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Oral history interview with Martin Friedman,
1965 Sept. 3-Sept. 5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Martin Friedman on September 3- September 5, 1965. The interview took place in Provincetown, MA, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

September 3, 1965

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mr. Friedman, I happen to notice, as we were talking this evening, that you were born in Hungary, and that you had a very interesting locale in which you grew up. I don't know to what extent your memories of Budapest may have affected your inclinations toward becoming an artist. I wondered if there is anything you could recall either of your experience in Hungary or later when you came to the U.S. What started you on that course?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well, I remember as a child that my family had occasion to go from Budapest to Vienna on the Danube, to Tübingen, an overnight trip, a wonderful trip, and I have a very vivid memory of it. Because they played those mid-European waltzes. I remember sitting on the boat at night, and all the different rhythms -- the paddlewheel chugging away at the water, the rhythm of the waves; and the rhythm dancing -- that really got me, really: around and around were these wide skirts, and the swish of the skirts and the odor of the place, the sound of the music, and the rhythm of this around and around. I didn't know, I couldn't analyze why I enjoyed it at the time but I did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you were less than nine years old.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: We left Hungary when I was nine. (after a pause) There are so many things about Hungary that I remember as a child that are just fantastic, I wouldn't know where to start.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The very interesting music you mentioned, too.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I loved music all of my life. It's very difficult for me to dissociate music from that of painting. I don't know if I ever told you, Dorothy -- it's one of many incidents -- I was painting, around 1945, I was painting at Pigeon Cove, a town near Rockport, [Mass.] and I was in a good mood, the work was going just right. And when a work was going right, I thought of Brahms, I was on a real Brahms binge. I think it's in the first movement of the Third Symphony, Brahms starts out with a real fortissimo, [he almost shouts] powerful [he loudly hums the melody], comes out full force.

Well, I sang that, full force, loud in my horrible stentorian voice. There was a guy outside, along the wall, and he literally jumped up in the air. (Seckler laughs heartily) And everybody in town knew the next day there was a nut in there. Being very much of an introvert in these days, this was wonderful, just what I wanted. (both laughing)

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting -- making you jump from Budapest to this day when your emotion was so closely --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Always associated with music, as far back -- I'm sorry I didn't study music, all the whole family play instruments except myself. But I went to a whole series of lectures on music, its structure, and so forth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you were a child, did you play an instrument of any kind?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No. Well, I came of a marriage of two "status people," you know. My mother came of I would say the lower middle class, business people, and although she had the aspirations and the desire to teach her children to learn and everything, they weren't in a financial position to do so. We came to this country when I was nine, I have so much to tell about Hungary but we'll delete that.

When I came to this country, we moved to somewhere near Yonkers and I was the only foreign-born child in that neighborhood. We had to go through a woods to get to a little school that had four classes. I didn't know a word of English. The only thing that was in my favor was that I knew math, I was ahead of most in the class in that, and drawing. That's when I started to really draw. But you know, when I think of the kids today, the advantages they have, it's fantastic -- the schools, the art instruction they have, prints, the kind of information they can get on all different levels in art today is fantastic.

I didn't know what in the hell art was. I really hadn't the slightest notion what it was all about, but I drew all the time, I was always making drawings. I remember making a drawing, a copy, of Dickens, I made a whole number of them, and one day some guy came over to the house -- I was about 15 then -- and said, "You know, I live near a place, I think it's a school for artists." (pause) Well, I thought I better try this.

I might tell you in the first place, I started to work when I was 14. I worked in a factory and in those days you worked from seven in the morning until about six o'clock at night with half an hour for lunch, six days a week. It was really brutal. And the characters there -- oh, they were coarse, they were brutal. It was a horrible life, I detested it, but I didn't know any other life, that was the only life I knew. Well, I got into the Academy. I would love to see these drawings, to see (laughing) how horrible they were.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was the Academy!

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I got into the Academy on showing these drawings to whoever --

DOROTHY SECKLER: And how old were you then?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I was 16.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And they actually admitted you to the Academy as a student?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: As a student, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then did you give up your job? Or did you study at night --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No. When I was sitting there one day, talking to the chap next to me and told him I was fired out of every job I ever had, I was just very poor at it, I guess, very inept. The last job I was fired out of was because I was -- my job was to sandpaper down the side of a piano before I varnished it, and there was dust on it. So, I had a feather, and I started to trace a landscape that I saw outside with the feather, and the boss, a German guy, saw me and said, [roaring again] "Verdunkt get the hell out of here" and out I was fired. And I told this guy I was fired, I wish I could get into the art field. But I didn't know what the art field meant! See, we had no instructions in those days, we had no means at all of being informed of art.

