Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Dorr Bothwell, 1965 February 27

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Dorr Bothwell on 27 February 1965. The interview was conducted in Bothwell's studio in Mendocino, CA, by mary Fuller McChesneyfor the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney interviewing Dorr Bothwell at her studio in Mendocino, California, and the date is February 27, 1965. First I'd like to ask you where were you born.

DORR BOTHWELL: Right in San Francisco.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What year was that?

MS. BOTHWELL: 1902.

MS. MCCHESNEY: And where did you receive your art training?

MS. BOTHWELL: At the California School of Fine Arts, which at that time was a temporary building on the lot where the Mark Hopkins Hotel is now. It wasn't the [San Francisco] Art Institute, but it was the old temporary wooden structure built on the foundations that were left of the Mark Hopkins home after it was dynamited during, you know, the fire and earthquake.

MS. MCCHESNEY: It was called the Mark Hopkins School at that time, wasn't it?

MS. BOTHWELL: No, it was called the California School of Fine Arts at that time. Just had had its name changed. That was in 1921 when I was at the art school there; and then I studied with Rudolph Schaeffer, who was just teaching there at that time. I think he taught a year, and then the following year he opened his own [Rudolph Schaeffer] School of Design and I studied color with him. That's about the extent of it except 1923, I think it was '22 or '23, I went to the University of Oregon to get pre-medical anatomy and wound up studying Principles of Chinese Art for some reason or other. That was it.

MS. MCCHESNEY: How did you first make any contact with the government-sponsored art projects?

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, the very first contact I made was when I had come back from Europe in 1931. And in the fall of '31 or the beginning of '32 [December 1933] there was the first PWAP [Public Works of Art project] or WPAP--I forget which way the letters went, and at that time that was not [relief], that was a project to help artists but it wasn't to keep them from starving to death. At that time the depression hadn't really bitten into American life so deeply, and I first heard about it over The Richfield Reporter and I wrote a little note to find out about it and got back that nobody knew anything about it. This was in San Diego. So then shortly afterwards, I think, [Stanton] Macdonald-Wright came down there and he knew something about this. He was getting very much interested in the whole thing and later became head of the Los Angeles project when it was the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. But that very first project, well, you just made a painting and they sort of distributed them to the museums, and I know I did one. I was experimenting then with Cennino Cennini’s gesso process.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Whose gesso?

MS. BOTHWELL: Cennino Cennini--you know, he's the man that was always interested in gesso and his work had been translated that year by Yale University. So, any rate, I did gold leaf and egg tempera painting on gesso for The San Diego Museum [of Art]--which it still has--and that was under the PWAP I think it was called. And I think I did three things all together. I did a sort of small--a baby mural, let's say it was, in those days. Of course, canvases are so huge now, but it was quite a large canvas. And it was of a market, a regular supermarket. And the shopping bag had the blue eagle on it with the NRA [National Recovery Administration] - was that it? I think it was, at any rate, and hanging back of the lights and the scales were some other banners of the time and it was just a regular, ordinary scene but that was that. I think I did two things on gesso and this one mural for the PWAP.

MS. MCCHESNEY: This was when you were living in San Diego?

MS. BOTHWELL: That's when I was in San Diego.

MS. MCCHESNEY: How long were you on the PWAP, do you remember?

MS. BOTHWELL: Less than a year. Six months, I think.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Less than a year.

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes. It was very elastic and it had no real, I couldn't find, looking back, I can't see any real tight organization to the thing. We were just kind of commissioned and I don't remember what they paid us. It was very small I know. It wasn't a living thing. We weren't supposed to be paid adequate sums. We were supposed to do something and somebody would pay a little bit here and match the government's payment or something like that. I really don't remember about that.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Were you commissioned? Did they give you the ideas of the project you were to work on?

MS. BOTHWELL: They didn't give you the ideas, no, but they asked for a painting or a piece of sculpture or something like that, and they generally had some idea where it would go. Oh, I think I did four things because I remember one canvas was called The Devout Vegetarian and that went up to the Los Angeles County Museum [of Art], supposedly--I've never seen it since. Things disappeared. I know where the two things were supposed to go: one to the San Diego Museum [of Art] and the other to the Los Angeles Museum [of Art]. But I was not on very long. It couldn't have been a year.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What year was that?

