



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Peter Lowe,
1965 Mar. 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Peter Lowe on March 3, 1965. The interview took place in Oakland, California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney and Robert McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

Words and phrases were inaudible throughout the interview audio; the original transcript was used to clarify passages. Some additional relevant information from the original transcript has been added in brackets with an -Ed. attribution. The current transcript is the result of a combination of the original transcript created and edited in the 1960s, a verbatim transcript created in 2021 from the digitized sound recording, and an audit of the 2021 transcript compared to the original transcript using the digitized sound recording as reference.

Interview

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This is Mary McChesney interviewing Peter Lowe. And he lives at 474 38th Avenue.

PETER LOWE: 38th Street.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Street. 38th Street, in Oakland, California. And the date is March 3, 1965. Present also this afternoon is Robert McChesney. Pete, I wanted to ask you first, where were you born?

PETER LOWE: Los Angeles.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What year was that?

PETER LOWE: 1913.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: 1913? And where did you go to art school?

PETER LOWE: First time in China.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: When I was a baby, one year old, my mother and father took me back to southern part of China. And I went to school in China and that—learned Chinese old sculpture. You know, they make that sculpture for the—the Buddhist temples?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: [Inaudible.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You were just saying, Pete, that you were doing temple sculpture—Buddhists—for the Buddhists. Was that it?

PETER LOWE: Yeah, for the religion.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: For the religion? And it was the Buddhist religion?

PETER LOWE: Buddhist religion. And then, I have the drawing, see? Make drawings first. And they watch you there. They have children too. They have about three sons. And they always—they study drawing first. And then, after the drawing—and then, the father tells them how to mix up the mud and mix up mud and then start to work. And then, I was a child at the time, you know? Just—I don't know how old I was at the time; six or seven.

One day we started, they all were watching to see how we did it and they let us do a full drawing to copy, or something like that. You do the drawing and then afterward—and then, they give you a little talk about it, saying which was right and which lines—carry the lines through, or they talked about Chinese writing, which were important. How your mind could

interfere and express upon your heart, or something. They tell you all these things to learn and—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: —to practice. And then, they give you a square of tile, dry tile—give you a piece of tile. And then—and give you a big glass of water, plain water. And they give you a big brush and then you draw right on those drying tiles, you know, clay. And they dry right away. Then you can see it right away. They—see how you're drawing, see? Practice, you know. Practice how you're expressing your mind now. You see, that created interest for two or three years. I think I started that way. Starting—start—pretty good start and all that, because they always give you something like a lecture, you know, about art and the century, starting with the different dynasties [inaudible]—Yuan, and then the tell you about Ming, and then Ching and all kinds of stuff. And the style and the artist's expression and the different type of artists to understand, the different types of people we're talking about. For instance, they call a—I don't know what the English call these different styles. They call [speaks Chinese], see?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Better make a list of those dynasties he was speaking of, because you'll never remember.

PETER LOWE: [Ch'u Ying and Ding Goon Ping -Ed.] and other painters. They talked about them and it was very funny to see some of the painting. The dresses were covered with gold and pearls. And some beautiful dress. They were the people of the emperor's court.

[00:05:05]

And some [inaudible] during the time period. It's a painting that [inaudible]. He said, "The living conditions in this world were very wealthy." Very wealthy during that time, and especially those artists were very near those rich people at the time and drew like that, because, as you can see, all the painting, see—all in the book, see, have something beautiful pearl and gold or something like that. It's very nicely decorated. The artist must be very rich near those people. And he is a different types—he's a representative of the different type of person for the artist.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: I say, the next thing point out—a monk painter, see? Think of a monk painter, see? The religion, you know—a monk painter—a monk is a little bit different person. They try to live in the present religion and they have to go near those people—the common people—and paint how they lived.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, he'd be a painter of a particular religious sect.

PETER LOWE: In that religion—they have to bring a different type of people to the religion—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: —and not the kind of people you have in court, the high great peoples, but the peasants.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: So, the court, you mean—

PETER LOWE: Court. The court, yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: And the thing—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: So, there were the court painters and then the monk painters who went out and painted among the people?

PETER LOWE: [Inaudible] people, see?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

PETER LOWE: Among people the thing as painting as common, as you see it. Like, artists

just go out and they see the people in the street—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: —and house by house. They went house by house, because they went to see the people. Because they wanted religion for the people, they had to go see the people. Now the monk's kind of painting is a different type, see?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: And it comes with different types of people.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: When you came back to the United States, did you go to art school here?

PETER LOWE: Yeah, I studied at the California School of Fine Arts. But most of the time I went to night school. And I went there a couple of months and then we had the private school.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: When did you go to the School of Fine Arts, Pete?