So, what happened. He said, right away, "I think you can get a job at my uncle's place doing commercial illustrations." So I got the job, as an errand boy. Incidentally, when I entered the school, when I was 16, life really began for me for the first time in my life. It was a different world for me, from this brutality and hard work and I was so inept at this sort of stuff, that to go into this world was just like a light, a light had entered my heart and my mind. And I saw those paintings, those portraits, and the conversation, the very atmosphere of the place, the freedom of it, was just like gold -- all I saw was gold, really.

But I could only afford to go at night school. I got this job, and started to do commercial illustration. But I came into contact with people that had more education. I left school, as I said, when I was 14, we weren't in a position (he laughs) to continue, let's put it that way. So, I got this job as an errand boy. After having worked as an errand boy for about a year, I quit, I asked them to just let me stay there and practice; and I practiced and I would say that in four years I was making more money than my father.

Then I realized my terrible lack of education. So I went to CCNY at night, I went to Columbia University at night, took courses in literature and so forth, but I was unable to paint except on Sundays because I had these responsibilities. But it was so much that by the time I was 21 or 22, I broke down, just a physical breakdown.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Your health wasn't very good at that time?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: It never was good. I had scarlet fever and diphtheria when I was about seven years one after another and an infection on this side that necessitated an operation. So I was a very weak child, really, tall, and anemic. A one-dimensional person, that's all I was. The third dimension I developed this year-- (both laugh) -- having gained 10 pounds.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh my! Well, while you were in your teens, all this time that you're speaking of now, was there any point at which you were able to get over this job business and attend school during the day? After the breakdown what happened?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No, I couldn't, because my father was unable to work for several years. I suppose I shouldn't have done it but I helped support that family. In fact I was the main support of that family for about three or four years, and it wasn't until I was about 27 or 28 years old that I was able to make an arrangement, which I kept throughout the rest of my life until about five or six years ago, which was to work six months a year and paint six months. That's the kind of continuum that happened for, I would say, I don't know, 25 years or so. The last five or six years, of course fortunately, I'm in a position where I sell enough [?] to get along without doing

commercial work.

Now, there's a diminution of time element as far as doing commercial work. About 12 years ago I cut down from six months to four months, then down to three months, then down to two; and the last five or six years I did practically none.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Marvelous. Well, when you had this breakdown, how old were you then?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I was about 22.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And after that you still had to go on working when you got better --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Oh yes. But after that, when things began to get better, as I said I worked six months of the year. And I had a show, by the way. My first one-man show was in 1932, at a gallery called Brown and Lambertson [pho.sp.] Galleries. Do you remember that gallery? It was subsidized by a woman who was the ex-wife of W. T. Grant of the Grant stores. This was a means of writing off or a hobby of hers for a couple of years.

I had this show in '32 and I was living in Rockport. By this time I was married. Do you know, I never went to see that show? I didn't go to see the show because I didn't think it was important enough. Oh by the way, I forgot to tell you: when I was about 33, in Rockport, when this show took place, we had taken off two years for work. I forgot to tell you, there were times when I took off two years and a year and forget about these things. Whenever I had sufficient money I took time off.

As a matter of fact there's a lamentable situation here, because in 1929 I had a contract to work six months in a year for four years with a firm and I worked day and night during those six months, and Barbara worked too. The income was quite good, I was able to save enough money, and we figured we could live in Europe for a minimum of about eight years. We had made arrangement with the American Hospital in Paris for Barbara to have her first child, which never did come by the way. I had my money in stocks with the very firm that I worked for, and some in banks. And you know what happened in 1929.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you lost it all?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: And I had my second breakdown. Not because of the money -- I never thought in those terms, but what it would have given me: eight or nine years in Europe, painting all the time! To me it was a dream, and Barbara couldn't understand it as time went on why I felt so terrible. I was just so sick, just sick. So, whatever money we had left, we stayed in Rockport for two years. Those were the two halcyon years of my life, because I was able to do a lot of work, and I had that one man show down there. Some day when you come to my apartment I'll show you the reviews and the reproductions and everything. Much more than I can get now, much more than most artists can get now, because there's more space available for reviews --

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was your work like, Martin?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Very realistic, I think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What had influenced you in developing your style?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I'm trying to recall... I would say Ryder was one of the influences in my life; yes. Rembrandt --

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where had you seen Ryder and where had you seen Rembrandt?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well, may I go back a little back again? You see, I have to digress -- (Seckler agrees) I had heard there was a museum called the Metropolitan Museum downtown -- we lived in the Bronx at the time, I was a kid about 11, 12, 13. We had gone down to the Museum several times. My friend and I had a pair of skates between us -- I used one, he used the other. He was also interested in drawing and we went all the way from 179th Street to the Museum.

