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Oral history interview with John Saccaro,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with John Saccaro II on June 18, 1964. The interview took place in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

John Saccaro II and Mary Fuller McChesney have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MARY McCHESNEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney interviewing John Saccaro who lives at 60 Canyon Drive in San Francisco. The date is June 18, 1964. Present this afternoon is Robert McChesney who was also on the Project in San Francisco. First I would like to ask you for some background information. Where were you born, and in what year?

JOHN SACCARO: San Francisco. 1913.

MARY McCHESNEY: And where did you get your art school training? Or where did you go to art school?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, until I got out of the Army at the end of World War II, in 1945, I was self-taught. Then in 1950 I enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts, now the San Francisco Art Institute, and I had three and a half years there. That was my total art training.

MARY McCHESNEY: That was on the GI Bill?

JOHN SACCARO: On the GI Bill, right.

MARY McCHESNEY: But you had been painting before this time?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. I was doing mostly watercolors. I think mainly for myself and for the Art Project. When did the Art Project start, Mac?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I don't know, Johnny....

JOHN SACCARO: It was in the late 30's, wasn't it?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I was on quite late.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, I guess I was, too, so...I was doing watercolors, mostly watercolors, for quite a few years there before the Art Project came along and then World War II and then the art school.

MARY McCHESNEY: How did you first get on the Art Project?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I was doing watercolors and somebody said to me, why don't you try to get on there; go down there and see about getting on the Project? And I did and they took me on and they gave me senior rating. What surprised me most of all is that they had two ratings. You remember how it was. They had the junior rating and the senior rating. And the junior rating got \$85 a month and the senior rating got \$96 a month, plus supplies. And somehow they gave me a senior rating right off the bat, which made me very happy. That's how I got on and that's the rating I was given. That's all I remember now.

MARY McCHESNEY: You were on the Easel Project, watercolor Easel Project?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, in the beginning, almost to the end of the Project I was on the Easel Project. Then we got transferred. I guess Mac and I together at the same time went over to Treasure Island when they started to make the murals for the Federal Building, murals for the....

MARY McCHESNEY: Golden Gate Exposition?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, the Golden Gate Exposition. That was in, what? 1939, wasn't it? Yes, '39. Then they had it another year, 1940.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes. You must have been on it before I was. Well, I don't know about that either. But I

went directly to work with Volz.

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, did you?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes. I remember we went down to first Street; they had studios down there and we were doing the cartoons.

JOHN SACCARO: I remember that place. I had a big fight with Volz there one morning.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Did you?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: You went to work there too, then?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, but before this I had already been working on the Easel Project in watercolors.

MARY McCHESNEY: Who was your supervisor on the easel project?

JOHN SACCARO: Bill Gaskin. And over Bill Gaskin was Joe Adams. Remember Joe Adams? A little guy, roly-poly guy, with a pipe all the time?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: You mean Allen?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, I guess I do mean Allen.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Joe Allen was head of the Project.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. That's right, for Northern California or the Northern District or something like that, they called it, yes. Joe Allen.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: When you were on the Easel Project, you painted watercolors in your own studio?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, that's right. Or outside, outdoors, you know, which is mainly what I did. And I used to get into a lot of trouble because of all the paper they'd give me. I'd come back the next week with about a million watercolors and they'd raise hell down there and tell me to stop using so much of their materials and "...just bring in one or two, that's all, and don't use quite so much of our paper." Of course they were giving us the best paper, probably Honoj, Arch's, and Windsor Newton Watercolors. Remember those, all those real goodies?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: All that stuff, and I was using it up like a crazy man and I don't think the result warranted it either.

MARY McCHESNEY: Did you turn in all the paintings that you made?

JOHN SACCARO: Just about, yes. I don't remember, I suppose I did, because I don't think I have any of that period myself. They must have gotten them, yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: Did they ever arrange any exhibitions that included your watercolors during this time?

JOHN SACCARO: Not that I know of. Quite a few years after the Art Project had been abandoned, I went into some building concerned with Social Security down on Sansom Street and there I was surprised to see two watercolors of mine which I had completely forgotten. But they looked real familiar to me across the hall, you know. I thought, gee, that looks like one of mine so I went up and looked at it and sure enough it was. Sure enough.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: When was this? This was about three years after the Project folded?

JOHN SACCARO: It must have been. Or even more than that, Mac. Gee, I couldn't remember.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: After the War?

JOHN SACCARO: It could have been even after the War, yes, Because it was a long time after the Project. I had completely forgotten them. I remember one of the watercolors was of old St. Joseph's Church down on tenth and Howard, I believe it was. Now I remember having done that painting, but at the time I had forgotten it, you

know.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes. Well, were these paintings more or less realistic?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. They were all realistic at that time. I had already done a lot of abstract paintings but only for myself because, at that time, you know, there was in those years a cultural lag. It took ten years for something to cross from Paris to New York and then at least another five or ten years before it reached San Francisco. So in San Francisco we were just getting hip to Picasso and Braque and Rouault, and in New York they already knew about Kandinsky, who was unheard of out here. So I hope I answered the question.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, in the Northwest though there was a different condition. You had painters that were pretty far out up there, like Norris Graves....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, but we didn't know them down here, you know.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: No, but I've often wondered how this little nucleus of abstract painting ever started up there. Of course it wasn't strictly abstract....

JOHN SACCARO: No.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: But I guess it came from the Orient rather than from Europe.

JOHN SACCARO: It could have been because they were both deeply concerned with it, you know. Japanese...I mean both Morris, what was his name?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Morris Graves.

MARY McCHESNEY: Morris Graves and Mark Tobey....

JOHN SACCARO: Mark Tobey, yes. But, as I say, at the time that all this interest in abstract painting was going on here, there was no real interest on the part of the museums to push it. They were still absorbed with Picasso and Braque and these others. Because I remember going around with Ted Polos and we'd say, "Oh boy, look at this, and look at that," and they were always Braques or Picassos or Rouaults, you know. Kandinsky wasn't even a name out here at that time. And this must have been around 1935, '36.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, even the European painters, the abstract painters, the Cubists, and so forth, weren't particularly picked up out here....

JOHN SACCARO: No.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I mean by this time. About this time, you had this tremendous influence from the Mexicans....

JOHN SACCARO: Sure. That's right. That's what was prevalent, along with the Braque and Picasso was the Mexican School. Rivera and Orozco and a few of the others. This is what was big on the Coast at that time. And as for the rest, for the Kandinskys and Lavrounovs, or whatever, Kuka and those, they were absolutely unheard of on this Coast, just completely unknown.