PETER LOWE: Oh my God.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: And who was teaching there? Otis [Oldfield]?

PETER LOWE: Otis.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: [E. Spencer] Macky

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, Macky.

PETER LOWE: [Lee] Randolph this time. I don't know what year. Randolph's [inaudible].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Randolph?

PETER LOWE: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And there were most of them there, finally, [inaudible]. And then we have a group of Chinese people in Chinatown. And we had a group of people.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Was this for art—to study art?

PETER LOWE: It's art study.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Sort of an art class? Or—

PETER LOWE: Art class. And we studied at Montgomery Street, and a year passed away now and we had a few artist who—a group of kids, you know? We were pretty young, just a group of kids. And we studied and then we put up the money, and we rented a studio in Montgomery Street. I don't even—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: The Montgomery Block?

PETER LOWE: Not Montgomery Block. It's that—you know where the place was with a carpenter shop's upstairs?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Carpenters Hall.

PETER LOWE: You say Carpenters Hall, I say just a shop.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Carpenter shop upstairs.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, the framer?

PETER LOWE: Yeah, framer upstairs.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: The old man who did the framing?

PETER LOWE: No, not that one. I think the broom shop [inaudible]. Cuneo had a studio Cuneo in the front apartment. We were in the back apartment.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Where was this?

PETER LOWE: Cuneo is the—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Rinaldo Cuneo?

PETER LOWE: Yeah, Cuneo was very famous at that time, see?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah, he was in the front. And then Bloom? Who was that?

PETER LOWE: A downstairs [inaudible].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Broom shop.

PETER LOWE: A broom factory was there too.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, broom factory.

PETER LOWE: We had—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, yeah. [They laugh.]

PETER LOWE: —yeah, yeah, yeah. Remember that? Yeah.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Where was this from the Black Cat?

PETER LOWE: Next door to the Black Cat.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Next door.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, it was next door to Black Cat.

PETER LOWE: Black Cat. Yeah. Well, I remember Cuneo was in the front, and then me in the back, and then another guy played piano—sculpture was in there. And then, we put up the money in there. I don't know. I forget how much money, you know—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

PETER LOWE: —how much money in there. And then, we worked over there. And besides, we were studying in there. And a group of Chinese people—kids, all young like that—we studied in there. And then, we put up the money to hire a teacher. We hired Oldfield to be our instructor. We hired Oldfield over there.

[00:10:06]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Was [Dong] Kingman with you?

PETER LOWE: No, Kingman's way out. Yeah, Kingman was later.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: Kingman was later. And then, we hired Oldfield. And then, we put up an exhibit. Afterward we studied Cubism at that time. You know, when you're young—and we all studied Chinese art, this group of people. They all wanted to know about Chinese art.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You were just talking about the group that you had in Montgomery Street, who was—who was studying art together.

PETER LOWE: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How did you first make any contact with the WPA or the Art Project in San Francisco?

PETER LOWE: After what the—then after, we studied Otis. And then I think it's a—I think the WPA—I was just—afterward—and then, let me see. I had a garment factory in Chinatown.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: A garment factory?

PETER LOWE: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, you—that you owned yourself.

PETER LOWE: Yeah. I owned it myself, and a friend owned it. And things were not better. We went broke. I couldn't make anything. And then, Kingman asked me, in the street, he's like, Pete, you're doing nothing. We went broke, see. And he said, why don't you go down and ask them to give you some work. Low pay, just to work. To get in the Project. Make it on the Project, see? I tried it—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Who'd you go see?

PETER LOWE: And then, first I go to see and they told me to go on relief. And then I went into the state department, is it? They said you have to have relief before you get into WPA.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, relief.

PETER LOWE: Relief first. They said, "You have to do relief first before." And then—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That was easy, wasn't it?

PETER LOWE: Not easy to go and ask them for relief. That's rough. [Inaudible] go down to ask relief, you know? Don't know what to do the first time, and then, okay, you go down there and finally, they asked me, What kind of artwork you've done? And I say I'm a fine artist, I'm not a commercial artist. Really, I'm not for the commercial work, see? And the first time they wouldn't let me in the Art Project. They sent me down to do labor work, down there for the water department or something. Making landscape. Flower planting, or something like that.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

PETER LOWE: I got in there first, and then—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, this is more or less on the easel project, huh?

PETER LOWE: No, you work in a farm.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No, working as a laborer—

PETER LOWE: Labor.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —doing the gardening for the—

PETER LOWE: Gardening [inaudible].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, gardening. I thought you were doing landscape paintings.

PETER LOWE: Huh?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I thought you meant you're doing landscape.