I never saw anyone in the Metropolitan Museum, never -- this was in the summertime, vacation period. And I thought this was the normal thing, this was the way a museum should be, nobody (laughing) should ever be in it! And we spoke very low, (he whispers) we could hardly hear each other. And this was it. But I got older... in other words, the dimensions of my life opened little by little. As, for instance, the first time I went in -- I'd never heard very good music prior to age 22 -- I happened to pass Carnegie Hall and I noticed the concerts posted. Intuitively I went in. The first thing I heard was Tchaikovsky's Pathetique, an old Tchaikovsky program, the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra.

Well, the sounds of the violins and the different chords made a vivid impression on me. Of course, it's very tragic and sentimental, and literally I had tears in my eyes. From that time on, music was the other love of my life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You said your style was "realistic" and you spoke of going to the Metropolitan. I assume you'd seen paintings there that gave you some idea --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Yes. Rembrandt became my immediate favorite, but there were many -- I'm not talking about the influences, because when I speak specifically of my early influence, I can't recall any one particular person, outside of Rembrandt and Ryder, very vividly. They didn't seem to affect me very much as far as influence is concerned --

DOROTHY SECKLER: What medium were you from --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: -- but later on there was a strong influence. I was informed by other people and that was Rouault. I started to paint in watercolors. As I think of it -- you asked me whether they were realistic. They were in a sense, but they were totally different from any other realism I had seen theretofore. I'll give you an example: The only painting instructions I ever had was at Boothbay Harbor, then in the early 20s. A guy named Snell, he was an N.A., I was in his class for a month or so. One day he came over to me and said, "Martin, I don't know whether you'll ever be a good painter or a lousy painter. I don't know what you're getting at." Because I didn't paint like the others.

It wasn't because I didn't want to paint like the others, [heatedly] I would love to have painted like the other fellows and be influenced by the teacher, but I wasn't, I just couldn't. So I painted the way I felt I could, "this is the way I'm going to paint; that's that." I thought it was a very nice gesture on his part to tell me this rather than have me continue on. It was the only instructions I ever got.

Later on, as I said, as I developed. And the style of painting, the method which I employed, was -- I think I gathered some of it by reading. For instance, I first painted outdoors, landscape primarily, and you know the things began, I painted larger and larger paintings and they were very difficult. As I became older I thought, "Gee, this is too much, I'm going to make them smaller" and I made smaller paintings, and finally got a tripod under a box and painted from that.

Then I decided to do just black and white sketches and stopped painting at home. And when I realized, when I got home, that when I resorted to my imagination or my visual experiences -- because my work eventually became a synthesis of visual experiences, a transfer from a visual experience to tactile and plastic qualities, and relationships in color and texture. And I painted ever since that way, although some of my work may appear like landscapes, but I never see these landscapes.

And a strange thing about it. I find that -- and I think that's an experience of other painters too -- if I think of what I'm going to do, rather than feel what I'm going to do, then I get into difficulties. It's like the story of the fly and the centipede. You know, the fly asked the centipede, "How can you walk with all those hundred legs, don't you get them all balled up??" "No," says the centipede, "it's a cinch" and he started to walk and got all turned around." (laughter) Well, that's the way with painting: I find that when you're totally involved in a painting, you're not fully aware of what you're creating at the time, only in retrospect.

There are times, when you're working you get into an impasse or a cul de sac. You can't seem to get on with it and you wonder what is it? What is it that makes the difference between the ability to project a concept when you're totally unaware when you're projecting it, and thinking about it? You'd think that with all the experience, and all the technical skill at your disposal -- the knowledge of color, the knowledge of shapes and forms, and their relationships, tensions, everything that's involved -- there's so much more as a matter of fact -- and yet nothing happens. It's really a complete mystery.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is. No, I've come across this in many painters and in my experience too, so I agree with you that it's something that frequently -- [she breaks off for some playback, then continues] I'm fascinated by the fact that you're almost like an instrument with something, feelings expressing themselves to you, and yet you really don't have the feeling of consciously having contrived them in any way or devised them. Then of course the question comes, how do you actually conceive a painting? How do you begin? How does the image develop through your feeling?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I might put in a word here as far as instruction is concerned. I attended a series of lectures by Robert Henri at the Art Students League. I was very much impressed by them, because he devoted practically all his time to the philosophical angle of painting -- not directly to painting but what it is that a painter could be involved in. He spoke about the West, the wide spaces and the feelings that all this engendered.

And now, I would like to meet the situation head on as the youngsters today meet it. Many of them are really unaware of the tremendous pleasure and satisfaction in the eye tracing forms of a hill, or all the color relationships as one observes them. They don't think in those terms today, very few youngsters do, and this kind of involvement is a great source of knowledge in plastic terms, when they're translated into these plastic terms.