MARY McCHESNEY: How did it happen that you were doing abstract painting that early? What were the influences on you?

JOHN SACCARO: I don't even know. I just...there never was any influence, that is, or there might have been some from some direction or other, and I have forgotten it. I really don't know. I know that the first person that ever appreciated my abstract painting was Claiborne Tatum. Remember him, Mac? I didn't even pay much attention. I didn't think they were very good. And one time Claiborne came to the barn where I had a studio rigged up, an old chicken barn....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Was that in...?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, way out in Visitation Valley.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Right, yes.

JOHN SACCARO: And I showed them to him and he thought they were great. He really flipped right out for the things. I thought the guy was losing his marbles.

MARY McCHESNEY: Claiborne Tatum--he was also on the WPA Project?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: And worked at Treasure Island too?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, that's right.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: What ever happened to Tatum?

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, he had a terrible time. Well, Claiborne and I were pulled into the shipyards when the war broke out. Both of us got drafted into the shipyards and we both became blueprint readers. We were sent to blueprint reading school, that was it, for two weeks, and then we wound up being apprentice ship fitters in Bethlehem Shipyard. And, after all this time, and before this time, Claiborne had been involved with Mankind United. You remember he was real strong. I don't know what it was; it was an idealistic kind of thing, I guess. And he was very involved with that. And I remember one day at the blueprint reading school when our names were called, or asked of us, he said Claiborne Tatum, and right away the man who called the names pricked up his ears and at the end of the class he asked Claiborne Tatum to come to speak to him. And that was the last I ever saw of Claiborne Tatum in the class. I mean there was some connection between them; they knew each other, or they know of the organization, or something like that. Then Claiborne Tatum disappeared and I didn't see him till years later at the San Francisco Art Institute, or the San Francisco school, anyway....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Did he go to school there?

JOHN SACCARO: No, he just happened to drop in there. I had no idea what had happened to him and he dropped in to the School at lunchtime and was down in the cafeteria and we saw each other. I was sitting at a table with some others so I said sit down, and we hadn't even started to talk. And I remembered having read that he had been in a terrific accident. I think four people were killed, an entire family wiped out, and he was almost killed himself, at some grade, El Paso Robles, or something like that. And then I commiserated with him about the art world, or life in general, or something; the poor guy started to cry. I didn't know how to react to this. And he told me, at this time or just before this happened, he told me he was studying for the ministry and the place he was going to was someplace over here, some school over here, but I don't remember....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: San Rafael?

JOHN SACCARO: Might have been San Rafael.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: San Francisco Seminary?

JOHN SACCARO: I do remember he said he was studying for the ministry.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Protestant ministry?

JOHN SACCARO: I don't know. Could be. And that was the last time I ever saw Claiborne.

MARY McCHESNEY: You don't know where he is now?

JOHN SACCARO: I haven't the slightest notion, no. I mean if he's studying for the ministry and you really wanted to find out, you could probably telephone or....

MARY McCHESNEY: Who were some of the other people that were on the Easel Project the same time as you?

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, there was Karl Baumann. Wasn't Victor DeWilde on it? You must know them, Mac, don't you?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, I knew most of the people on the Mural Project, that is, particularly the Volz mural, but I was confined to that practically all the time. Later on I went down to the Pickle Factory.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. Well, I can't bring their names to my mind. I suppose as soon as I leave here today a hundred names will flash through my mind.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: You know Victor DeWilde taught at the Art Center there for quite a while, didn't he? Do you remember anything about it? Weren't you over there? Didn't you study or use the models?

JOHN SACCARO: At the Art Center?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: It was on Kearny and Washington.

JOHN SACCARO: No. I wasn't, I didn't; I was never in there.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Mark Milsk?

JOHN SACCARO: Mark Milsk, yes, she was on the Art Project too. And she has disappeared entirely. Well, there were a lot of people. There was a fellow named Bill Brown, or Bob Brown. He disappeared. I don't know whatever became of him. I know he got drafted into the Army after a while and they put him in that therapy thing for wounded soldiers kind of a thing....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Rehabilitation....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, rehabilitation. He wound up in that, and then he just disappeared. There was Reuben Kadish on the Project. And there was...what's the guy that's teaching at Stanford now, Harris?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh yes, George Harris.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, they were two sort of supervisors when they started weaving; they started a Weaving Project. Artists would make the designs and the WPA weavers would weave it if it was accepted, if it was approved by Harris and Kadish, or Kadish alone.

MARY McCHESNEY: Did you do any designs for the Weaving Project?

JOHN SACCARO: I did but it wasn't accepted and I still have it at home. That's all I know about the Weaving Project.

MARY McCHESNEY: About the Easel Project, did people like Kadish come down and check on your studio to see if you were actually working?

JOHN SACCARO: No, nobody ever checked. It was very nice. I mean they let you alone; they gave you all the material you wanted. And I was never in a studio; I was always down on the Bay and I knocked out a watercolor in about fifteen minutes and then lay in the sun the rest of the day. Even so, with all this, I was still producing too much, they thought.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, another thing, too, you lived too far out there that they couldn't afford to send a man out to check on you.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: Where was it you were living, Visitation Valley?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: Where is that?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, it's the southernmost district of San Francisco.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Bay shore.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, along the old Bay shore highway....

MARY McCHESNEY: Didn't David Slitka have a studio out there somewhere?

JOHN SACCARO: No. But Dave was on the Project too. I think he was closer in the Potrero district....

MARY McCHESNEY: Or Hunter's Point.

JOHN SACCARO: Or Hunter's Point, yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: Visitation is even further south?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, oh yes. And where Visitation ends San Mateo County begins. It's as far south as you can get in San Francisco, right near the bone yard.

MARY McCHESNEY: Oh, this is why you were talking about the bone yard earlier.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, well, but this bone yard had been there for years. I mean, it's been there since long before I was a kid even.

MARY McCHESNEY: Well, how did you happen to get transferred off the Easel Project and on to the Treasure Island murals? This is the mural that was done by Herman Volz?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. And I have to think the chronology of this. Yes, that's right. I don't remember...maybe Mac remembers how this was done. I just had orders to leave the Easel Project and go over to work on Treasure Island, as far as I can recall; I mean there was nothing....

MARY McCHESNEY: Just arbitrarily decided that you should go there--that they needed somebody....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, they needed somebody over there because those murals were pretty tremendous, as you recall...

MARY McCHESNEY: In size?

JOHN SACCARO: ...in size, yes. And so that's how I happened to get over there. I was just transferred from the Easel Project to the Mural Project.