MS. BOTHWELL: About 1932. And then I went to Los Angeles. I had this chance to go up there and by that time the depression really hit. I had a chance to work with Gladding McBean [and Co.], running some tests. They wanted to use underglaze as an overglaze and this was kind of interesting so I ran these tests. And then the depression hit the pottery department over at Gladding McBean's and they cut everything back. Gossip was that Mr. McBean had bought a lot of blooded Angus cattle and the firm couldn't stand the expense. But at any rate, so suddenly, I was without a job in Los Angeles. I had worked pretty hard. I hadn't made very many friends. Most everybody I knew lived in San Francisco, which is where I really considered my home. I always had lived there. So I was in Los Angeles and broke and without a job. This is when I tried to make contact and found that the only way I could get on the WPA by then, this was about 1936 I think it was, was to take a pauper's oath. And I had made the mistake of paying my rent and my utilities and the telephone with the result that when I walked, I went over to this place, I had some money at that time, I went over to this place which was on Sunset Boulevard about five miles from where I lived and they said, "Oh no, you really have to owe everything." So that was fine. I went home. I didn't owe those things but I didn't have any money to eat on, and I was really getting very, very hungry, and then, of course, we compared notes and there were others who were hungry, too. There was a big market at the corner of Sixth and Vermont and we'd go around to the back and, you know, the sprouted onions were very good for onion tops and flavoring like that and we figured out a way in which you could buy rice and buy some bacon and you'd boil the rice and put a little bit of bacon in it and a little bit of onion and you'd just eat that. It's very good and it's very, very cheap and we ate that for a while.

Well, finally, I managed to get on relief. Well, after you're on relief in Los Angeles there was a two weeks' delay before you were given a check, which I think amounted to about--I remember they allowed you ten dollars a month for rent. Most people were living in garages because· that was about all you could rent for ten dollars a month. But, any rate, you had this two weeks' delay and that was really painful, because everybody starved. I mean, later when I was on the project people would come on and they'd just faint. They hadn't had anything to eat for that two weeks when they were waiting to get in, between either getting off the relief and on the WPA or vice versa. There was always a two weeks' wait there where it was very difficult.

But then, of course, you know the silver lining. Finally, one day just as I was getting desperate, I got on this relief deal. But still I hadn't had anything to eat, nothing had come in. I just didn't know what to do and so I was standing on the street, Sixth Street there in Los Angeles, sort of thinking, well, shall I walk down and work at the YWCA--I think they'd let you wash dishes one evening for a meal. You could only work there once, I think, about once a week or something. Should I walk down there or what? My clothes were good. This was the trouble, you see. I hadn't expected to be fired, so everything had been paid up and my clothes were good and so forth. At any rate, that was that. I was standing there and all of a sudden somebody hit me on the shoulder and said, "Bothwell, where did you come from?" And it was Lorser Feitelson. And I said, "Well, I'm stuck in Los Angeles and trying to get to get to San Francisco." And he said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Well, I'm on relief." He said, "Oh well, we can use you on the project. We've got lots of things to do." So I said, "How do I get on?" "Well," he said, "we'll ask for you and it'll take about two weeks and then you can get on the project." So this is how I got on the Los Angeles project and it took two weeks.

MS. MCCHESNEY: This was when? 1936, you think?

MS. BOTHWELL: By the time I think I got on it must have been 1937, I think, or the end of '36. No, it was Christmas of '36. That's when I was fired, just before Christmas, so it must have been 1937. And at that time they were beginning to cut down on the people working, the artists. They had come to the end of … they had made a ruling and I have forgotten how long it was. You could only work so long and then you'd have to get off the thing. If you were really necessary, you'd go through and they would call you again, but you had to be off the project for a while. So a great many artists were being put off and I know that the first job I did was to do the scale drawings of the De Anza monument there. Is there a town called De Anza outside of Los Angeles? I don't recall. [De Anza Statue, Riverside, CA]

MS. MCCHESNEY: I remember that name.

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, at any rate it was the De Anza monument and it was a very big … it was a big curved cement wall that went back of the monument proper and they wanted a bas-relief of De Anza and his company starting out across the desert to get to this place. And so I did the research on that and made the drawing and then they made the blowup and then sculptors worked it out. It was a bas-relief. I didn't work on it. But the thing was the person who was supposed to do it had just been gotten off the project and they needed somebody to do that drawing. As a rule I didn't do painting. I did all sorts of odd jobs, finishing up things. I know I did a big mural in Long Beach [History of Aviation] and that had been started by, what was his name, Ames. I can't think of his first name. There were two artists, man and wife, and the man's name was Ames, I can't think what his first name was. [Arthur Ames and Jean Goodwin]

MS. MCCHESNEY: Was it A-M-E-S?

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes. And he had done, they had done, all of the scale things. They were pretty rough, in color, very nice and a very nice conception, but it was about a quarter of an inch to a foot so what we had to do was blow up the thing on the wall. And it was done in casein directly on the wall and it was up on a scaffolding because above the bookshelves was this mural went all around the room.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Was it a library?

MS. BOTHWELL: It was a library, a school library.

MS. MCCHESNEY: A high school library?

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes, I guess it must have been, I don't recall. We didn't work there too much when the school was in session. One time when there the principal came in to look at it and he was wearing a nice, navy blue serge suit. And we were doing it in casein using one-pound coffee cans, and I had just climbed the ladder with a one pound coffee can full of pink paint and I had the cover on it but somehow or other that cover slipped off and I shot the whole can and it went right out and turned over and just went right all over the principal of the school in front of all the kids in the library. I think it was a junior high school. It's coming back. I could look it up. I have it; I think I have some reference to it. [Charles Lindbergh Middle School]

MS. MCCHESNEY: Let’s see … and you said the mural went all around the room above the bookcases in the library. What size was it? How long was the room?