You asked me how I go about a given painting. Well, they're a result of different moods and different periods, because I know my painting has gone through a number of periods. But they're transitions, they're not radical changes, they're transitions from one period to another. When I was younger I was very much an introvert. Barbara can't understand why I enjoyed my gloom, I used to be a very gloomy person, and I reveled in it. My pictures were dark and -- oh I can't think of the words just now. But I remember a very lovely girl once told me that she thought I was crazy. "Only a crazy person," she said, "can think of -- " You've never seen my early work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I'd like to see it.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: When you come to New York you'll see it. I think they look like a very normal kind of painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Somber and poetic were they?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Yes. Deep in color, and -- I cannot recapture any more that kind of resonance.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What period would this have been?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: That was in the late 40s when I had my show at Perls. That was the first commercial gallery I'd shown in. I meant to tell you, after the Brown and Lambertson show, I didn't paint for ten years although I did not see that show. Then the Artists Gallery came -- do you remember that gallery with Stix [phon.sp.] and so on?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes indeed.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: They were very helpful, and I had two one-man shows there. And then Miss Kraushaar came around one day and left a note asked me to come to see her. Is it all right for me to diverge here?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I've come across it of course through many other artists who also knew it as the place where you're supposed to be picked up by other galleries, they're not supposed to keep you there.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: That's right, that's the whole idea, to launch the artist. They didn't take any commissions or anything.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you go from there to Kraushaar?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No. I went to Miss Kraushaar when she left the note, and she said "I can only introduce you in the gallery little by little, it may take a year or two before you become a full member." Well, as I told you a moment ago, I'd been painting for ten years but I hadn't shown for ten years. Even though I got very good reviews, I still felt that I wasn't really good enough to present to the public. Or, rather, it wasn't developed enough to present to the public. Which is contrary to what's happening today -- one year and you're on. This was in 1940.

So, following that I painted for ten years without showing. I told Miss Kraushaar, who was a very lovely person by the way, I'm very fond of her, that I hadn't been painting for ten years and I thought this was really mature painting, "I've finally arrived and I would like to have one last show, I'm ready for it."

So she said, "Well, try some other gallery, or come back if you're not satisfied with the arrangement at any other gallery, I'll be glad to show you." So one day I went to see a show at Pearls of Chuck B 's work and I was standing there. Usually I never had the temerity to go to a gallery --

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really??

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I mean, to ask a gallery to look at my work--

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh I see.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: It so happened that Pearls was in at the time and we talked to each other about the work. I said, "You know, I'd like to show you some of my work, would you be willing to look at it?" He said, "Why certainly, bring 'em up." Next day I went to Kraushaar, crossed the street and showed it to Pearls, he said, "I want to see the rest of your work, I'm coming over tomorrow." Way out in Brooklyn!

He came out to Brooklyn and he made me unearth every bit of work that I had. Oh, piles of stuff, you know, and said, "I want to give you a show in January." That was not even a year hence, about ten months. I had enough work, it's true, but for a show at Pearls I wanted the best I could get. So, we went to Rockport that summer as we usually did and there I had the very good luck of going to Gloucester one day and I wanted to get the very same bus back because I was anxious to return to work, do as much work as possible. I was running full-speed and ran into a hole and all my tendons were ripped and my leg swelled up like an elephant's leg.

For about two months I worked with my leg up like this, in terrible pain. It was foolish but I wanted to get that show off, I wanted to finish these paintings, because I glazed and scumbled and did over- and under-painting. I finally got it through. I had a very too show -- by that I mean, the results of the show were very good. But you asked me a question --

Seckler (laughing): Well, we've come a long way anyway! No: I was quite fascinated by that. What year was the Pearls show? (F. can't remember, calls for his wife Barbara; after some figuring they agree on "about in the mid-40s, I imagine.") I thought it might help give us a few pegs for time, we don't have to be absolutely exact; we'll be going through your scrapbook in time.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Perls, if you recall, finally decided not to have American painters and devote all his energies to French painters, which he did, except for the sculptor Calder.

Barbara F.: Also "the lion tamer," Aussendaro [phon.sp.] (they laugh)

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I think the reason for that [was] he bought a lot of his work, so he was unloading it. I don't think he has any more of his work left.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was an important contact, and a good gallery, and it must have given you a feeling of being more [voices overlap one word]

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I'm sorry in a way it didn't continue, although when I went to Babcock Coddington, [phon.sp.] [a proper name] was very nice and I had a very nice relation with them. I've had five shows at Babcock. Of course I've had other shows in other places -- two one-man shows in L.A., a one-man show at the Philadelphia Art Alliance -- I'm not talking about the rest of it, we all have that kind of a history anyway; more or less. But you asked me a question --

DOROTHY SECKLER: One thing I'd like to clear up before we go on from the Pearls Gallery exhibition, what kind of paintings would they have been? Were they identifiable, as for instance, mainly landscapes, or were there some figure subjects?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: They were mainly imaginative landscapes. All my work from the time just prior to the Pearls Gallery when I changed. Do you know, I don't recall the change from direct painting more or less influenced by the Post-impressionists to the kind of painting which I did later on, which was, well, glazing and over- and under-painting. I would start the painting in terra [? phon.] black-and-white to get a general idea of my shapes and forms, and then from there use fuller color, and then pure color. I didn't mix my colors at all, I applied pure color to the canvas, with white sometimes of course. Of course I would get very brilliant effect but it wasn't what I wanted, I wanted to mute that so I would have a kind of depth -- not a depth in a field of depth but a depth of color of the sensuousness of the color --