PETER LOWE: Oh, I asked them for easel work first. They said, You don't get that the first time. I think they don't understand the kind of things I say. I say I do landscapes, go out to paint the people, like that. But he caught one word. He say landscape.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.] So, you became a gardener.

PETER LOWE: [They laugh.] He say you do garden, and I was made a gardener. He didn't know about art. I said, I work under easel. I go out and paint landscapes, see? I don't mind. That's all right. No different. I went to work and finally, I work in there quite a bit. And then, I saw Kingman—I talking to him. Kingman asked me, "Where do you work now?" I said, "I work in the landscape." All right? [They laugh.] [Inaudible] You know, using the wheelbarrow. But I think Kingman said, Go down and ask them for a transfer, Pete. Go down and ask them. So

finally I saw, That's all right. I'll work a little while yet. I saw Kingman again [inaudible]. He said, "Go ahead. Go ask him." He said, "Go see Gaskin," see?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: I think—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was it Bill Gaskin?

PETER LOWE: Bill Gaskin.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: Bill Gaskin is a well, fine guy, really nice guy. He say—he say—he say—he told me—he said the Feds have murals coming up for the Treasure Island.

[00:15:12]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: He said, With an artist you work. You'll like it too. So, he said, Wait for a couple weeks. I'll send you a thing—send you a piece of paper, a transfer, you know, something like that. And he did. [Inaudible.] Then I go see Herman Volz, see? See, I go down and see Herman. Then I started to work in the mural.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This is Herman Volz, who was the head of the Treasure Island—

PETER LOWE: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —mural at the Golden Gate International Exposition, correct?

PETER LOWE: Federal building.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's upon the federal building. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: Yeah, that's it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What did you first start doing for Herman?

PETER LOWE: Drawing. And he had a small picture—a drawing, but he wanted it scaled, made bigger. And he'll only say, What do you think about this drawing? Just do your best. And then, we go in there with a group of artists. It was very nice. We international—Chinese. And I think Chinese—just white. That's all, just Chinese and [inaudible] working there.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That was down at number one—

PETER LOWE: Down the—near First Street.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, First Street.

PETER LOWE: First Street. And then—and then—and Volz, he don't tell you exactly what he wants, but we have to find out what he wants, and we were drawing and we tried everything. And then we finally—in a book I saw, Orozco painting, Mexican painter, and pretty near like that he wanted. I said I try and work like that Orozco [inaudible] and he finally did like that.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: And then, the whole thing come off pretty near, [laughs] and it all worked out. Volz knew what he wanted. He was a good artist too, you know? And then, mural is—it was simple. He likes simple things with strong feeling. Orozco's line was doing quite well.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Same idea—

PETER LOWE: And it didn't cause much trouble and it was nice to work with him. And then, I think I learned quite a bit from him too for—on the Project. Learned quite a bit in there. And it was a good start. I think it was a wonderful thing. And I think to myself sometime—I think after the church used the artist and the Buddhist Chinese—Buddhists—the religion used artists. And finally the administration, at that time started the WPA Art Project. And then—

and started to employ the young people on the job and try to develop something, a culture.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: I think it was a wonderful thing. The wonderful thing is since the religion, or after that. And the only thing I see is just—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, it's—

PETER LOWE: —the WPA Art Project that time. After that, I don't see anything now. And I think it was a wonderful thing. And I'm glad that they allowed a good thing in this country, the Federal Art Project. We turned out beautiful things in the easel project and the mural project, mosaic, and lithograph, everything. It's—we're outstanding, the art. I don't think the —after—now, the things—how many years ago now from WPA to now?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: About 25 or 30 years.

PETER LOWE: 25 to 30 years. I don't—you can't find something like this develop so fast from the WPA period. Go to check. I have to even go to check it. I don't think so. I don't think there was a success or something that's comparative even. The—look at the mosaic in San Diego. How beautiful is that? Look at the mosaic. I'm glad the mosaic there. Look at the mosaic in the [SF City -Ed.] junior college. Look at that. You—how much money you got to spend and get a mosaic up like that? All right. Forty years ago, you don't care about that, the money. But the culture is important. You've done something—ceramic, everything. We've done quite a bit advanced at that time.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: All right, here, 25 years ago, what have you done? Even—even they are still fighting about how painting should be done here.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Fighting about what?