MS. BOTHWELL: I think the mural worked out to be something like 210 feet all together.

MS. MCCHESNEY: And then how high was it? Four feet?

MS. BOTHWELL: No, no, it was higher than that. It was, oh wait a minute. No, that's the measurement of another thing. It was under that. It was about a hundred feet long, I think, all together because it had wings at each side and I think the library must have been forty feet long and then there were these pieces at each side. It was about, oh, I guess six to seven feet high. We had to stand on ladders on top of the scaffolding to reach the top of the thing.

MS. MCCHESNEY: And this had been designed by this man named Ames?

MS. BOTHWELL: Ames and his wife. I can't think what her name was. I knew them so well. They were very nice and they later on went into ceramics and they still are working in ceramics down there and they're very good artists. It was a pleasure to work on the thing. It wasn't bad at all. I mean, I've had to work on worse things. But that was the last big project. There was a smaller one which we did …

MS. MCCHESNEY: I'd like to ask you a. few questions about this one before we go on. You said it's about 210 feet by about four feet high, and what was the subject matter?

MS. BOTHWELL: I can't remember.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Oh?

MS. BOTHWELL: No, you see, it wasn't my subject. All we did was to blow it up and it was exactly like scene painting. We blew it up and we simply figured out here was the scale thing and we just did it to scale. I can't remember what it was about. I remember the colors because it was nicely … it had a nice coherent color pattern and range, but I haven't any idea what it was about.

MS. MCCHESNEY: You said you were painting in casein directly on the plaster?

MS. BOTHWELL: [Yes]

MS. MCCHESNEY: Did you have assistants working with you?

MS. BOTHWELL: Oh yes, and they changed all the time. I think I had anywhere from two to four assistants and they would come on the project and go off again, and I had for a while, I had Ivan Bartlett working with me.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Bartlett?

MS. BOTHWELL: B-A-R-T-L-E-T-T. Ivan Bartlett. And a friend of his had been on the project, Jean Swigett, and they were all friends of Ames. And I don't remember very much about that. It was a really painful thing. I had to drive every day. They picked us up in a truck and we drove from Los Angeles into Long Beach, which is a long, horrible drive, and I don't know but we got there early, early in the morning. We got in there and got up on the scaffold, stirred up all the paint and started in and we had the thing all divided into sections. We just went in, and if the drawing said, "This is green here," we put green down. It came out looking very, very nice. I don't think the people that designed it would have been too happy about it because they had expected to, at least, do the full-scale cartoon. I mean, as a rule the artist does the full-scale cartoon, but we had to work from the little, tiny scale things which were, as I say, a quarter of an inch to a foot, which is pretty small scale so that they had just suggested details of face and gesture and so forth. And we had to try to draw them in, so there was a little bit of Bothwell in there and there was a little bit of whoever else was helping. If it lacks in coherence, it was our fault probably. But it was a very nice mural. I think it had to do with education. It seems to me that I remember people reading books or something like that. It had to do with--I just don't recall--terrible.

MS. MCCHESNEY: How long a period of time were you working on it?

MS. BOTHWELL: Oh, I think that took about four months, because we didn't work so long. We had to leave.

MS. MCCHESNEY: And this was on the WPA?

MS. BOTHWELL: That was on the WPA Los Angeles project. S. Macdonald-Wright headed the project. Lorser Feitelson was assistant. Holger Cahill, I guess, was in charge of all of the projects up and down the Pacific Coast. I don't know as I recall. At least, he was kind of liaison officer with Washington But there were many, many changes as to the policy, how things were gotten. And toward the end there they were looking around frantically for things to do and then finally I was made supervisor of a job for the Exposition Park Museum [Museum of History, Science, and Art] there in Los Angeles for the Animal Husbandry Room.

We were making animated displays and dioramas and all sorts of things because that was just starting in those days, the sort of museum presentation that is so commonplace now. It was just starting, you know. It was cut outs and little buttons that you punch and things happen and things light up and all that sort of thing. And that was because we needed a project that would use as many people as possible. There still were a great many skilled craftsmen that hadn't been absorbed in the WPA. We needed electricians. We needed people that could do models. We needed people that could do blowups and things. We had one man; I only remember his name was Bass, Bassinet [Victor Bassinet], I think it was. He was a French-American, wonderful person, and he did incredibly beautiful, minute blowups of chickens. They were absolutely correct. He got the bulletins from the government, photographs of the things, and these chickens were over life-size. And Bassinet did them all with a pencil and they were perfect because they came out in great big circles in the chicken, poultry, display, and they were masterpieces. They were just beautiful. I have no idea where they are now. Mr. Benitor was the head of that part of the museum at the time. They would be gorgeous because they were to be mounted on circles of wood cut out, and they were just the most incredibly wonderful things. Peter Blume's drawings are somewhat like those that Bass did. Just terrific.