DOROTHY SECKLER: A kind of resonance of color.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Yes, like music would be.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. But you don't recall at what point you stopped painting outdoors and began -- or maybe you just went back and forth for a while?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No I didn't. Once I stopped painting outdoors that was it, because I realized this was for me. Within the space of my four walls I could visualize and be in a world of my own, a wonderfully contained world that I cherish today. I feel that more in New York than I do here.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Because in the first place New York, I have a studio that's bigger, the ceiling is higher, the light is better. Although New York is very noisy, it's a very quiet studio. Most of the time I have music -- sometimes I don't even hear the music, sometimes I do, but it's on most of the time; not all of the time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A record player or --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No. A record player is wonderful if you have someone to change the recordings for you, but when I paint I can't stop, it would have to go on repeating itself on and on. When you become totally involved, time passes, you don't even realize it. It wasn't glazing, I think that's really a misnomer as far as I'm concerned, it's really scumbling; there's a difference. It's a kind of a dry, sort of semi-dry brush.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You said you begin with a sort of generalized --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I find terra verde [phon.] a wonderful color for that purpose, because the accents aren't

deep, they're sufficient to allow the imagination to be nourished further, to evolve a clearer concept of what I'm doing. But I always have a very clear concept of the general shape of what I'm going to do. Now, that sometime may change. As I develop my work I find that what I thought of in a pictorial sense in my mind might be different when applied to a canvas.

Incidentally, I'd like to relate an incident that refers to that kind of a situation. In Rockport there was a chap, who's passed away since, very erudite man, an unusual intellect, and this chap painted as an avocation. He was outdoors, painting on a large canvas, right in the sun, and I told him, "[his name], you're painting those two elm trees, and you're painting them right in the sun. Do you realize that the sun is absorbing this color, that you're not really getting the proper relationship at all?" He said, "That's nonsense, those trees are out in the sun for that reason, and it's for that reason my painting should be out in the sun."

Now, that's a totally erroneous kind of reasoning. You know, this is so simple that you'd imagine a man of his intellect would comprehend that immediately. After all, all you have at your disposal is a flat canvas and some pigment, you can't possibly interpret -- not interpret, because interpreting is what we should be doing -- you possibly cannot get, what you're trying to do, the natural phenomenon there of air, space, gases, sunlight, vast distances, and so forth. It's just ridiculous; and he just couldn't get it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you find of course now that just from your imagination, just from a few simple shapes and areas -- one of the things that strikes me in looking at the paintings around the room, they have a very dominant, sort of color tonality; each one is blue or actually green painting but a soft, subtle variations of the tones and a dominant light. It seems to me in most cases it's the light that has supplied the keynote to its mood and to the feeling of the -- well, --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well, I didn't try this but I've been told that my work has a kind of inner light.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, it certainly seems to be. It isn't like the light of nature, really, it isn't like sunlight shining on the water or that sort of thing --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No, no. I remember Teddy Roczak once remarked about the painting, "Look, you've got figures in your landscape and the trees but they have no shadows." And I didn't realize it at the time, I really didn't realize it. That may have been an influence -- it just occurs to me now a period of painting that I'm very fond of, and that's the Sieneese school of painters, with their prim trees, their beautiful simple color shapes. That might have been [? unclear] but I was aware of it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You weren't?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No. And I very seldom employ shadows for the shadow's sake, unless it specifically helps my design.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. They're almost more like misty tones that just envelop certain shapes. You know, you mentioned Ryder, he also seldom uses -- I mean, if he uses a shadow it's so much a part of the basic patterning in the thing, it doesn't shadow the [unclear word].

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: That's right, those big powerful shapes. Isn't it amazing the power he gets into a little canvas?

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is indeed.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: It's unfortunate that he wasn't more careful with his media. I remember talking once, at an opening at the Whitney Museum, to Herman Moore and I told him I had seen, just prior to that show, the show of Ryder's and that I'd enjoyed it so very much. He said, "You know, we have a terrible job showing his stuff. Without the proper lighting on it, it's almost black and white." END OF THIS SIDE, A of TAPE 1

BEGINNING SIDE B, TAPE 1

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: They're disappearing very rapidly.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. He used that bitumen --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Bitumen, and he would also use dammar varnish, and sometimes copal even, which is much worse. And then over that a dry medium. Now, these are simple things that you learn from reading about art, the ABC of painting, actually, and he just ignored it, that's all, he thought that he could get better effects with the way he worked. (pause) And he was right, absolutely right. Because he might not have been able to get it other ways.