MARY McCHESNEY: What did you begin doing when you went over to Treasure Island?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, Treasure Island.... Volz was the supreme designer or whatever you call him, designer-in-chief, and he laid out the thing. And Tom Hayes seemed to be his assistant. And a guy named Nei...remember that tall guy that stuttered...Nei...?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Neininger.

JOHN SACCARO: Neininger! He seemed to be the paint mixer....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He was a technical man on the Project.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, that's right. And they had the cartoon for the murals divided up into squares in the office down on the ground; each square was marked, had, for example, so-and-so had blue eyes, or it was cobalt blue or ultramarine or whatever it was, or gray. And then Neininger would mix the paint and he'd get one of us and say, "OK, go up there and paint so-and-so's eyes, it's square Number so-and-so, or area so-and-so." And that was how you did it. I remember...I always get a kick when I hear the name of Kit Carson--we might have worked on that together, Mac. We were painting Kit Carson's mustache, and Kit Carson's mustache was stained with tobacco. It was blond and it was stained with tobacco. We had to put that in, and the mustache was seven feet across. That'll give you an idea of the scale of the actual painting.

MARY McCHESNEY: Seven feet of mustache!

JOHN SACCARO: Seven feet, the mustache alone was, yes. So that's the way it went over there. I mean...Tom Hayes was the majordomo and he's dead now. You know that, I guess. At least that's what I heard.

MARY McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, Fred Wiley, do you remember Fred Wiley? He was on the Easel Project too, wasn't he?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I think he was before he went over there.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, I think so. He was, because I remember once he grabbed Karl Baumann by the shoulder right in the place where we get our supplies down on Potrero Street when the office was there. And he said, "Baumann, I think you're the greatest watercolorist in the world." Just like that. That's the way he felt.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He was really a weird one, wasn't he?

JOHN SACCARO: Oh yes, he was really...now he's working for the cars or buses or something. He runs a mimeograph machine or something. But that's the last I ever heard of him, too.

MARY McCHESNEY: This mural at Treasure Island was a very large one, about 80 feet high, 60 feet high?

JOHN SACCARO: It was 80 feet high and 120 feet long and there were two of them. Isn't that right?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: That's what I claim.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. 80 feet high and 120 feet long, each one. And there were two. They were separated by a colonnade of pipes or rods. Do you remember those?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Representing the states.

JOHN SACCARO: That's right. That was it, yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: About how many people worked on this mural project?

JOHN SACCARO: I think there must have been around 20 or 25 of us because the two Julians were on it, weren't they? I mean the ones we were talking about earlier. And then there was Peter Lowe, and Jose Ramis, and Neinger, and Tom Hayes, and Fred Wiley, and that guy they used to call "cowboy" that wore the bandanna; he was a folk dancer too....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh, Lenshaw.

JOHN SACCARO: Right, Ernie Lenshaw. And Volz himself, of course. And I mentioned Tom Mayes. There were quite a few of them. I think at one time I came to the conclusion, or counted, that there were 22 of us, but it could go a few numbers either way.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: How many of us were on the signature? You know, there was "Mural by Volz, assisted by...".

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, well that was the second year. I wasn't even put on that year. I went over and saw that I had been left off completely. It made me kind of mad because I had worked there the whole first year.... It's too bad that panel wasn't saved.

MARY McCHESNEY: Do you ever know what happened to them?

JOHN SACCARO: To the murals?

MARY McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: I haven't the slightest notion. Martin Snipper would probably know if anybody would.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, that building was either torn down or the murals were. I'm sure the mural was painted out, because it wouldn't have lasted anyway. It was peeling off, even in the second year. It began to peel off.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, well, that's....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: All that plywood underneath was green when they used it, you know.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Not because of the paint, but the plywood was green.

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, the paint was the best, I remember that.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes. Very good. I've still got some of it.

JOHN SACCARO: The cobalt blue was something like \$600 a gallon the Government was paying for it. Something fantastic....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh no, not that much. It couldn't have been that much.

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I know it was pretty expensive. They got the best. You know, Uncle Sam was paying....

MARY McCHESNEY: These were done on plywood panels?

JOHN SACCARO: The murals were all on plywood panels.

MARY McCHESNEY: Did you size the panels first?

JOHN SACCARO: I don't remember whether the panels were sized or not, do you?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I think they were.

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I wouldn't know, Mary....

MARY McCHESNEY: You were painting it during the time the people were actually visiting the Exposition?

JOHN SACCARO: Well....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Second year. No. That's right....

JOHN SACCARO: We were there before the Exposition actually opened but I think it was pretty near through by the time the Exposition actually opened. I think we were through....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: We worked over there for two or three, it seems to me, two or three months after the Fair opened.

JOHN SACCARO: After it opened?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I don't remember it that clearly.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Don't you remember we used to stand up there and watch those elephant trainers go by and the pretty girls riding the elephant trains...?

JOHN SACCARO: Oh yes, that's right. So it must have been opened then, yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: You were standing on an outside scaffold?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. We had a big pipe scaffold 80 feet high, as high as the mural, and it was the same length, 120 feet, and it wasn't secure at the top like it should have been, remember. It should have been really tied up there....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: The scaffold itself wasn't that tall; the scaffold was only about...it might have been 80 feet long. The thing is, don't you remember, we had to get off the thing and shove it?

JOHN SACCARO: No.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: When we finished one section of one panel, we'd have to get off to move it.

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: We'd have to climb down.

JOHN SACCARO: And move it to get to the other section, that's right, yes. It had to reach to the top or we never could have painted the mural, but it was moveable. But it wasn't secured. I remember that, because, as I was saying earlier outside, Mac and I used to get on top there when Jose.... We'd wait to see if Jose was making a very delicate line and then we'd start easing it gradually, making it move. It was very dangerous, too, remember, to make that thing go back; if it got a good start, it could have wound up with us 80 feet on the ground with a cracked crown.

MARY McCHESNEY: This is Jose Ramis? Who was one of the assistants?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. He used to get so mad he'd stalk off there, "I'm going to see Volz; I am going to tell him on you bastards." Well, he would, too, you know. Then Volz would say, "What are you guys doing to Jose? Leave him alone." And all that.

MARY McCHESNEY: Did Clay Spohn work on this project too?

JOHN SACCARO: I think he was on the Project but he was making a mural of his own, wasn't he?

MARY McCHESNEY: Oh, he wasn't on the Treasure Island mural?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He was working on his own....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, a kind of a phantasmagoria that he was doing at that time, sort of dragons and horned animals, and....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, actually at this time he was working on that Los Gatos High School job which was....

JOHN SACCARO: Is that what it was?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: It was the Indian legend he was painting then. He had a series of nude male Indians that were washing that mercury ore off their bodies....

