yes.

MM: What did you do there?

RA: Well, Shirley Staschen was with me at the time; I mean, we associated as artists at that time. And, let's see, what did happen? Oh, Bill Gaskin got an idea that there was a building there called - - oh, I don't remember, West or something like that. And it had totem poles being made and everything. When we got out there, it was the usual thing. It was raining like hell. It was February. There was nothing there but just mud and bulldozers and confusion. Boy, I mean confusion. So he got the idea that to be very modern we would take all the national parks and make great huge outdoor murals of plywood and automobile lacquer. So I said, "Well, gee, I have to have some other things in here." So I designed some things that would have looked very good if my specifications had been carried out. But then we - - I don't know. I was not affiliated with the project. I was off the project at this time, I guess. I wasn't getting paid by it. Who would get that kind of a job?

RM: What - - which do you mean?

RA: Treasure Island.

MM: Did you work on the Federal Building?

RA: The Federal Building, that was it. Yes.

MM: Wasn't that a WPA project? The Volz mural was paid for by the WPA.

RM: Yes, that was primarily WPA.

MM: But some of them - - some people who worked over there were paid by the city.

RA: I guess that is what we got, I don't know. It was much more than we got on WPA.

RM: Not on the Federal Building.

MM: Not on the Federal Building, there were other buildings like that. The Federal Building was all WPA.

RA: It was?

MM: Is that what you think, Bob?

RM: That's what I assumed. I noticed that when you - - you know that big bronze thing you did? Did you do a big bronze, a modern thing?

RA: No.

RM: Oh, I know who that was. I was thinking it was you. It was Michael Chepourkoff.

RA: Oh, Chepourkoff's, yes. He wasn't on the WPA.

RM: I don't think so.

RA: Well, anyway, these were installed and the powers that be were very unhappy. So the next year they got some chintzy little pictures for there.

RM: You did work on the project over on the Island, didn't you?

RA: Oh yes.

RM: I know, you had your lunch on the ship all the time.

RA: That was a great job, wasn't it?

RM: Yes, that was a great plan.

MM: What were you doing there? Working for Volz?

RA: Very, very indirectly. Yes, he was overall head of the project, I guess. He and some German architect, whose name I have forgotten, were working on - - that was the Park - - that wasn't a Federal Building, that particular job, it was Recreation and Parks or something or other. Relatively small.

RM: Well, back behind the Federal Building or behind the side where the mural was, that was all courts in there.

RA: Yes that was all courts.

RM: They had all recreation displays, for instance, fishing. There was one guy who taught people how to cast. They had a little band in there. The music project was all set up.

RA: I don't think I ever saw that place. Oh, Urban Neininger was there.

MM: Was he supervisor?

RA: No. He was a technical man, trouble shooter. We developed a saying, if you got in a hole why Urban will pull you out. If there wasn't any machinery, he would invent it.

MM: Had he been over at the Aquatic Park project too?

RA: They kind of shuffled him around and any time us guys would show our latent imbecility why he would come over and say, "There, there," and pat us on the head.

MM: When you first went over to the Fair, do you remember what you did at the beginning?

RA: Well, I went over to there casing the joint and looking at blueprints and that's about as far as it was. And then came back and talked to Gaskin, made a requisition for materials. He whittled them down. They were delivered to this old school where the project was, yes, that's right. You were right. Out on Potrero Street by the San Francisco County hospital.

RM: Yes, the hospital. It had absolutely no heat in it at all. Great big court.

MM: Did you work out there in this building?

RA: I just had to come and bring in some sketches, and talk things over and listen to the latest beefs that were going on.

MM: What were you drawing at that time? You said you brought sketches of what you - -

RA: Oh, the National Parks? I was making models of them, you know, plywood models.

MM: Oh, what were they actually? You mean they were painted on plywood?

RA: They were sawed cutouts, collage.

RM: They finally went up, didn't they?

RA: They went up, you bet. They stayed for a little while. But then somebody didn't like them so - -

RM: They tore them out?

RA: They put in some ghastly Time painting-type illustrations at least for my taste..

MM: You cut them, the plywood in the shapes of the National Parks?

RA: Well, things like the shapes.

RM: To represent the National Parks, I think.

RA: Yes. Well, as an example for Yosemite Park, I tried to get a stainless steel waterfall going down over a painted background. The sketch so showed, but when it came out, it was a sawed up plywood thing spread with silver paint. It looked like hell.

MM: What were some of the others?

RA: Oh, I have forgotten. The hardest ones were things pertaining to redwood trees, because redwoods are

beautiful because they have a life of their own. There was no point in sawing them into plywood, but something came out, merely decorative. All I remember was there were eight of them. That's a tough cookie to do in a cute thing. Yellowstone Park I cut inside the outlines of its lakes.