DOROTHY SECKLER: If he'd thought of the effect of color. I thought what you were saying about Ryder and the palette knife was very interesting, and your own use of the palette knife.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: You mean when he was in the country? (she confirms) Well, when he was in the country -- do you recall Ryder's early work? They look totally different than the work later on, they haven't got the kind of simple, strong majesty that his work finally evolved into. Well, it was the discovery of the palette knife as far as he was concerned, because it gave him that kind of simplicity of shapes and simplicity of design which you're able to do with a palette knife, and he was able to do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: It requires an artist with an understanding of forms and shapes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you say that you use it yourself a great deal.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Yes. I've been using a palette knife for, well, just prior to the Pearls show; all of that show uses the palette knife, and of course scumbling. I don't start with the palette knife as a rule, because it's dangerous to start with the palette knife as a rule, there's a tendency of the painting to peel off.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you get too much impasto --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well, you see, it squeezes off the oil too much. And the following layers don't adhere very well. However, when I apply the paint I don't apply it with a palette knife, I apply it with a brush, and then usually it comes down with the palette knife; but I think I employ it differently than others. I scrape the painting off, you see --

DOROTHY SECKLER: You take off the top layer --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: -- so as to permit the underlying color to come through. In other words, if you recall I told you I use pure pigment, I have until recently; now I mix my paint, the last year or so. But up till then I used pure pigment. Let's assume I used red underneath, a red tree, let's say, and I wanted to make it a purple tree. Then I would use purple over and pull down on a palette knife so that most of the painting comes off and permits a fusion of those two colors. Which gives it a kind of subtlety you can never get any other way, actually impossible, and a depth of color. There is a depth of color possible --

DOROTHY SECKLER: Adds a kind of breathing quality to the surface because it's porous and open a bit, very often.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: And of course there are subtle differences to be played along. You switch a life, permit a little more pigment over the other layer, or a little less. It depends upon what you're driving for.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Some people, however, who use that technique get so carried away by the facility of the effects they can create that they have all kinds of little, you know, patchy things all over the canvas. But in your case, it's very (overlapping voices)

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: That's the one I avoid to use, because I loathe, I LOATHE that kind of painting, that kind of tricky painting. Because you're only fooling yourself, you're not fooling anyone else really. Except curators, you can fool them!

Seckler (laughing) -- all of your curators! So I'm looking around and seeing your paintings in this room. Always there's such a simplicity to the image. Each one has a big, subtle --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: By the way, I don't know if I told you, the last year or two I've devoted mostly to nocturnes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: But they're nocturnes of light. I think that's an area of development in painting that has yet to be fully developed --

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: -- and I'm going to try to do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very interesting, and it is true.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Because, you see, I don't mean light just in a realistic sense but to arrange and to conform to patterns of moods. And, incidentally, very difficult to paint. Because the temptation is to get a dark area and put a lot of gobs of light, but that doesn't mean anything. I want the stuff to sing. To me if a painting doesn't sing, it's not a painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So the closer tonalities seem to be the pervading ones, and then the little glowing, slightly lighter touches are so beautifully placed that they carry your eye and your feeling to the whole area. You were going to tell me something else about your painting just before we got to talking about the palette knife.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Oh yes: the other day, just to show that one of millions of incidents that occur in the course of one's life -- in relation to our whole contemporary life, by the way, I personally think we are in a decadent period. I know that many artists will contest this contention, but the fact that we are moving from one area of painting to another in such rapid sequence does not mean that it's a healthy period.

All the great periods of art have been periods in which there was a homogeneity of attitude towards and striving for a given ideal -- religion, different religions, or other manifestations of a given era. The other day I was listening to a news broadcast. First, there was some popular music played, and a chap said, "Well, now we are going to give one minute to God." Which in itself is a horrible thing to say.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then they interrupted it.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Did I tell you that?

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't know whether it was you or --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: And then it was interrupted by an ad, an advertisement for Ex-lax or some other (laughing) -
-

DOROTHY SECKLER: So God didn't get His minute.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: -- some other mundane factors that were involved. But isn't that a horrible -- if that isn't symptomatic of a decadence, I don't know what is. Because we neither have really religion, in the former sense, nor something to replace it; because there are other things that could replace it. There are other inspirations that could replace it.