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, I don't remember. He wasn't on the mural on Treasure Island, I know that. I know I used to see him. I think I probably saw him several times when I was on the Easel Project. Probably he was getting supplies, you know. In fact, I think that's where I met him the first time. That's all I remember about him.

MARY McCHESNEY: What was the subject matter of the mural at Treasure Island?

JOHN SACCARO: It was the conquering of the West. Yes. It had all the pioneers hauling covered wagons over the Sierras and it has Mexicans and Spanish Conquistadores, and all the stuff, wasn't it, Mac?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes. and then on the other panel I think it was more modern; it had bankers...

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: ...Architects....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, things like that, yes. I really don't even remember any more.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Sort of hard to recognize....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: You were on the mural project at Treasure Island for about a year?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. I was on when it was first painted, so I guess I lasted about a year. And then, as i said, I wasn't on the second year.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: The second year the only thing that was done on it was that they retouched the thing because it peeled off a great deal, cracked....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Then they put us to work back of those patios, or whatever you call them, back of the main panel, in those courtyards....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: Were you transferred off the Project onto something else?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. They had this wild Armenian, I guess he was a little mad, who was doing the Aquatic Park murals, you know, the ones that face the Ocean. They're tiles. You've seen them; you've seen the Aquatic Park building....

MARY McCHESNEY: Sargent Johnson did those, didn't he?

JOHN SACCARO: No. Hilaire Hiler, or however you pronounce his name, did the inside mural. And this Armenian, I never did know his name, he did the outside facade overlooking the sea and its sailboats and big fish shapes....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: That's right.

JOHN SACCARO: Well, this man got mad, this Armenian artist. He got angry one day at the Art Project and everything else, and he just took off and he never came back. So here was the mural, two-thirds or more completed. And the Art Project apparently didn't know what to do because it was kind of a craft job rather than an artist's job. And this man was a super craftsman in tile-setting and mosaic and stuff like that. So Joe Allen got a hold of me when I came in once, or he sent for me, or phoned me or something, and said, "Come in, I want to see you." So I went in and he said to me, "You speak Italian, don't you?" I said, "Yes." and he said "Well, we're going to continue with the Aquatic Park murals. It's work that's done chiefly by craftsmen, and we're having thirteen of them brought here either from Italy or from New York..." I don't remember this part of it any more. And he said, "Not a one of them...they're very fine men and they're expert craftsmen in mosaic, but not a one of them speaks English." So, he said, "I want you to go down there and study that mural and find out any secrets, if there are any, of this Armenian's design, how he worked and stuff like that, take a few days and look it over thoroughly so you get it in your mind the way he worked." And he said, "I want you to go down there and take charge of these men, tell them...they'll do the work, but you tell them how to finish the design according to the way it was begun." So I went down there and I had to get the measurements for how much had to be finished. There was about a third, or less than a third, to go. And I had to measure and i think Claiborne Tatum came down with me too and he helped me measure it and we decided how much material would be necessary and things like that. And I was all set to go. And then World War II began, and when World War II began and we seemed to be very interested in it, why I was dragged with Claiborne and all the rest of us into shipyards or wherever....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: But you were still on the Project when the war broke out?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. I was drafted. I was taken right from the Project and sent in to the blueprint reading school on Mission Street and then from there to the shipyard.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Was this after Pearl Harbor?

JOHN SACCARO: Must have been, I guess. I don't even know. I don't even remember. But I know that we were building destroyers like crazy at the time. Maybe we were building them for Britain.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: It must have been after Pearl Harbor.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: War didn't break out until Pearl Harbor.

JOHN SACCARO: Anyway, I think it was after Pearl Harbor because then the Project just ended overnight. Practically everybody got shifted somewhere else.

MARY McCHESNEY: You said you were drafted to go in the shipyards. How did that work?

JOHN SACCARO: I really wasn't drafted. I mean they did it so fast that nobody knew how it happened, I guess. I guess we were so used by then to jumping at the Government's beck and call that, when they said report next Monday morning at so-and-so Mission Street for blueprint reading school, we all went. And that's all there was to it. I guess they...and maybe they figured they could make use of us in the lofts or something, laying out, you know, the battens for the ships, design, stuff like that. Actually, as it turned out, it was nothing like that at all. We just had to learn how to read blueprints so that we could become ship fitters.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Johnny, Who else from the Project do you remember that went over there with you?

JOHN SACCARO: I only remember Claiborne.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Clay was there?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. we went together. Then I told you what happened the very next time. And, to go back to the Aquatic Park mural, that thing was never finished and it still isn't, right to this day--well, I guess maybe an eighth of it is not completed, instead of a third.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Bufano had some trouble on that too, didn't he?

JOHN SACCARO: I don't know; he might have.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Didn't Sargent Johnson have to take over Bufano's job? You know, Bufano had a one-man strike or something like that, and they just locked up his shed, you know....

JOHN SACCARO: Is that right: I don't know....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: And they asked Sargent Johnson to take over where Bufano left off.

JOHN SACCARO: Oh! That must have been something else then. It couldn't have been this tile mosaic....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh, I'm sure...I think it was that relief work out in front, you know, cut in stone....

JOHN SACCARO: Maybe, yes....

MARY McCHESNEY: That gray relief above the doorway?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Gray-green, green-blue, or something like that.

MARY McCHESNEY: So you never actually worked on the Aquatic Park project?

JOHN SACCARO: No. I just went there and I was getting ready to get started; the men were out here, they had just come, had just arrived, and we got this notice to report to the blueprint reading school.

MARY McCHESNEY: What happened to them? I guess they were just sent back then?

JOHN SACCARO: I suppose, yes. I think they were artisans, you know, that the WPA was giving a job to and they just transported them out here and then probably sent them back.

MARY McCHESNEY: What do you think of this kind of cooperative artist project, like working on the Treasure

Island mural where, say, about twenty-two different artists cooperate on a project? Does this work out smoothly?

JOHN SACCARO: Well...yes.... It was a lot of fun, especially for Mac and myself here. I mean we enjoyed it except that it was pretty damn cold. Do you remember those cold mornings when those rungs were so icy your hands would almost stick to them? You wouldn't think it would get so cold on San Francisco Bay, but it was. And it was a lot of fun. We got along and everybody worked very well together but, of course, you couldn't call it an original undertaking. It was just as if Michelangelo had called in twenty people to paint "The Last Judgment." It wouldn't be a one-man thing, you know.