[00:20:01]

PETER LOWE: What? Not only the thing. Yeah, even now—before that time, you see the time we developed the art. Before that time there was no American art. Before the art on the WPA. We've done it. We've done it. We've did the thing, the easel painting, that portrayed something. It was a movement then.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: Now it's confusing, American art. When people—we really got in there during the WPA at that time. You see a lot of painting in that time? [Inaudible] at the time. It represents USA at the time. [Laughs.] It's funny. Now, it's going to—something will be happening again, and soon, for young people. Young artists in school are doing it. Now, we have no artists. We have no art. How are we going to develop it? I think it's a very simple thing, something like the WPA, now. For instance—for instance, you know it, we didn't make much money. We made about \$80, \$90 a month. We still very happy to do that work, you see, right?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: We don't work—we didn't work for the money. We worked for the low money, even if it was not enough to eat on. We still used the money to buy pigment, buy the color, buy the paper, buy the canvas.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You mean now or—

PETER LOWE: No, before.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Before, yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: On the WPA.

PETER LOWE: Yeah. We still didn't complain, you see? [Laughs.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's right.

PETER LOWE: Right? That's—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: \$80 a month, that was a fortune then.

PETER LOWE: Yeah. But how much money did we spend? Quite a few money spent back on the—for the material, we use it. At least, I use a half the money, because I think we were happy at the time.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, that's quite true. Yeah.

PETER LOWE: Yeah, I'm pretty sure I—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You put half of the money that you earned on [inaudible]—

PETER LOWE: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —back into the materials—

PETER LOWE: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —for your own painting.

PETER LOWE: Yeah. I still put a half in there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: We were just talking about how in the WPA, you spent about half the money that you earned a month on materials for your own painting. Were you on the easel project as well as the mural project for Herman Volz?

PETER LOWE: I just get in the lithograph at the time.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Lithograph? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: And I never had a chance to go in the easel-oil. That's what I wanted. I never have a chance to get in.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How many lithographs did you do on the Project? Quite a number of them, or just one or two?

PETER LOWE: No, quite a number. The—

UNIDENTIFIABLE SPEAKER: [Inaudible.]

PETER LOWE: —they had a pretty good system. When they accepted a lithograph, they printed up all—I think it's 18 or something. And they also gave you a few back. And they kept some of them. I think quite a few, but I don't know how many. But now, I only got one left. I don't know where they go myself. [Laughs.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You got that one back because I had it. And he saw it and he said, that's the only one I got. Got to have it. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How long were you on the Project altogether? Was it a period of two or three years?

PETER LOWE: No. After—let me see now—the war started. We had—we had to finish the—finish the mosaic in the junior college [SF City College -Ed.].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, you worked on the Herman Volz mosaic at the—at the junior college.

PETER LOWE: We had to hang it too. We had to [inaudible] and hand the painting, remember?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You were on it after I was, because—

PETER LOWE: Yeah, I—we had to finish the painting—the mosaic. And we finished the mosaic. And then, we really rushed—really rushing, because the war started.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: The war started, and then—and then, I saw war started. And then—and I think it was Mr. Poole [ph], Harry Poole [ph] came out from—he came from Washington or something. He saw me working to finish the mosaic. He said, Pete, you better finish. Work hard and finish that the thing because the war started. So I worked my head off to finish it, not much chance to work in here. And it's hard work, you know, to finish that.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, Pete stayed on as Volz's right-hand man right on through there.

PETER LOWE: And I'm—I think the—I liked it, because I liked that thing. I liked the job.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: [Inaudible.] The job—of course, I—the job—right, the job of course was a pretty big thing, the mosaic, you know? And he said, "[Inaudible.]" I wouldn't think it. [Laughs.] After a while I hanging on in there, I worked quickly, I think it was a pretty good thing. Hard work, big rock in there, you know.

[00:25:00]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This was done in very large pieces of rock stone.

PETER LOWE: Stone is a beautiful color. And I think it's the—sometimes, you got to take a look over there. I think it's worth to see it. It's worth to see it, a job like that. I think it's worth to see it, because maybe someday people will think about it.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think we ought to go back to the part where Pete first got on the Project and went to work with—on Treasure Island there. And I think Pete's—can tell us some interesting stories about how we used to travel across on those ferry boats in the fog and meeting down there at this ferry station. And that was a great time, wasn't it, Pete?

PETER LOWE: Yeah, it was a great time. But the—you know, when you do learn something—when you work something, you have a feeling you've done it. You're happy to do it. It means—it means something. I think not only me—everybody. Like, you—everybody who worked in the Project, worked in the Treasure Island, the mural. Everyone was so interested and happy to work. It means something. I'm average, so I know it. And the people have a cup of coffee. Most of them have a cup of coffee, or they have a doughnut. Sometimes, it's just a cup of coffee and run over there and do work, you know? Go to paint. And that was—yeah. The first time we did the drawing of the painting and put the painting up there, and so it's work.