First of all, I think that there are many painters that ignore or try to or aren't involved in the very milieu, the socio-economic milieu that we live in and all that's attendant with it. Wars, the injustice of justice. I think that an artist, to be a fully developed and mature example of his era, has to be involved in this sort of thing. I'm sure Rembrandt was. When he went around to the ghettos, when he saw these figures and all the philosophical statements which his work really indicates -- I'll put it this way: I've gone very often to the Frick Museum to look at that self-portrait of Rembrandt. To me that isn't just a painting, it isn't just a great painting. In fact, I don't think of it -- there are times when I don't look at it in terms of pigment and the play of light and so forth, which is simply fantastic. But it's more than that. It's a terrific philosophical statement. And so poignant... this character looking you --

Now, I'm speaking of a rather different dimension of painting. Sometimes we scoff at it, but actually it's very important. When I see this self-portrait, it kind of sums up for me the lament and pain that is manifest in much of our life. It's a kind of a dimension that I miss very much, I'm sorry to say, in contemporary life even among the very best painters of contemporary life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I often have somewhat the same feeling. Then, it's so difficult, I suppose for artists, or it's so easy for an artist to say, "Well, you know, you can't really do much about it, painting is too complex to have a direct relationship to what's going on in the world. And how can my painting reflect, how can it be a response to --"

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I don't know that it can. I do know this much, that I think all of us should be, many of them are. They can't divorce themselves from life, that's impossible, and yet be a fully rounded human.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And of course you're not speaking there only on the strict subject matter --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No!

DOROTHY SECKLER: -- your own subject matter, I mean the idea of doing nocturnes --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: That's exactly -- may I comment on that?

DOROTHY SECKLER: By all means.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I myself, the way the current scene affects me so much, that I would love to do a caustic, sardonic painting of the miserable situation we're in. We're in a kind of situation where that should bring forth a beautiful civilization. We have at last the means where we can produce a sufficient amount for all the peoples, to educate them, to house them properly, to eliminate wars -- all this can be done because of the enormous

development of industrialization and invention. But we don't, we're in a mess in many ways.

I would like to make comments in paint, or black and white, but I feel that if I did it, it would be just an illustration. So it's no use of me going in. I tried it several times but it didn't function. The only contemporary painters I know that approach it anywhere near are men like Jack Levine, well, Rouault did, yes; and one or two other persons. But even they don't have the kind of invention and depth of passion that a man like Goya had. His are more than paintings, they're really historic documents of the time. And they're great paintings. Am I right, would you agree with me on that?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, absolutely.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: But of course that takes a genius.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it takes a particular kind of temperament.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: In other words, there's a kind of ambivalence, as far as I'm concerned, when I start to paint. I'd love to paint the other, and I also love to paint the way I am painting now, that is, it's a kind of mood and poetry and music that I feel in painting. Because I think all the arts have a kind of cohesiveness. When I see a good painting -- I'll give you an example: with a Jackson Pollock, I hear sounds of trains, of movements of trains or of vehicles. And different paintings affect me differently.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. That's fascinating, having the kind of parallel of sounds.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Some paintings make me think of Brahms, some of Bach. Cezanne's make me think of Bach. Because of the very structure, the structure's the same kind of structure. Musically speaking. He has a contrapuntal that music has. The same kind of structure. And grandness, and bigness of design.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Who else would you mention as affecting you in musical terms? Or who else, I should say, has been important in your --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Renoir makes me think of certain musicians.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was an influence on you for a certain amount, for a certain time.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I can't think of the French composer, I can't think of his name -- incidentally he liked this composer very much. I might add that the Tribune critic, Emily Genauer, on several occasions mentioned that my work is something like Debussy. I don't agree with her, though. I think it was, then, more like Brahms. Well, Walkowitz once came (END OF THIS SESSION)

DOROTHY SECKLER: (resuming) This is Dorothy Seckler, continuing an interview with Martin Friedman in Provincetown, Mass. on September 3, 1965.

At the end of our previous session, we had been discussing the parallels that you sense in certain of your paintings and talked about the fact that yours was possibly closer to Brahms than to Debussy. I thought it would be interesting to continue along the line of [tape is silent for brief period, then resumes]

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: (resuming in mid-sentence) different composers concerned, never occurred to me whether the paintings came first and I was influenced and then I thought of Brahms, or whether (he laughs) I thought of Brahms first and the paintings came after that. See, I didn't know which was which.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But is there usually a very close feeling about the relationship to Brahms? I mean, does that --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: There has been in the past; not any more. No; lately I have no specific composer in mind. I don't think of any particular composer in mind when I'm working or when I'm relating to my work. But there are periods when a certain group of composers I like more than at other times. In reference to that I remember one day there were several others here addressing ourselves to a question: what composer we would prefer to have if we were stranded on an island and could have only one composer's work. There were eight of us. What composer do you think, Dorothy, we picked? I know it's pretty difficult --

DOROTHY SECKLER: I imagine Bach, I suppose.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: That's what most people think. Seven out of the eight: Mozart -- not because he's a greater composer than Bach, oh no, heavens no, but it's because he has a range, you see, of both dramatic music and very joyful music; and just MUSIC.