MARY McCHESNEY: How did Herman Volz happen to get the assignment to do the design for this mural?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, Herman was...he knew the ins and outs; he knew his way around and that's how he got them. I still don't know how you get these jobs. I'm always reading about how so-and-so has got a job painting a mural, this and that, or been commissioned to do this and that; or this and that architect has gotten so-and-so to do such-and-such on this project or the other. I don't know how the hell they do it. How do they hear about it? I think they must sleep in the city hall and wait for these things to come up and then they jump on the architect's bureau down there and get themselves involved with it somehow or other.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I wonder who designed the Federal Building. Was that Ernest Born?

JOHN SACCARO: I don't even know. No. Yes, it might have been Ernest Born.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Herman was a good friend of Ernest's.

JOHN SACCARO: Was he? well, that might be it then. I knew that he was a pretty smooth operator when it came to latching on to projects because, after that, the City College mural, too. Did you work on that?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: We both worked on that. This is a...I can't

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Did you come back over then?

JOHN SACCARO: Gee, I don't remember when that damn thing was. It must have been before I got drafted into the Army.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: It must have been the second year. No, that was the first year, that's right; we finished up on the Federal mural. Then we went over to the Fine Arts Building and started work on that mosaic.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. We worked out of the old Pickle Factory down at the bottom of Chestnut and Columbus, do you remember?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, off and on. I spent most of the time over at the Federal Building on Treasure Island.

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, I was in the Pickle Factory a lot on the fourth floor there.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Peter Lowe was over there, too, wasn't he?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. I guess quite a few of the same people were, except that it was a different kind of a mural, a mosaic. It was a mosaic--isn't it; yes, mosaic, all little colored pieces of stone or rock or marble or whatever you use. A much better thing than the Treasure Island thing. NARY McCHESNEY: This is still at city college?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, it's still there but it's practically invisible. They've got columns that obscure it. You know, you sort of have to go to the side and look at it; they want you to look at it real close up, you know.

MARY McCHESNEY: What building is it on?

JOHN SACCARO: It's on the main building of the City College of San Francisco. On the right, on the north side, that would be, the north end. And have they got one on this end, too, or the south? I don't remember seeing one there.

MARY McCHESNEY: City College? This is the junior college?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I don't know whether it's a junior college or not. But I know it's called the City College of San Francisco, or San Francisco City College, or something like that.

MARY McCHESNEY: This is the same college where the large Rivera mural is placed in the library? The one that Rivera did at Treasure Island? That was placed I believe at city College, too.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, I think so. I believe so, yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: What was the subject matter of this mosaic mural?

JOHN SACCARO: Gee, I don't...isn't it California history again, too? Or am I mistaken in that?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: All I can remember about it is it's a series of six or eight very tall figures...

JOHN SACCARO: That's right.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: ...and what they represented I don't know.

JOHN SACCARO: I haven't seen it for years now. The only thing I remember about the damn thing is that it was colder than hell out there those mornings. We made fires in an old gasoline barrel to keep warm.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: That was for the Federal Building.

JOHN SACCARO: No, for this thing, too, for the city College building. Because I was only out there a few times working on that thing.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: How could it be the City College thing when that was all done inside at the Pickle Factory?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, but it had to be pasted up, you know. Remember those sheets had to be laid out in the Pickle Factory and then we pasted them up. We had some way of doing it so you just laid the entire thing out--like women make those little tables now. You know how they put the stones on paper! They glue them to paper, and slop them down...

MARY McCHESNEY: Into wet cement...?

JOHN SACCARO: ...into the wet cement and when it's all set and dried, they just scrape off the paper and wash it off and there's the design. That's the way Volz did that one.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh, then you must have gone over there after I was through. Volz kicked me off, you know. We got into a big beef....

JOHN SACCARO: Is that right?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes. Because we only...Carleton Williams and myself, Dave Kittredge, and one or two other fellows were there all the time. We were doing...we were blowing up the cartoon on the main panel so we could see what it looked like from the back; see, we did all the drawing up there. And, of course, they were working; I remember some of these craftsmen were over there working behind the panel. But the main part of the job wasn't being done at that time. So evidently, you went back over there after I was kicked off....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, probably.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: But I went to the Pickle Factory and I got over there and there was nothing to do. They put me to building models....

JOHN SACCARO: In the Pickle Factory? Oh, well, at the Pickle Factory I had my first exposure to saws that cut stone, you know, diamond-tooth saws. They're copper saws with diamonds inserted in the teeth and I was really taken with the idea that these saws could go through a piece of marble, like butter. And that's about the only thing I remember about the place, actually. Although I remember always thinking at the time what a terrific studio that would make. I kept my eyes on the place for years. One time I went and asked how much they would rent that third or fourth floor, or whatever it was, for a studio. I went to some guy in North Beach, a realtor, who was in charge of it, an agent, and he said something like \$350. I almost fainted.

MARY McCHESNEY: This building is still standing. It's on the corner of Columbus and Union....

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, yes. Columbus and Chestnut, yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: Columbus and Chestnut, near the art school or the Art Institute.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, right down the hill from it there.

MARY McCHESNEY: Now it's a furniture warehouse.

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, it's been all kinds of things. For a long time they stored slot machines in it and all kinds of things.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: You know, when I went back to the Pickle Factory, in fact, it was the first time I had been over there, what a motley crew they had there. By this time everybody was there. I don't know where these people came from--there was Pete Owens. Do you remember Pete Owens?

JOHN SACCARO: No.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He was an ex-newspaper man and had worked on the Call Bulletin. He was there. And practically nobody was doing anything, just sitting around doing little doodles....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, everybody was fooling around, yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Angelo Sottosanti showed up there. And do you remember Thelma Johnson Street, the Negro gal?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. She was there.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: There was....

JOHN SACCARO: And the jolly Frenchman who was in charge of us, a timekeeper, sort of, Monsieur Monsieur, remember him?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Say, wasn't he wonderful!

JOHN SACCARO: Monsieur Monsieur, that was his name. And we used to say, Bon jour, Monsieur Monsieur.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He was a beautiful character.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. I wonder what ever happened to him?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He died.

JOHN SACCARO: Did he?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes, he died of heart trouble. I remember the poor guy weighed....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, two hundred pounds....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Two hundred pounds and had to climb all those tremendous stairs every day up to the top floor.

JOHN SACCARO: He was a great jolly guy, though.

MARY McCHESNEY: He was a timekeeper for WPA?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, a timekeeper and....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: There was a fellow by the name of Coates was doing a mural design; it was a design he was doing for some job in Sacramento or something.