And well, we had, as I say, people that could do little tiny motors, little electrician things, all of little things, and that was when I was working on that, that it was the close of the whole thing. I think by then I'd been on it for going on about a year and a half. I think you couldn't stay on longer than two years. I think it was two. For some reason I think I even stayed on longer than I was supposed to because I was transferred off the artist thing into supervisor of this museum project and put me in a different classification. I think that's why I was there for a year and a half. But that was the thing. But there were all sorts of things that happened. Oh, Grace Clements

was one of the people working on this museum project. She was quite well known as a painter and she used to talk over KPFA every once in a while. I think she moved up here to the Bay area and she was always very wonderfully verbal. She could explain things, put everything in words just wonderfully - a very gifted artist.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What was she doing for you then?

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, she was working with me. We took sections. I've forgotten. She had ….I know I had things to do with the chickens and the cattle and the sheep, and I don't know what Grace was doing. Oh! Grace got away from that. She did things with mosaic and she finally did the great big …. I think she did the mosaics in the airport. I've forgotten, but she got a terrific mosaic job. At that time things were getting better, you see, and people were looking around for artists who were kind of doing things. And I know, Grace had been working with mosaics and she got this wonderful job. You can look that up in the files of California Arts and Architecture because that was all written up with lots of photographs and everything else. I think she had been doing fishing and everything so she had a lot of fish designs and that sort of thing. But that was about all. Of course, there were all sorts of case histories and sad stories and everything else that happened.

MS. MCCHESNEY: As a supervisor, what were your responsibilities? Did you these people or were they just ….

MS. BOTHWELL: No, all I had to do was coordinate; I'd be called a coordinator now. Well, I'd design or we'd all get into a huddle and design how to present the material. For example, all the milk and its by-products would be one thing. We'd decide could it be animated, how it would be done, and we'd do the whole great big space, and so forth. And then each little thing was farmed out to somebody else: a diorama here or somebody had to decide how to display, you know, dry milk, skimmed milk solids, and all that sort of thing. And the museum had much of the material and we tried to keep it in its original containers, if possible, and just display them nicely, and, oh, we did that sort of thing.

MS. MCCHESNEY: How many artists did you have working with you?

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, that shifted, generally about five, I think: there was Bassinet doing the drawing and Grace Clements who had her own projects. Really I just coordinated. I didn't direct them or anything, but I just kind of distributed work. Somebody had to be there to write up things. There was a little bit of paper work and that sort of thing that we had to do in those days. And then there was a girl, I can't think of her name now, later on she was Dorothy Thomas, and she was there because we had to translate a lot of things. She was reading about some of these products in German and French. She had been educated in Switzerland. She was very handy and she also could draw. And then I had Ivan Bartlett. That's one, two, three. It seems to me there was somebody else. They were generally a flexible one, but this was toward the end of the project.

MS. MCCHESNEY: And this was at the Exposition Museum, you said?

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, the Museum and Exposition part. It's the Los Angeles County Museum [Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art]. It’s the only museum they have. And it's sort of like the [M.H.] de Young [Memorial Museum] in a way. Well, we don't have a museum in San Francisco that's the same because it has everything in it. It had all, you know, fruit and alcohol and all of the whole thing about California and what grew here and all that sort of thing. And then it had the galleries and its own little pitiful collection of stuff, and this was the only place where they had the big annual shows. It was the only art museum, but it had everything, just everything there. And they were trying to fix it up. I haven't been in it since I left it so I have no idea what's happened to it. I'm afraid we didn't do too much for it. Well, Mr. Benitor, who had been running the thing, I think got a very good job. He left. Everybody sort of left and left this poor thing that we'd been operating on. I imagine somebody pulled the pieces together. But I would love to know whatever happened to Bassinet's beautiful chicken drawings; they were gorgeous.

MS. MCCHESNEY: After that, that was the end of your experience on the project?

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes, I think that was the last. Then I was asked to do a mural in San Francisco and it was just about the time I was getting off the project anyhow and I came up here. That would be in 1939. I came up and looked the thing over and realized that if I did this mural and did it fast enough, I could get myself and my equipment up to San Francisco. I had been trying all these years that I'd been in Los Angeles, altogether seven years, trying to get myself--or down in the southland, let's say, seven years--trying to get myself to San Francisco, and I always had enough to get either my studio equipment or myself but never the two together, you see. So this was that. A good thing about the WPA at that time was that we got passes to the fine arts exhibit at the Fair, so I made a trip up. Two or three people came up and sort of camped at our friends' and had a chance to go over every single day to the Fair and see the art exhibit and all that sort of thing. It was really wonderful. I don't recall how we got these passes but we were given them. That was that.

MS. MCCHESNEY: But you weren't on the WPA in San Francisco?

MS. BOTHWELL: Never. No.

MS. MCCHESNEY: You mentioned at the beginning this De Anza monument for which you did the drawings. And that was a large concrete curved wall behind the sculpture of de Anza?

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes, I've got a reproduction of it here someplace. (This was a thing was done in a children's theater.) Here it is, the De Anza thing.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Oh yes.

MS. BOTHWELL: And it continued all around. I only it once but it was night and I couldn't see very well so I never did see what they did to it.

MS. MCCHESNEY: And you did the drawings for this?