And besides, we know it what it was about. I think I have a feeling that way too. We work in there. And, of course, we're not paid too much. Didn't have a UN scale to pay, so cheap labor. But we still liked to work. Nobody stop us. Even the union couldn't stop us. They tried to stop us because the job in there. They tell those house painter or the so-called UN decorators to do it. He couldn't have done the job like that. He can't. There's a big scale in there. You miss one line, you come back in here, you do it upside down [laughs] it would be wrong—all wrong [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs] because it was really big, you know? 60 feet high, is it?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: 80.

PETER LOWE: 80.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, I have some question about the height. I thought it was 80 feet.

PETER LOWE: Yeah, pretty high, big, you know? You mix up one line, and then you don't know which line it is. You couldn't see it when you go up there. You had to know what you're doing, because it's big, you know? You going by scale, you know?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: And then, you—then that house painter, they thought he could've done the job. So they got a good pay on that. And then, all right, so we go in there. We are very happy. We put it up. We've done the job. And they're all—not only—everybody cooperated. Everybody, even from Herman Volz to the bottom. There was a guy—there was a guy who talked—mixed—check up the color—number of the colors were consistent.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Urban Neininger.

PETER LOWE: Yeah, he's very good. He's the best. That guy, he got the color in there with a number. He got everything mixed up in there. He won't mess up, see? And so, we get in. We —on order. We wanted the green color [inaudible]. One, two, three, green. Red—we got two or three kinds of red. Gray, four kinds of gray—all kinds. We got all kind of colors, see? It's a system work. Because those house painters, those decorators, never could have done it so carefully. Volz had different kinds of gray, different kinds of green, different kinds of things. I'm sorry they destroyed the mural. They ought to keep the mural. It's very beautifully done. And—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, it'd have been hard to keep, Pete.

PETER LOWE: Hard to keep.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Because it was on that plywood. And—

PETER LOWE: The plywood. And then—and—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

PETER LOWE: All right, we've done it the second time, you see? Second time's a funny thing. You know, the second year, see? We had to repaint it—repaint that. That's going to be very interesting, yeah? Repaint it. And I don't know why—I don't understand. And we working there. You know, I work—I don't want to see the people work so hard. You're supposed to work double, triple, double in there. One time, I saw McChesney right in the morning, try to squint through everything, work his head off like that. I say, What's was going on? [Inaudible.] He told me he had to finish that before Saturday. I still don't understand. I said, "All right Mac, that's how you want to work? that hard? He [inaudible].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Volz put me in charge of the—

[00:30:04]

PETER LOWE: You wanted to finish that thing in one afternoon. [They laugh.] My God. That's impossible.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It turned out to be a typical boss, didn't it?

PETER LOWE: Yeah. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: So did you have them all working too hard?

PETER LOWE: Well, I tell him slave driver. I said, That's a slave driver. That's what I said.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Slave driver. [Laughs.]

PETER LOWE: You know, a big mural. You know, "Finish it before Saturday," see? That's a big job. [They laugh.] I still—I still don't understand it.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I remember Tatum [ph] too. He complained about it to me.

PETER LOWE: Yeah, we done it. We've done the job for you, yeah?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: We've done it. I said, All right. Let's go. We've done it. You'd be so proud we done it. Beautiful art. We cut it. We never mess up. We use the—you know, when we painted, we used the—what we call the 35 brush or what they call it?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: 35, yeah.

PETER LOWE: We cut—we cut the line in 35 brush.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Those great big house painter brushes?

PETER LOWE: We cut that beautiful line that was in the drawing. Cut it—everybody do that. It's [inaudible].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's fantastic.

PETER LOWE: And we never mixed up one color wrong. [Inaudible] beautiful job. And another job is to brush off—use the—use the steel wool to sand it off first. First time, that was a hard job, all of it sanded off. That's what he wanted. He wanted—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I had forgotten all about the fact that Volz put me in charge. [Laughs.]

PETER LOWE: I don't know why he had gone and done that. Maybe he had a reasoning. I don't know. He must have had a reason. He must have a reason. I—and I really work with that thing. Everybody worked. And—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, Volz—

PETER LOWE: —everybody [inaudible]. But McChesney, that's all, we've done it for you. We worked for you, is all. Not for anybody that day. I tell you just for you—everybody working there, they said, "All right, for Mac. That's all." [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Herman Volz probably told me it had to get finished, you know?

PETER LOWE: Yeah. He knows it's a big job.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: [Inaudible.] This was not slop for house painters. It was different. They put them in, you see, but how many times can you change one color about 60 feet high? Go in there about the little house where they keep all the paint, take the paint inside, take the paint outside, go up there again, come down again. [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs.] Can you imagine, you couldn't sleep when you got down. [They laugh.]