MM: Who did the supervising on this? Who had to approve the design?

RA: Wish to God I knew.

MM: Was it Gaskin?

RA: Gaskin was in front of the executive office.

MM: Oh. And it wasn't Herman Volz?

RA: Volz? He was doing a main project there, a main mural project, so he had the incidental things. He had nothing to do with this particular job.

MM: I see. Then didn't you also do an abstract sculpture over there?

RA: No, that wasn't me.

MM: Oh, then you did the plywood with automobile lacquers?

RA: Yes, that was it.

MM: Where was that placed?

RA: It was in the court of the - - what was that name?

MM: Court of States?

RA: They call everything, everything else. I don't really know.

MM: How large was that?

RA: There were about eight panels which would be, oh, about - - it was pretty big, maybe 20 feet.

RM: Did Timothy Pfleuger have something to do with this? Was he the architect?

RA: I think he was one of the big shots. George Creel was actually the head.

RM: George Creel?

RA: He was actually - - he was head of State. I've forgotten the exact measurements. They were big, they were large. Yes, George Creel was the head of all that part of the Fair. Oh, sure.

RM: The Federal Building.

RA: Federal Building.

MM: And these were completely abstract shapes?

RA: Well, I wouldn't say, no, they weren't. They were - - I don't know - - they were abstractions of the things, I mean, by present-day standards they would be naturalistic, pretty naturalistic. They were just decorative. There was nothing wildly creative about them. There couldn't have been.

MM: About how long did you work over there at Treasure Island?

RA: Well, let's see, I don't know - - from 19- - I have forgotten when we started, the Fair opened in '39, 1939. And I had been working six or seven months, I would say. And I worked through most of the Fair. And then I think I returned for the second year for some sort of job. Really and truly, it has slipped my mind completely.

MM: Did you have any other people working with you besides Shirley Staschen?

RA: Oh, I worked more for them, or with them. I mean she didn't actually work for me.

MM: Oh, I see.

RA: She did a great deal of it.

MM: I was interested to find out if, when you were assigned a large project like that, if your headquarters would ask how many people you would need and then assign assistants? How did they go about organizing that part of the project?

RA: That's hard to say. They more or less had, I suppose, what is now referred to as a pool of people. They sent them from project to project if they were needed to work out there. For example, Shirley had been working at Aquatic Park. She worked over at Treasure Island. Raddy Volz (Herman's nickname) had his own assistants and when you needed paint or anything like that, you would have to go to Raddy. And go out to the boat.

RM: That was the second year, wasn't it?

RA: I guess the boat was the second year.

MM: Is this the old steamship, the riverboat that was used for headquarters?

RA: Very elegant boat, ferryboat.

RM: River Queen or something like that. I haven't the name of it.

MM: It was what the Island used as a headquarters?

RA: Yes, the machinery was taken out.

RM: It had a big bar in the lounge. That was the only thing distressing, nobody had money enough to go down and buy a drink.

RA: Or to get off the boat, yes. Just the supervisors.

RM: Yes, Volz would go down there once in awhile. He was some special guest over there.

RA: Oh, he had the architect. Oh, that guy got the red carpet treatment, I can't think of his name.

MM: It was Ernest Born, wasn't it?

RA: No, this guy was from Vienna. I think Ernest Born did a lot of things over there, but I couldn't tell you what.

MM: I was wondering if he did the Federal Building?

RM: I don't think so. Wasn't Pfleuger the architect?

RA: Pfleuger?

RM: Yes.

RA: I couldn't tell you. I was in a state of absolute bewilderness.

MM: It could have been Pfleuger. He was the one who got Rivera the job to do the mural over there but I don't know if he designed the building.

RA: Oh yes.

MM: He did design the building - - let's see, when Herman Volz did the stone mosaic to be placed at the City College, Pfleuger, I think, was the architect on that project. And he had Diego Rivera come up to do that large mural hanging at the Fair which was late removed to San Francisco City College.

RA: Yes. I remember watching him paint it. And wasn't Zakheim's wife his assistant there at the time?

MM: No.

RA: No? She was working somewhere.

MM: Emmy Lou Packard worked on that project.

RA: Emmy Lou Packard did? I didn't know.

RM: I think Phyllis Zakheim worked.

MM: Did you know Rivera? Did you meet him?

RA: No, no. Met him? I was a very humble, little guy in those days.

MM: After you finished up at the Treasure Island International Exhibition, did you do anything else for the WPA? Or any of the other art projects?