JOHN SACCARO: I don't remember any Coates.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I remember he was smoking in there one day and he accidentally threw his match into the wastepaper basket and it was filled with paper and he had his wall just covered with these rice paper tracings. What he would do, he would do a drawing and set his paper down over it so he could change it, you know, and then he'd change it and change it, and chance it, and he had these sheets and his wastebasket flared up and touched this rice paper and it went zoom, you know....

JOHN SACCARO: Oh boy!

ROBERT McCHESNEY: So everybody was running around screaming, and Coates almost fainted.

JOHN SACCARO: Funny I don't remember him. but as I say, there were so many people coming and going toward the end there in that Pickle Factory....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: There was a guy named Shumaker that worked on the silk screen project. I wonder what he's doing now.

JOHN SACCARO: I don't know Shumaker either. I know there are two Shumakers around town now. One spells it

with at "u" and the other "oe" like in "shoe." But I don't think either one of them would be the one.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: No. I don't know...I don't think so....

JOHN SACCARO: Tatum was over there too, I remember. Because I remember many times going out and having coffee with him....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Clay Spohn was there....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. I remember him.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Zakheim's ex-wife, Phyllis Wrightson....

JOHN SACCARO: Zakheim...yes, Phyllis Wrightson..., Yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: She and I helped Clay finish off his mural.

JOHN SACCARO: She disappeared from view, too.

MARY McCHESNEY: She's down in....

MARY McCHESNEY: Santa Barbara.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Santa Barbara.

MARY McCHESNEY: Is she down in Santa Barbara? Oh!

ROBERT McCHESNEY: And Zakheim is back up in Sebastopol.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, I ran into him about a year ago, or more than a year ago now, at the Museum of Art and he said he was living down in One Cannery Row in Monterrey. He said I should go down and see him sometime. I never get down there, so.... I never saw him again.

MARY McCHESNEY: He's gone to Poland just recently and done a mural there.

JOHN SACCARO: Is that right? I didn't know that.

MARY McCHESNEY: How long were you on the WPA Project altogether? Several years?

JOHN SACCARO: I guess so, Mary. I really have lost all track of that stuff. For a long time I kept records, you know, slips of this and that, but then I guess I destroyed them all or they got lost or something. I don't know whether it was too years or three years, or one year or what. Well, it must have been more than one year, say two years, I would say.

MARY McCHESNEY: How long were you on, Mac?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, from the first of '38 to-- again I've forgotten when I went off, because I went off before the war. I guess it was about '41, '40, '41, because I know I worked a year out of the warehousemen and the Mine, Mill and _____.

JOHN SACCARO: Then you were on for three years?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I was on around two years at least, I guess.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, you were on longer than I was....

JOHN SACCARO: Was I?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes. Perhaps four. Because you started before I did and you were on after I was off for a year....

JOHN SACCARO: I don't really remember how long I was on the darn thing.

MARY McCHESNEY: What kind of an influence do you think the WPA period had on your own work as an artist?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I was more or less still a young artist and I was just finding my way. I don't think it had any particular influence. It was nice that I was free to go out and make my watercolors and not have to pay for any

materials. And it probably helped me quite a bit that way. But at that time I never even gave a thought to things like that, or who was influencing me or anything like that at all.

MARY McCHESNEY: Was the money you were paid enough to live on?

JOHN SACCARO: Oh yes. \$96 was a lot of money during the Depression. Yes, it was...I mean it was really a good peace-time salary almost. I mean it wasn't as good as, for instance, policemen made. At that time, it sounded fantastic to me that a cop should get \$200 a month, I remember policemen got. And that sounded like they were really riding a gravy train. But \$96 for an artist with all materials besides, that was real good in those days.

MARY McCHESNEY: \$96 was very good for the artist.

JOHN SACCARO: Sure! Damn right it was! Sure, that was still the bottom of the Depression, you know. In a year or two the Depression would be over, war industry would be taking over, but when I got on, \$96 a month was pretty good wages. Particularly, as I had no particular skill, I didn't think, anyway.

MARY McCHESNEY: Do you have any criticisms of the way the Project was run?

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, well, there were a few personalities there that could have been dispensed with. They had a few too many supervisors, too many chiefs, you know, and not enough Indians, all that. There was that woman they used to call "Owly eyes"....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: You mean Dorothy...?

JOHN SACCARO: No, that was another one. This one...she was another one, too, that raised hell in there. Dorothy Collins.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Dorothy Collins.

JOHN SACCARO: Dorothy Collins, yes. And then this other one--her name I can't remember any more--she's still around San Francisco. She ran a gallery for a while and she was in there as some sort of supervisor. And then there was Joe Allen and Bill Gaskin. They were...Bill and Joe would have been enough to run the thing but I guess they had to give jobs to as many people as possible, either as artists or as supervisors of artists, and so it made for too many of them. You had to report to too many. Bill Gaskin and Joe Allen were very nice to me, I must say. When my show opened, the very first one-man show that I had, opened at San Francisco Museum of Art. It was only twelve water colors in one of the small corner galleries and it opened the same night that Picasso's Guernica opened and there were three thousand people milling around in that museum. And my show, two people went to see it, me and Joe Allen. And I never forgot the guy for that, you know.

MARY McCHESNEY: Was this show held while you were still working on WPA?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, that was 1939. I guess it was. Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: You were allowed, then, to have private shows of your work?

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, yes. And I had these water colors and Morley had given me the show and it was supposed to open the night before the Guernica opened and for some reason or other they decided to open it the same night that the Guernica show opened. And, as I say, the place was just mobbed. No one went to see my show at all. Just Joe Allen.

MARY McCHESNEY: About how many artists were on the Project in San Francisco? Do you have any idea?

JOHN SACCARO: The entire project?

MARY McCHESNEY: Yes. Were there hundreds of them?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: There would be no way for us to know that.

JOHN SACCARO: Because it was divided, you know. They had, for example, the Easel Project, they had the Mural Project, they had the Weaver's Project, and then they had a lot of projects which were mostly women that were copying down early Indian, California Indian, designs from the original. They'd get the original or a photograph of it and then these women would very carefully and painstakingly make a reproduction of it with water colors.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: That was a catalogue of design.

JOHN SACCARO: Was that what it was?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Isn't that what it was called?

MARY McCHESNEY: Index of American Design.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, that what it was. They had that and I suppose there were other things too.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh, there was the lithograph project.

JOHN SACCARO: And the graphic project, that's right, lithography and things. So all together there were five or six different branches. Nobody could know....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Johnny, to get back to the Federal mural, do you remember, along with the artists, there were several men that were strictly house painters that went over there, you know.

JOHN SACCARO: That Ernie Lenshaw was one of them, wasn't he?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, Ernie at least painted easel paintings....