I think that's the hardest work I ever did in my life. Right, come up there and down again, up there, down again, you know? And then, change the color. You're well aware, I think it's very dangerous. You could fall to death. [They laugh.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, that—after that was finished, we went over to the—[Pickle Factory -Ed.].

PETER LOWE: You know why we done it? We thought, "Mac's a nice guy." That's why—not that I wouldn't do it.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, after they got through with it, they didn't think I was so nice. [They laugh.] So, then, we went over to the art building, didn't we? And worked on the big mosaic.

PETER LOWE: The big mosaic.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Or did we go back to the pickle factory?

PETER LOWE: No, then you go work in the—you work for Volz now. I don't work Volz now, because I think it's a [inaudible]. Then I went to work with Diego Rivera. Then later, again, I finished the job, and I had to go back and do lithographs. And I don't work like that. I trained for work [inaudible]. That's it. That—you work in one side. I work in one side.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's—

PETER LOWE: And I don't like that idea you're working that, and I quit you. And I work—I work for Diego Rivera. I said, "I thought you were [inaudible]." And then, later, again, I finish the job. I had to go back. They asked me whether I do lithograph. I had done lithographs. And then, I go back to work with the mosaic again. That's the—that's the—I go back to work in the mosaic, worked with you with the mosaic. And then you quit work.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No, he fired me.

PETER LOWE: He fired you.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: And then, you worked for Clay.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Clay Spohn.

PETER LOWE: Clay Spohn, [inaudible] and then transfer out. Then—see, I quit you. I work with Diego Rivera.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: How long did you work with Diego Rivera?

PETER LOWE: Until we finished the mural.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: And you worked there quite a while.

PETER LOWE: Yeah, quite a while. I worked with Diego Rivera. And then, you worked, and another guy, worked for Volz with the mosaic. And then, finally—and then—and I finished the job for Diego Rivera. And then, I go back in the Project, and then they put me in the lithograph. He said, "All right, I'll give you another—better job." [Inaudible] be promoted, see, with the lithograph when you do your only work, see? And I worked with lithograph. And then, you quit and then they put me back again.

[00:35:03]

And between you and I, no argument, see? And then you left, you quit work. Or Volz fired you. I don't know. [They laugh.] I don't know. And they put me back to work. And later, Volz put you back to work. And then we finished the job. That's the story.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: And we all wound up at the pickle factory [inaudible].

PETER LOWE: We all wound up at the pickle factory at that time.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Pete was wonderful down there, with those old Italian stone cutters. You know, and—

PETER LOWE: Oh, they—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They were great guys.

PETER LOWE: Those were great guys to work, those Italians. They have experience, we'll say, from—you worked on different drawing, you see, until you learned how to hang the mosaic, how to cut the stones, you never learned that. But only then, even Volz, he didn't know about it. I don't know if he knew or not, to hang the job—I don't know. I'm not sure. I don't want to say anything. Before—I depend what I learn of from those old Italian mosaic worker. They're very decent guys to work. A decent guy to work, and understanding people too. They had same amount of money, work about \$90 a month, [inaudible] but they understood that we spent our money to buy oil and canvas to paint. See, the money was gone. And sometimes, we don't have the money to put it up—to buy lunch. But those guys, like Joe and his brother, like that, he'd say, "Come by. We don't want to eat lunch when some people can't." They'd buy salami and then sometimes mackerel [ph] [inaudible]. Hard work, you know? It's my [inaudible.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They all had red wine.

PETER LOWE: Oh, red wine, dry salami, things like that. And they understand. And then as a beginner I didn't know, except hand mosaic. They taught you how to hang it and mix up the cement. And you say, Teach me, joe. It's very important to hang in the ceiling—the mosaic to hang on the ceiling, see? You all right? You put the mosaic in the ceiling. How do you handle it? You put a up stone there, and that was too heavy? Huh? [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs.] They must have a trick in there. Do some—nobody teach you. Nobody taught you and every time you put it in the ceiling, the stone come down again. You see, they have a reasoning there. I say—I ask you to teach me out to put a ceiling in like that.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: He said, "All right, Pete, I will teach you." Alright, when you hang up the ceiling, you use less lime, more cement because the ceilings are different. You know why? The ceilings have to dry quick, see.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: How you going to dry quick so to hold up the stone before it fall down? [Inaudible] fall down. He said, The only trick is the cement, all right? Then your secret is to use more cement on it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: More cement?

PETER LOWE: Less lime.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh. Yeah, yeah.