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes.

MS. MCCHESNEY: And then somebody else did the ….

MS. BOTHWELL: Those are the drawings.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Oh! This is the first one that you did?

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes, that was my first. Is it dated there?

MS. MCCHESNEY: Oh, 1939.

MS. BOTHWELL: Well.

MS. MCCHESNEY: At the top.

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes, but I'm not sure that that was right. Could be.

MS. MCCHESNEY: And after that do you remember what you did next on the projects?

MS. BOTHWELL: After I did the de Anza then, I think we did a miscellaneous thing. I think this thing. This was the Whittier, east wall Whittier Elementary School. This was a design for the mosaic. Whether they ever executed it or not I don't know. Then, let's see, what was the next thing that happened?

MS. MCCHESNEY: You did the design yourself?

MS. BOTHWELL: I did the design. Then this was done. Let's see. This was 1939 that this was reproduced. Of course, these things took…. This was the Hollenbeck, mural for the Hollenbeck Junior High School [Los Angeles], and they had a lobby. That was just a little thing. It was only two feet high, I think it was two feet high or two and a half feet high, and that ran two hundred and some odd feet. And we had all the costumes of the children of the world or all the costumes of the people of the world around the foyer of the theater. Above the paneling was this little tiny space and somebody got this bright idea. These are in very brilliant colors and very simple little things. And they were characters, like for England. This was France, and Czechoslovakia, and Japan, China, Korea, and so forth and so on. They had a whole lot of them. That must have been 1939.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What material was that done in?

MS. BOTHWELL: That was right on the wall and again, I think, we were using casein. Casein had suddenly become very popular at that time and we were doing quite a lot of casein work. The beginning of the project, people had used canvas and oil paints and everything, but I wasn't in that painter's division. I was sort of in – the idea of, well, wall decoration. They suddenly got this idea and everybody was experimenting with the casein. Besides it was cheap. We made our own mixtures. We had the dry color and we measured the casein and mixed the whole works together generally in big coffee cans. Coffee then was what? 38 cents a pound, I think.

MS. MCCHESNEY: These were not done on wet plaster like a fresco, though?

MS. BOTHWELL: No, no.

MS. MCCHESNEY: They were done on the dry plaster.

MS. BOTHWELL: Dry plaster, yes.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Was there any fresco work being done at that time in Los Angeles on the project?

MS. BOTHWELL: That I couldn't answer; I just don't know. [David Alfaro] Siqueiros was in Los Angeles and had done a big mural for Chouinard [Art Institute] school in fresco but, let's see, that was in 1932 or '3. And he started an interest there, but then the interest kind of died down because he had done this darned thing so fast, or hadn't aged the plaster or something or because it began falling off, or fading off, or something or other, so people didn't take too kindly to it. No, the big projects, at least as far as the WPA went were really getting down. The great big wonderful things had already been done and an awful lot of people you see had worked on these, on the post office and all those big murals. That was another branch of the government where you submitted designs, you know, for the branch post offices and that sort of thing. All those, I think, had been done and the schools were getting pretty cagey about having decorations because they had to pay some part of it. I think they had to by that time. I don't remember too much about it. You know some of it you just put out of your mind.

There were certain very bad things that I have never .... I guess they had to be done, but every once in a while we had people who came over and checked on you to see where you were living and what you were doing and so forth. And I had never moved away from my studio. I paid thirty dollars a month rent and just by hanging on I managed to get off relief, which only allowed you ten dollars a month rent, you see, and got on the WPA. At that time I was receiving $86.78 or something or other like that, I remember was the sum, and I could manage to keep my studio. And I practiced a few little economies. Well, we had one of these --I've forgotten what they call these people--and this woman came over one day. They generally came on a Saturday or on a Sunday when they'd try to catch you home and you were supposed to find out if you really were in need of being on the WPA and also if you really, you know, were living in a style they felt you should.

So she came in and she was very suspicious because she saw I had a lot of slick magazines on the coffee table. She said, "How can you afford those?" And I said, "I don't take a newspaper." She said, "What's that got to do with it?" Well, in those days a newspaper worked out to about $25.30 a year, and I said, “Well, I take that money and I subscribe to three art magazines or two art magazines.” And I've forgotten something else, you know. They'd cost about $4.50 a year maybe in those days, $5.00 a year, and I could have five of them for the price of the daily newspaper. She was very suspicious about that. And then, of course, they walked around. They were pretty nervy-- and opened bureau drawers, you know, and looked around to see what you had, and opened the refrigerator if you had one, to see whether you had any fine champagne stashed away or whatever it was. This was, I guess, it was necessary but it was rather annoying. You know, you'd be coasting along doing the best job you could and realizing that you were on a subsistence level but very grateful for the fact that you had the money coming in, and then one of these people would arrive and you'd suddenly realize that, you know, you'd sort of sold your soul for this. So you really were a depressed person. It wasn't too bad.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Were there many artists on the projects in Los Angeles?