RA: No, I didn't. I retired in blushing confusion and tried to paint. I did paint. No, I didn't do any more after that. My wife - - I was in rather poor health then - - my wife was working and we got along all right.

MM: How long were you on the government projects? About four or five years?

RA: Oh, I would say more than that. Yes, four or five years. Five years call it.

MM: The others an then Aquatic Park for three years. What kind of effect do you think being on the art project had on your career as an artist?

RA: Well, I think it saved my life.

MM: Pretty important fact I would say.

RA: I think most of us feel that way. I mean we would have been a sad mess without it.

RM: Yes.

RA: At a certain period of time, I mean. There was really one time when it was pretty desperate.

RM: There was absolutely no place to go for the artist.

RA: Absolutely none.

RM: The commercial firms were all tight. They weren't putting out any. I remember walking the streets of San Francisco with a portfolio of my art drawings and oh, it was - - it wouldn't have gotten me anyplace even if I got in to see someone, you know.

RA: Well, even so, there were some tight squeezes.

RM: Yes.

RA: So that is the career.

MM: Do you have any criticism about the way the project was run?

RA: Who doesn't whenever they're working for anyone? No, except of course, there was the necessity of the bureaucratic bungle. I mean, so many people telling so many people what to do and not quite knowing, shaking down into a formative state. You were given much more leeway than you'd think. Every now and then you would run into a minor tyrant. He would have to through his weight around.

MM: Do you think it might be a good idea for the government to sponsor art in the United States again?

RA: No. Not unless it was basically, completely necessary.

MM: You don't think it's necessary now?

RA: I think it would be damn comfortable but, I think I have the wrong feeling about government in art. It never seems to work. Excepting things like WPA and so on like that, where it was completely economical necessity. There wasn't anything else to do. It was a very good idea. But it was - - the analogy between that and the Army, after one gets into the Army, is too much.

MM: Do you think there was a real similarity between the way the WPA project was run and the Army?

RA: Well, it was a bureaucracy, what the hell could it be elsewise? Well- I have had some beautiful and wonderful experiences, laughingly, in both the WPA and the Army Air Force. The usual thing is if you're an artist, "Paint my picture." Or you're an artist and you are assigned to such and such a position. You will do all the lettering on this thing. I can't letter, and first, they made a radio operator out of me. Why go into that now? I don't know anyway. And it came to it anyway and I wound up painting grass for a psychotic major.

RM: Were you in long enough to be shipped over into one of the defense projects?

RA: No.

RM: No. Some of the fellows were. Some I've talked to that were shipped directly off the project into the shipyards.

MM: John Saccaro.

RA: John Saccaro! Gee whiz. I haven't seen him in years.

MM: He went to the blueprint-reading school and from there to the shipyards.

RA: Was he in the service or - -

MM: No. Later he was. This was right from the project to the blueprint-reading school and then into the shipyards. He said he went to work at the project one day and there was a notice to report at the school and he said that by that time he was so used to doing whatever the government told him to do that he went over there and before he knew it he was in the shipyards. This was, of course, 1941, something like that.

RA: I bet that was a hell of a note for him. Well, things were moving kind of rapidly.

MM: But you were off the project before the War? You were off at the end of the Fair?

RA: Yes. Yes, I didn't get my greetings till quite a while later.

MM: Do you think it had a good influence on the art of San Francisco or not?

RA: I think by and large it did. It certainly had a great influence on the morale of the artists, I think. Heaven knows, everybody squawked and everything but there was really and truly a feeling of rapport. Didn't you feel that there?

RM: Yes. It was a tremendous thing in that respect. The artists working together.

RA: Everybody, you know, used to bite at each other on occasion, but that was just a matter of opinion. But everybody was eating, however meager.

RM: Well, it saved the - -

RA: It saved the bacon for everybody.

RM: - - graphic arts for San Francisco. I don't think San Francisco would have ever done anything to save it.

RA: No.

RM: The Federal government, despite San Francisco, saved it. San Francisco to this day isn't doing anything to help out.

RA: No, that city knows how, everybody yelling about how cultural we are. Age. God.

RM: It's a lot of nonsense.

RA: So even the opera almost folds. That is a funny thing in a way.

MM: That was very surprising, wasn't it? Do you have any other thoughts about the WPA or government sponsorship?

RA: No, I haven't any ideas. Of course, I would like to see it for the people to live nicely but I'm so afraid, after the War, of government sponsorship of anything, except of civil rights and - - well, I'm on the side of the angels after all.

RM: Zakheim always says, "You're a black Fascist."

RA: No, I say, I'm a white Muslim, put it that way.

MM: Well, thanks very much for giving us the time for the interview.

RA: Oh well, thank you for taking it.

END OF INTERVIEW

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