PETER LOWE: So, the cement will dry quick. You hold it all—the cement will hold it all on there. That's the secret. You have to understand that. That's the secret, see? [Laughs.] That's the secret they taught me. Those old [inaudible] working in Italy before, they really teaching me how to do it, see? Especially the lime. And they would—they wouldn't—he say—they're [inaudible]. So I got a secret [inaudible]. They have all all kinds of secrets, you see.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: [Inaudible] those workers [inaudible]. Because they have experience. This was not a school. They had to learn the job. [Laughs.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You did a lot of small mosaics in the—when they were working. You remember?

PETER LOWE: Yeah, I've done this. I don't know—some is—I don't have anything myself. That's all—I've done quite a bit in my extra time, mostly in extra time—my own time, you know?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: Since I work a half hour later and did those. You have to do that in your own time. You're going to—I think it's fair. Herman told me if I wanted to do that little thing, use my extra time.

[00:40:09]

And the mosaics—I've discovered the mosaics were very important. Mosaic's like a painting. A lot like painting. You can do a lot like painting with mosaics, the way you use the color.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Spread the color?

PETER LOWE: Yeah. It's the—for instance—yeah, like that. Like you paint a painting, see?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: You need some red color to show up a certain point. A spot of red like that, see? See, the artist has to do that, feeling while you are painting. You can put a piece of red color in the gray, a certain gray. Bang, like that, a piece of red color in a painting. Hold up the—not too cool, not too light. [Inaudible] my painting.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: Very interesting in the mosaic.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Have you done any mosaics since then? Did you go out and do any more mosaics after the Project?

PETER LOWE: No, [inaudible].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You didn't?

PETER LOWE: Mosaics are—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Takes a whole shop to do mosaics.

PETER LOWE: —[inaudible]. You have to—it's not easy. Take a certain kind of stone, sometime the right color with the marble. [Laughs.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah?

PETER LOWE: You [inaudible] like that. You won't get—unable to get a—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, Pete, there was one—I think a particularly unusual thing about Volz's mosaic mural was the fact that they used big—cut out big sections to use in it instead of using the—constantly these small squares.

PETER LOWE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It's a half inch to three-quarter inch or inch mosaic—

PETER LOWE: That's good.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: —rock. But they actually cut out sections, didn't they, out of stone?

PETER LOWE: That's what you—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

PETER LOWE: That's—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They did that, though, didn't they?

PETER LOWE: They did that, because the old artists did the same thing, like Volz. They try things out. He was doing his job good because he was using these big forms, you know, like that. You cut it down. It's not already developed. Take a—take a—take a chance. I go pick a big piece because it's a big thing. Use the big form and develop it. I think it's a good idea to do that because from now on, maybe another method, see? Try a—try a different thing now. Cut the stone bigger.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, cut it—cut it into shapes.

PETER LOWE: To shapes, yeah. It's the kind of movement, you know? Combine it. It will be better too. No, I think he got a good idea with that, because it might develop some day. Try to make it go for the shape.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: I think it's a good idea too. Like, cut a hand in stone, stronger like Chinese oak and stone from the mountain. Something very simple, like a few lines coming down, try to simplify if possible, you know? And make it more powerful, outstanding, and better. Let the people see the simplicity in ideas, stronger. I think it's a good idea. I think it's a wonderful idea. And it depends on artists, see, who have done this, see? So, we have to have time to do it and just develop something, see?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: And this used—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: It must have been a very different kind of experience, where you had to go from working with Herman Volz on his mural to go to working with Diego Rivera on his mural. They painted very differently. They were working very differently, weren't they?

PETER LOWE: No, the principles was—the principles were pretty much the same thing, yeah. How to—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

PETER LOWE: —hold up your painting. How well have you—mural mosaic? How to hold it all together, that big thing. The idea is the same thing. Maybe we got more idea how to do it lately, but it still was the same thing. But a different kind of technique.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Technique, yeah.

PETER LOWE: Technique, and what they do [inaudible]—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, their approach was entirely different.

PETER LOWE: Huh?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Their approach was entirely different, where Volz's is—was big, flat areas as a—

PETER LOWE: But the organization, the backbone.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: —where Rivera had to try to do his, you know, with the—

PETER LOWE: But they still have the frame. Like—

[00:45:02]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Right.

PETER LOWE: —when you build a building, the concept you have of the beams. The beam is strong. The beam holds up the same thing. It is supposed to be in the human body [inaudible], the bone, how you do it. It's still—the backbone is the same thing, but you can work in your different ways and technique. That's all, see?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: But you have sometimes the writers—same thing, you have to make up your mind what you want. [Inaudible.] You're a writer, you probably understand that with your background. How you express [inaudible], how you're going to [inaudible], how you're going to end. How you're going to—forward, backward, the same thing. [Inaudible] pretty near, same thing as sculpture [inaudible] but you can change the form into abstract, or modern, or different ideas, details. And a lot of people are interested in detail. A lot of people's interest in few lines. But you still have the backbone, where you hold up the thing, organize it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Organize it, yeah.