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, they were gradually getting off when I got there. Of course, Los Angeles is a very big place and I was in the Los Angeles downtown part of it. You know, I was trying to think where in the dickens we had..., where did we go? It was some place near Catalina; I think it was in the Westlake Park district, as I recall, where the headquarters were. I really don't remember too much about it except it was close to Westlake Park. That's about all I remember. I think it was off Catalina or something like that. But that was a fairly large group except that, as I say, many of them were home painting and you didn't see those people. People went around to see what they were doing and occasionally you'd see them come in with some canvases, and they never called meetings or anything like that so actually you never did see the whole group. And sculptors would be working in their studios. And about the only groups we got acquainted with were the ones that were actually working in the buildings, in the big lofts, blowing up, making the big drawings and that sort of thing. Oh, I suppose there were ten or fifteen people there that continually changed. Well, we were sent around too. We'd get the drawing done and we'd be sent out to a school and then we'd disappear for a month, you see, from the building. And we'd come back; everything is different. Maybe some more paintings piled up and that was it.

But they never did have a show, for example, of the paintings all together. Well, of course,--and I think even today--it still doesn't have a really big museum to exhibit paintings, you see. And so we never did see all of the paintings. They did later on. Toward the end they had some selected groups from this enormous backlog of paintings, but after that, as I understand it, and I guess this is true of most of the projects, they just sold the canvas and the stretchers for whatever they could get. I think they took the canvas off the stretchers and sold the stretchers secondhand and the canvases. Every once in a while you'd see them turn up patching things, and I don't know what they did with them. I haven't any idea. Yards and yards and yards and yards of paintings. Probably some of them very good.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What was the main style of painting in Los Angeles at that time? You mentioned Siqueiros. Did he have any influence on the way these painters were working?

MS. BOTHWELL: No, no, no.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What about Rivera?

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, that was years ago. He hadn't come up. No, I don't think there was ... I think at that time they were rugged individualists, as I recall. As I say, I wasn't on the painting project. I don't know who all was doing what. There was a chap by the name of Cherry I think his name was. He paints now. Every once in a while I see him written up in Arts [Magazine]. He's on the East Coast and his wife is a very good painter, paints plants and things.

MS. MCCHESNEY: You mean Herman Cherry?

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes. And I can't think what his wife's name was [Regina Kremer] but she painted very well, too. Then there was ... what's the man that paints Negroes? He paints the Negroes in a kind of wonderful way--I can't think what his name is--and he was on the project as a painter.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Jacob Lawrence?

MS. BOTHWELL: No, no. This man was not a Negro. He just painted Negroes and. spirituals and that sort of thing. He still lives down there, and his name begins with L but I can't think what it is. It's a word of four or five letters, I think. [Dan Lutz] But he was on the project and it gave him a big boost. He has since gone way ahead. But I really didn't know any of them. You see, I'd been working out in Glendale at Gladding McBean and all of a sudden I was down in metropolitan Los Angeles. Painters were all over the lot. You know, they were way out and, as I say, you never saw them unless you happened to be there a day when they were bringing their paintings in, because the people went out and inspected them and that was that. There was no coherence, no camaraderie as far as that went. It was too scattered. It was a rather grim thing. Everybody had terrible tales of woe, you know, because the bigger the place the more snafued they are, mixed up and everything else.

MS. MCCHESNEY: You mentioned Lorser Feitelson at the beginning. He had been a friend of yours earlier and then he got you on the WPA?

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes, I had known him when it was the PWAP. He used to come down to San Diego at that time. See, I had grown up in San Diego and after my father's death my mother had moved down to San Diego. I used to go down there and this is the way I met people down there, and then I had worked for a while and had things in the San Diego Museum. Reginald Poland was the director at that time. Well, Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundeberg, who is now his wife, were quite an influence by the way, in speaking of painters, and Lorser had a sketch class and this is one of the few times we met any other painters because we got together for a sketch class. He had a fairly big-sized studio. There was Lorser Feitelson, Helen Lundeberg and S. Macdonald-Wright, Holger Cahill. This was the main group that we saw in the offices.

MS. MCCHESNEY: And they were all in the sketch class too?

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, not Macdonald-Wright, but Lorser and Helen Lundeberg were. Cahill just used to come by and he just sat in.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What sort of painting were they doing then? He's [Feitelson] a very wellknown hard-edge abstractionist now.

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, he was doing a kind of a hard-edge thing. Actually he was painting things somewhat like Helen Lundeberg does now. She's been very consistent. She's always worked exactly the same way and the things always have a double meaning. I remember one that I liked very, very much. She found a piece of wood with a beautiful oval grain in it. You know how it goes around like .... it makes a. beautiful oval pattern. And she found a small piece of driftwood that looked like a wonderful little rounded volcanic island and she set it on this piece of wood, and then she painted it. And she painted it in such a way that, at first glance, you thought it was an island with a stylized sea around it. And at second glance you realized no, it's a still life. And she's always done things like that. And Lorser changed his style. He did go from one thing to another and I think for a while he did do some abstract expressionist painting. But, of course, that was very much later. At the time, though, he was hard-edge. He did very interesting things. He drew beautifully. Both of them drew beautifully. And they headed the class and there were a number of artists that drew there and whose names I should remember and it's shocking that I don't. But everyone, I think, was fairly miserable and when that happens, you aren't too outgoing. You're sitting around looking at your own ego and saying, oh, dear, isn't this terrible? Or you get caught up in drawing and then I don't pay any attention to who's there.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Did you do any other projects? Decorations for schools? Or was that the only one?