JOHN SACCARO: Did he? I didn't know that. I always heard that he was a house painter. And then there was another little guy named Harry something, remember Perry or ? I can't remember his last name but he was a house painter, I think.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes, and there was a sort of a raucous character that was strictly a house painter there. One of those, a short chubby guy, and there was sort of a big guy, but I don't know...if you don't remember those names, why I certainly can't....

JOHN SACCARO: I'd know them if I could see their pictures....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: About four of them came over there and worked for quite a while.

JOHN SACCARO: Was Slivka on there with us for a while? Or was he on the second year?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Slivka?

JOHN SACCARO: Wasn't there a Slivka and Dave Chary or....

MARY McCHESNEY: Herman Cherry?

JOHN SACCARO: Herman Cherry. Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: Was he on up here?

JOHN SACCARO: I think he was on up here, too.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He was on in Los Angeles but I don't think he was on up here.

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I know he was around here somewhere in that era.

MARY McCHESNEY: Was he really?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, that's amazing. I didn't know that.

JOHN SACCARO: I remember names. I remember Arshile Gorky was out here a couple of times.

MARY McCHESNEY: What was he doing out here?

JOHN SACCARO: Just visiting. He was just visiting. He knew Beckford Young. Do you remember Beckford? Whatever happened to him, anyway?

MARY McCHESNEY: He's living in the East Bay.

JOHN SACCARO: Is he?

MARY McCHESNEY: Ferbrache is going to interview him pretty soon.

JOHN SACCARO: He's what?

MARY McCHESNEY: This man, Ferbrache, Lew Ferbrache, is going to interview him...next week. I think.

JOHN SACCARO: Oh! I often wondered what happened to him because he was a kind of an early abstractionist in this area and he won a prize one year I remember for one of his abstract paintings. It was more...involved symbolism; it had an arrow or something, as I recall. It was pretty far out for then, for that time, It was nice.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: It was an arrow.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, the arrows were big. Of course, Klee's were just beginning to invade the area, too.

MARY McCHESNEY: Paul Klee, the surrealist painter?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: Did Gorky...did you meet Gorky socially?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, I met him one night at the old Black Cat. I forget who introduced me to him, Neininger or Tom Hayes or Volz or somebody, because, of course, they all knew each other somehow and I was introduced to him. And then I think I saw him in the same place again one more time after that.

MARY McCHESNEY: He was working on the WPA Project in New York...?

JOHN SACCARO: In New York I guess, yes.

MARY McCHESNEY: Did he talk about that?

JOHN SACCARO: No, not that I remember. If he did, he didn't talk about it to me because I didn't know him that well. I just met him casually and that was it, you know.

MARY McCHESNEY: Was there very much contact between the New York artists and the San Francisco artists then?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I don't think so. I don't remember. I know now that Kadish is back in New York working there but I don't think he was there. He was more from the Cost to begin with, wasn't he?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes, he was from...in fact Kadish was from Los Angeles.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. And I don't know where Neininger was from. Or Tom Hayes either, for that matter. I think they were all coasters here.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Neininger is back in New York. Slivka is back in New York, and Kadish is back in New York.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. But they were Westerners to begin with, weren't they?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I saw both Kadish and Slivka last time I was back there....

JOHN SACCARO: You saw them? Oh. I had a friend of mine that...his name was George Tomlinson; he committed suicide, poor guy. On his last trip here, about six months ago. He told me on one of his trips back here, he said, "I was on a boat." I guess Slivka was a sailor, wasn't he?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: And he said, "I was talking to some guy on the ship I was on coming here and I mentioned you (meaning me) and Dave Slivka said, 'I know him. We were on the Art Project together.'" And I was surprised because I didn't even think that we even remembered each other hardly, you know.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes. I was influential in getting Dave to ship out. He was worried about going into the Army, getting drafted and so I sent him down to the _____ hall.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. I haven't seen him. In fact, I thought he had just, you know, given up on the art world, like so many do. You hear from then for a few years and all of a sudden they wind up as draftsmen. I think that's what DeWilde has been doing for a long time now. He's a draftsman for the Hamilton Air Base, or whatever it is, around here somewhere. And I kind of figured that a lot of these people that I haven't heard of, like Slivka, and Cherry, and others just had given up painting....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: You saw cherry, of course, when he came out here to teach, didn't you?

MARY McCHESNEY: He was teaching at Cal.

JOHN SACCARO: I didn't see him. no. I knew he was here, I heard he was here, but I didn't see him.

MARY McCHESNEY: A few years ago.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Oh, he's a crazy character. He wrote a letter to Art News, I think it was, saying, "I wish they would quit calling me a 'young artist.'" He said, "Jesus Christ, I'm over fifty years of age and they're still calling me a young artist." He'd be in one of these shows, you know, "Young Talent."

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, "young talent," "new talent!" Holy Smokes!

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He's just like a midget Groucho Marx, you know; he smokes a big cigar and has the same type mustache and he dances with all these huge, tall women, you know, and he really _____ one.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. Well, he was living out here right in Bob Howard's studio for a while....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: That's all I know. I didn't even see him then because I was busy with my own eight-hour-a-day stint so I never got around to....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, Slivka, you know, was written up in Art News recently....

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, I know. He's pretty active yet.

MARY McCHESNEY: Of the painters who were on the WPA Project in San Francisco, there aren't very many who continued their careers as painters, are there?

JOHN SACCARO: A lot of them went down the drain, to put it inelegantly, but that's what happened. I mean, oh, it's economic; it's a real problem to survive as a painter and as a person, too. I mean if you're involved in the art world.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: It's a rat race.

JOHN SACCARO: It's a rat race, yes. It really is. It's a terrible thing. I mean, I have come to the conclusion that it doesn't make any difference almost how you paint, you can paint the lousiest pictures in the world, and if you just survive, I mean, you will eventually get some recognition. I don't know how right that is but mere survival seems to be a pretty important thing in this game.

MARY McCHESNEY: You mean survival as a painter?

JOHN SACCARO: As a painter, yes. That's right. Because I remember so many of these people that we have talked about. I don't know what's become of Karl Baumann. I don't know what's become of Victor De Wilde. The last I ever heard he had a heart attack, and even before that he had stopped painting and was working...he was a draftsman at Hamilton Air Base, and so many others that were active at the time. The only one that I know of that is still...that started off like a rocket and is still going, if he is, is Dong Kingman, of the San Francisco painters.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He is still going in New York.

JOHN SACCARO: I guess so, yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Peter Lowe quit.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. Peter Lowe, there's another one disappeared. Fred Wiley disappeared. Tom Hayes killed himself. If I could only remember some of these other names that were on there, or some of the faces, like...I could attach a name to them; I'd be able to think of their names.