PETER LOWE: Organize it, you see.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Emmy Lou Packard was working with you at this time, wasn't she?

PETER LOWE: Yeah, he worked with—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Or at the same time.

PETER LOWE: —yeah, he's the big—he's the very important—back with Diego Rivera at the time for—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Emmy Lou.

PETER LOWE: —researching or something very important. [Inaudible] put the thing together to work, see? But I do mostly color for Diego Rivera, that's all. Both—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Color grinding, you mean?

PETER LOWE: Yeah, because that's a—I—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What was—

PETER LOWE: —because they—Diego asked me—asked me a few times. He know. He wanted to test me on the Chinese method of color grinding, how to change [inaudible]. I liked to work with him. I had to watch him. I had to tell him to believe me or fire me next week, see? [They laugh.] I had to tell him something about that. So, he said, Alright you, the only thing is you have to use my color. Sometimes overdone, no good. Sometimes it was too much overdone or it was not enough, and no good. It's got to be just right. Need to grind the colors, there's a little trick too, because I learned it from the old guy from China.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: When you were in China?

PETER LOWE: [Inaudible.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Wasn't Miné Okubo on there at the same time you were too? And she —

PETER LOWE: No, Okubo had her project. She had her own project. Easel project, see? They do not—they—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Didn't she work with Rivera? Did she work with—

PETER LOWE: She didn't work with him, but they watched him. They went to learn it, but they're not responsible in anything.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, I see. Sort of apprentices.

PETER LOWE: She had her own project. They just came to watch Rivera, to learn.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

PETER LOWE: [Inaudible] they can see how Diego paint, how he started to paint—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How he did it.

PETER LOWE: —you—how he did it. They go to—they learn. They had three better [inaudible] in person. They—in the project, they have a better chance than anybody. They have real [inaudible] chance for his own project, you know?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Was she on the WPA?

PETER LOWE: So, they're on the WPA—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

PETER LOWE: —but they have the easel project. They have their own project. The project—even their own project.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Is that at the Fine Arts building? Were they working on—

PETER LOWE: No, like the—like the Colored girl. Who is that? The Colored girl—the big Colored girl. What's the name of that?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Thelma Johnson Streat?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Thelma Johnson.

PETER LOWE: Yeah, he just watch—they just said to watch Diego Rivera do work. That's all.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: They came as observers to learn, to watch his technique.

PETER LOWE: Yeah, watching.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: But they weren't assistants of his. But Pete, said they had their own projects too.

PETER LOWE: Yeah. [Cross talk.] [Inaudible]—like Packard, was it?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Packard. Emmy Lou Packard.

PETER LOWE: Emmy Lou Packard different, was responsible for the—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: She was actually an assistant of Rivera's.

PETER LOWE: —assistant, yeah. She was acting as an assistant on that mural. Different, see?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, but Emmy Lou wasn't on the Project?

PETER LOWE: What?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: She wasn't on the Project.

PETER LOWE: Not on the Project, but they still had responsible for—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

PETER LOWE: —[inaudible]. But I had to grind the color, to make what he wanted for the color. What he wants.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You were saying earlier that you thought this was a very important period in American art, the time of the WPA. Do you think it would be a good idea for the government in the United States to sponsor the arts again?

PETER LOWE: Sure, of course. You want American art, you have to do like that. We have to. Otherwise the United States has no art. You want art, you have to sponsor. Not art come for free, from the air, come from anywhere. Comes from the [inaudible]. You have to sponsored to develop it. That's the main thing. Like the old church, very old Chinese religion of before sponsored art. Like, the old Chinese emperor, all artists were sponsored by the emperor.

[00:50:03]

Look at Ch'u Ying. He was sponsored from the Ming Dynasty, the emperor sponsored him. Like Ching [ph], even Ching [ph] not too long ago it sponsored. They bring the artists in there and let the artists work and get pay. That artwork got turned into the emperor. He decided which were good to keep, and which to throw in the wastebasket, and so far they haven't done it. That's where Chinese art comes from. Chinese art—Chinese culture doesn't come for free, it comes from the emperor.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: The Chinese WPA.

PETER LOWE: It don't call WPA, but we have a better name.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: [Laughs.] I'm joking.

PETER LOWE: But they have a better name.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

PETER LOWE: Not the WPA, they call you WPA worker. We have a bad name too, but they call you WPA. But they have a better name. They have a very fancy name for their [inaudible].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Royal court painter?

PETER LOWE: Yeah, that's right. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Thanks very much, Pete, for giving us the time for the interview today.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]