MS. BOTHWELL: Just the Hollenbeck, the Whittier and I thought I had the photographs of the Long Beach one, but I don't have. Those were the three main school things. Then there were smaller projects such as the mosaic design. It was a big mosaic wall which, I think, was never executed; and the De Anza thing, which was executed;

and there were smaller projects. I had no difficulty drawing over life size. I was given the job often of doing the cartoons for other artists' things. And this was another reason why I didn't get to know too many people. It was a kind of a hard-working crew that would work in a loft, you see, with tracing paper and all these rolls of stuff, and the personnel kept changing, and somebody would come in and they'd need this thing blown up, so we'd just blow it up, and that 1 s that. Dan Lutz is the man's name (L-U-T-Z). He was one of the painters that would come in, and, of course, Grace Clements was painting at that time and I saw her studio and her work. She had come from New York. Well, I think each artist was fairly individual. I don't recall any particular style. I was doing sort of surreal things at the time, as I recall. But nobody was doing any --well, some people were doing social comment, but not too much.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What sort of an effect do you think the WPA had on your career as an artist? Or did it have any?

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, I don't think it affected me much one way or the other. For one thing, I wasn't doing painting, see, I'd come home after enlarging things all day and try to do some painting because I am primarily a painter. I wasn't interested …. It just happened that I had had this background training in design and so forth, so it was easy for me to do the kind of technical stuff where, you know, you blow the thing up. It's mathematics and my background was mathematics so that was another reason. I didn't make mistakes, you know. Some artists would make mistakes. They'd come with a cartoon that was five feet too short and three feet too high, you know. It wouldn't fit the wall. Well, my cartoons fit the wall and that sort of thing. No, I don't think it made too much difference. It kept me painting and that was all. I think people that had a chance, that were paid to paint, I think that made a big difference to their career. But as I say, I didn't come on as a painter. At that time, I took whatever I could get. And this was it. I was never allowed to paint a canvas for the project except for those very early four ones that I did for the PWAP.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Do you think it would be a good idea for the government of the United States to sponsor the arts again?

MS. BOTHWELL: No, not unless they had the terrible need. We don't have that terrible need at present. By the time the artist got on the project, he knew what it was to literally be really at rock bottom; then he appreciated the thing. At present now, I think if it were done without this terrific need, the materials would be wasted and everything else. People really respected their materials and there was not a great deal of waste; or they may have taken stuff but it wasn't wasted. They took paper because they wanted to draw on it and they didn't have any paper to draw on. But it wasn't the sort of thing I saw when I taught, for example, where the government was paying the GI's, and they'd take a big sheet of beautiful paper and put a little squiggle in the center of it and ball it up and throw it away, you know, because, oh, well, Uncle Sam was paying for it. I think you have to have real pressures to make that sort of thing work. No, I don't think it would be good.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What do you think of the mural work that was done on the WPA in Los Angeles?

MS. BOTHWELL: It was just like any other place, terribly uneven, and it was influenced by… Well the whole idea of mural was influenced by the works that Diego Rivera had done and by also the people would be suggesting these things and they wanted as much information on the walls as possible so that they came out looking like cretonne, you know. There were so many figures overlapping and all this activity and little groups of people doing this and doing that I remember I saw a reproduction in a magazine of something that was being done in Russia, I guess it was a French magazine I was looking at, and they had done just four single life-size figures with no landscapes or anything else in the background. There were four symbolical figures that were sort of floating on this wall but it was such a relief. I immediately thought, "Oh, how wonderful! Let me just do some simple figures," and I went around and talked to MacdonaldWright and Lorser and everything and they all agreed it would be fine, but nobody ever …. They wanted all the other things in, you see. You had to tell a story … and they were turbulent times. People were trying all sorts of things. I think that we had some murals that were as good as those done in Coit Tower, for example. Where they are now today? Some are good and some are just terribly uneven. It just depended on who was doing it.

MS. MCCHESNEY: You mentioned Macdonald-Wright. He was head of the Los Angeles project. Was he a painter too?

MS. BOTHWELL: Yes, he's a very famous painter. He's the one that is written up in all books on early abstract painting because he was one of the people that started out with the paintings using color. I've forgotten what the exact name of the thing was, but you can look it up in any book on the early beginnings of abstract work. But he, at that time, was doing very long, sort of scrolls of California hills, very beautifully drawn and kind of smootched a little bit in pencil. I remember seeing one or two of those. He really wasn't working too consistently. And then he was doing large, color panels. I guess he first got on the thing when it was PWAP, and then when PWAP disappeared, he was asked to head the thing because I remember seeing four panels that he had done, sort of yogi-ish and Oriental figures, sort of shaded figures that were kind of weak, sweet echoes of

what he had done earlier when he painted this Dynamism, or whatever it is called [Synchromism], the very early paintings that he did. Yes, he was one of the very early modern artists. He lived in New York for a time. He had shown in the Armory Show, I think.