MARY McCHESNEY: Herman Volz doesn't paint any more.

JOHN SACCARO: Who?

MARY McCHESNEY: Herman Volz.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes, he does.

MARY McCHESNEY: Oh, he does?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, he does but he's not part of the art world, I wouldn't say. Would you?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: No, he isn't. But he was up here about a year ago. Dropped by here for some reason or other. He said he was starting painting again. And Julian Williams, you know, he decided to be a farm boy; he was going to be a rancher. So he married and knocked off four kids or, rather out, and raised grapes and all kinds of crops stock, and just worked himself to death. He said he never worked so hard in his life; it almost killed him. So all of a sudden he said, "I can't stand it any more," and he ups and sells the whole ranch and everything and settled down in Heelsburg and even that was too much for him. Now he....

JOHN SACCARO: This is Carleton or Julian?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Julian.

JOHN SACCARO: This is the guy we were talking about earlier?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: Is he painting now?

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes, he's gone back to painting. In fact, some very interesting painting. And his wife, Lee, I don't know what her name was before; she is drawing and is very good, too. But he had an awful time getting back into....

JOHN SACCARO: Oh sure! Well you lose a few years in this stuff and, boy, you're counted out.

MARY McCHESNEY: Fifteen years he lost. That's a long time. It's pretty hard to go back.

JOHN SACCARO: That's beyond the pale, I think. Yes. You can't knock off that long.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Carleton Williams quit painting. In fact, he never did any very much.

JOHN SACCARO: So, you see, almost all of them quit. You can see just in this conversation here that almost everybody that we knew then is either dead or has given up painting or gone into some other field of endeavor....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: There's Luke Gibney; he's dead.

JOHN SACCARO: Luke's dead; he's dead, yes.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Percy Freer. Did you see him out here?

JOHN SACCARO: Percy Freer! He died of a heart attack. Yes. I saw Freer; the last time I saw him I met him at the art school. I was visiting Charlie that day. Charlie was down in his little cubicle, the tool room down there...

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Yes, that's right, yes.

JOHN SACCARO: ...and we were sitting there talking and he was showing me some of his paintings and all of a sudden in walked this tall guy. And, gee, he looked familiar to me right away and Charlie said, "You remember Percy, don't you?" Gee, right away I did, you know. He was on that photograph I sent you too--that one that wasn't so good, you know....

MARY McCHESNEY: Yes.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes, that was another shock to me to see that....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: He had a bad time, too, when he came back in. Of course, I don't think Percy ever painted....

JOHN SACCARO: I never did see a single painting of his....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: I don't think I did either.

JOHN SACCARO: I never saw a single drawing of Tom Hayes's. I never saw most of these people's work except De Wilde and Baumann! I never saw any of their work. And it's a funny thing, at UCLA now. The place is loaded with professors up there and they all keep their work hidden. I don't know whether it's deliberate or whether it's accidental, or what. I don't know, but....

MARY McCHESNEY: Well, in New York you have to have a personal invitation to get into somebody's studio; they are so very touchy about people coming in.

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. Well, that's gotten to be a thing here, too, in San Francisco. In fact, the thing is that you don't visit anybody anymore in this studio unless you are asked to, you know, at a certain time. There's gotten to be a real mystique about it or something.

MARY McCHESNEY: Do you think if government sponsorship of the arts had continued, that many of these people would have been painters now?

JOHN SACCARO: Oh, I guess so, yes. I kind of think so.

MARY McCHESNEY: What would you think of the idea of reestablishing some kind of government sponsorship of the arts? Do you think it would be a good idea?

JOHN SACCARO: Yes. If the government doesn't sponsor it too much. I mean, if it gave a certain stipend per month and you had to produce something each month, and it had to be approved, maybe by a jury of three fellow artists as to its quality, so that you would get rid of the freeloaders and the dead men and all the rest of the hangers-on, I think it would be a good thing, yes. Because there has to be some way. Otherwise a thing like that where you just paint and hand it in is just like honey attracting flies, you know. It would seem to me, anyway.

MARY McCHESNEY: Do you think that a lot of people who were on the WPA Project weren't really people of sufficient talent to have been there, if it hadn't been for the fact that it was easy to get on?

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I was one of them. I was one of them. I don't think I had sufficient talent to be on the WPA Art Project. As I told you, I just went down and...I had been doing water colors for a long time but nothing that would have made Michelangelo turn green with envy by any means....

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Well, there you are, Johnny. Actually you never know where genius really lies. If you hadn't gotten on the Project....

JOHN SACCARO: Well, maybe I should modify what I just said about a government stipend. It should give young painters a chance to make it in three years and see if they are young geniuses, and if they aren't, rout them out.

MARY McCHESNEY: Well, you're one of the few people who has continued to have a successful career as an artist....

JOHN SACCARO: Well, I mean it's only outwardly successful. The world thinks it's successful. You know, if you continue painting and you have a painting here and a painting there and you sell one occasionally and your picture is reproduced here and there, the outside world thinks that you're making it like crazy, you know. But actually for most artists, it's not true. I talked to a lot of artists up in Los Angeles, those that have exhibited in New York and everywhere else. Down here too, who was it that showed here? Michael Goldberg and Paris and Grillo, was it John Grillo? All right. And I heard when they had their show at the Bowles Gallery and they really went all out on that show, thanks to Philip Lieder. I thought anyway, these guys were really wheels, you know; they were making money like crazy and I heard that John Grillo had a farm on Long Island or someplace....

MARY McCHESNEY: You must be thinking of Ippolito.

JOHN SACCARO: Ippolito, yes, not Grillo, yes Ippolito. I heard that he had a farm out on Long Island and De Kooning had a farm someplace else, or they were next door or something, I don't know, and this guy had that. And then I was talking one night to Harold Paris's wife, I think it was she anyway, and she said, "Oh, don't believe that bull. They're having just as hard a time back there in New York as we are here." So that kind of opened my eyes as to this aspect of the world in general, that it has a peripheral interest in art, you know. They're not really deeply involved, so they see your name in a few places and stuff like that, they think that, oh yes, man, he's tremendously successful, you know. Actually the poor guy doesn't even know what pork chops taste like any more.

MARY McCHESNEY: Thank you very much, John Saccaro, for giving us the time for the interview this afternoon.

[TINY BIT OF TAPE LEFT]

ROBERT McCHESNEY: Regarding how few painters really make a living I'm sure...

JOHN SACCARO: There are only about ten in the U.S.

ROBERT McCHESNEY: ...they have to teach school or do something else....

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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