MS. MCCHESNEY: [Uhuh] Did you have any contact with any of the other WPA projects, like the Writers' Project [WPA Federal Writers' Project], or the Music Project [WPA Music Program]?

MS. BOTHWELL: No, I was not very social I guess. I knew they existed. I even knew where the Theater one was. I think we did have …, no, I don't think I ever met anybody there though. But they were thinking about maybe consolidating things and maybe some of the people who had been doing designs would do settings or something or other like that, but by that time the whole project fell apart so it didn't happen. Actually, I think the most valuable thing for the PWA was the Design Index and that is something that is irreplaceable. And those artists were paid about, well $86 or $89 and $90 a month and they had to turn out four of those meticulous watercolors a month. You know that Design project [WPA Index of Design]?

MS. MCCHESNEY: Yes.

MS. BOTHWELL: I think they turned out four of those a month, or two of them a month, and that kind of work, you couldn't touch it today for three hundred dollars apiece. You just couldn't get them. They'd do a piece of patchwork quilt, you know, and absolutely every stitch would be on it because that sort of thing can't be photographed because there are always little things that are hidden with shadows and accidents-of-light and everything. The type of artists that could do that had to have this watercolor background and then have this patience to do all these things. And Bassinet who came to do chickens had been doing some of these wonderful things on the Design Index and that had folded, so he was out of a job there. And we had several of the Design Index people came over into the museum project, but I didn't know any of them. As far as I know they were technical workers. They were people who had done all the bird feathers for scientists and that sort of thing and they just turned around and they used watercolor or gouache and they were scientific artists in that sense. This was a wonderful project and, you know, it still hasn't all been reproduced or photographed or anything. It's still there. But they preserved all of the early California things that could be found in the Los Angeles area.

MS. MCCHESNEY: What were they mainly working on, Missions or …?

MS. BOTHWELL: No, no, no. All the California hidalgos; all the people that had haciendas.All the things like that: the shoes, the fans, the costumes, the combs. Then the utensils: wooden utensils, cooking utensils that were used at that time in early California days. The whole early Californiana from the time under the Mexicans, from the Spanish under the Mexicans into the first part of the American thing up until the time California became, well, up almost to the gold rush. It covered that. It covered about a hundred years, I think. And it's really fabulous. And that was done also in Santa Barbara. I don't know anything about the Santa Barbara part of the project, but that was one of the strong things there because they had so many of the old California families. Oh, everything: the saddles, and all the silver ornamentation on the saddles, farming implements, oh, chairs, chests, everything, shawls, fans. It's just incredible. Those things have been preserved but all the canvases, heavens only knows what happened to 'em. I think toward the end people were just helping themselves to something they liked.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Do you have any general thoughts about the period?

MS. BOTHWELL: Well, no. Yes, I do. I've always been able to understand why some people were interested in Communism because there was so much injustice. People weren't really interested in Communism, but they were interested in something that would even things out and there were lots of people on the project who were not Communists, or card-carrying Communists by any manner of means, but who definitely felt there was something wrong in the whole political setup that this thing should have happened. For example, when I got onto the museum project and [indistinct] I had a man come who was an electrical engineer and he'd been in an office. He had done all sorts of things. He was down there doing some common wiring and he had so little to eat that the first day [indistinct] he fainted dead away and then we had to revive him. We all chipped in and we had a supply of groceries that we would fix up a bag of groceries--he had two children, a wife and two kids – and then whoever had the most gasoline … We'd find out how he had gotten there, he'd mostly come on a bus, and we'd pile him into a car and take him and the groceries home and tell him not to come back for a day or so. We'd just sort of cover up.

Well, in this case I was head of the project and I'd just mark him that he was there and I told him what day the inspection was and he'd come back, but he had just not hand enough to eat. And even so, you could get, you know, you got tickets and you could get canned foods and dried beans and peas and everything like that for people that had a big family. They really needed those supplementary things, and this was all right, but you just began to feel it was all right in one way but it was all wrong in the other way and people would sit around and there were many people that were interested in Communism and, you know, would just help.

I myself wasn't because I don't like hate and I kept saying, “Well, there's something wrong with it because I've never seen a happy Communist. They're always mad at something or the other, and this isn't going to help." I get mad at injustice, but being mad all the time isn't going to help, you see. We argued a lot about whether it would help. And, of course, in those days we didn't have words like Fascism or anything else. But as far as I know there were no Communists--while there might have been, I wouldn't have known it--on the project, but certainly nobody was going around saying, "Let's bomb everything." We were very grateful to be on. We did feel there was something wrong that this had to be done but, boy, we all cried when Roosevelt died. I mean, this was the thing.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Have we covered it?

MS. BOTHWELL: I think we have.

MS. MCCHESNEY: Thanks very much for giving us the time for the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW

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