By the way, talking about just music, and we were talking about Rembrandt too, when I listen to or think about

the late quartets of Beethoven, I always think of Rembrandt's paintings. Because the late chamber music of Beethoven are also more than just great music, they're tremendous philosophical statements. I feel as if there's a man of enormous intellect, of great passion, just sitting down and talking to you on the wisdoms of many, many ages.

It's a kind of feeling that you have in all the arts. When I hear a play by Shakespeare, I'm at a loss whether to listen to the beauty of his words, of the sequence of the words, or the great philosophical statements which are so concise and he can sum up so much meaning in just a small sentence. Did you ever notice that?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: It's just fantastic. And I get lost as to what to listen to. (laughter) What I'm trying to do here is relate all these different arts. And the same with architecture. There's music in architecture and there's a great feeling of painting in architecture, because the formal elements are there, and the formal elements are in literature as in music.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Just before we were talking about this you were also going to tell me something that occurred to you about, I think, thematic development in your work?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Yes. As I said, I have a clear conception in mind, in the big sense of the words, not in the details and so forth, either in color -- just in the general color scheme and form, or rather form and color scheme are one and the same, by the way. But there are aspects of it: one is that of color, one is that of form, and tensions, and so forth. Well, sometime along the way I see something in a painting that gives me a completely different idea.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In your own painting or someone else's?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: In my own painting. And I might switch the whole painting to a new idea which is suggested to me by what I see on the canvas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting. Then you find that --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: So I go off on a different tangent entirely. Which means a new kind of approach entirely. And sometimes some of my best work comes out of that way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Probably the intuitive or more or less unconscious thing comes through while you're working on something that came from a more conscious level and takes over. And then you believe in that image rather than in the first image, and you accept that. That would logically be a better one because it's the feeling that comes through. And no doubt that accounts for this very moody -- it's sort of a quiet emotion but it is emotional. And certainly it wouldn't seem that it could be arrived at by any other than an intuitive method. (she laughs) Well, if you can speak of an "intuitive method," intuitive means.

Would that have been the case, for instance, with any of those we're looking at at the moment? Or would they have started with something quite different?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: That one over there, the one that's right around the bend here, I was going to do the flats. I painted the dark area one with a straight line and that did it, that changed the whole painting for me. Because I saw a new truth coming out, and I think it was fairly successful in that sense. Of course it's a small painting, far from being a major work. (a few sounds indicating they're evidently looking at paintings)

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is one of the few that I've seen with figures.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Yes. Well, you know, in the last exhibition I had, figures are in almost all the paintings. But the figures, for me, aren't -- they're not really means as figures of by themselves. To me, a figure is incorporated -- I like to see it incorporated in a painting as a part of the painting, so they don't stand out as they do on that one.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Not very much -- (overlapping voices)

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: They usually form part of the pattern of the rest of the work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's almost like the painter is a witness rather than an actor in the scene.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Yes, there's a word for it -- like a presence, they're really presences, that's what they are --

DOROTHY SECKLER: Presence, yes that's it.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: -- incorporated in the structure of the painting. Both in terms of color and design. And sometime someone said -- although they usually stand still in space, someone said there's a movement in them in spite of the fact that they're standing still in space. That would not be an example of them; but all the works I had in the last show, almost all of them had figures. Why they don't have figure now, I don't know, I really don't know. I'll have to wait until some figure comes along.

Incidentally, I've done a lot of drawings. I love to draw, as most painters do/don't [unclear], and when I draw from the nude, I find I become a prisoner of the nude. What I need once in a while, once every few months I have a model posing for me, and results aren't as a rule very satisfactory. But it functions as a catalyst and I'm able to continue on and work from imagination.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you paint from the nude or just draw?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Draw.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In charcoal or --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I have three paintings of the nude and they're all from imaginative works. I don't know... some people think, in fact several persons asked me who the model was. Well, the one on the canvas is a more luscious than the one that posed for me. (he laughs) I'm more in love with the model on the canvas than the one on -- in fact, when I was younger, if the model was very beautiful, it's a disturbing element, you know, because you're young and you're painting from a model -- most of the time I painted from a model (Seckler laughing) and when you're painting from a model you feel you should be painting. One model complained once that's all I ever think of. (Seckler laughs heartily)

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mean that painting was all you ever think of, or not painting?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No! She said, "I thought we were going to have some cocktails, some fun, and goddamn it, all you think of is painting." Well, I didn't actually feel that way, but I was adamant: I was going to be a hero and do my painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well Martin, I think on that note we'll have to close for today.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: In other words, I'll end it with saying the things I regret in my life now are my omissions more than my commissions! (both laugh heartily) END OF THIS SESSION

INTERVIEW RESUMES

DOROTHY SECKLER: During our interview on September 4, it occurred to me that we had not gone deeply into the period of your life in the, well, in the later 30s and into the 40s. I wondered if, as most artists had, you had a period of being on WPA. And then of course the War years usually made some difference in the artist's career. I thought we might clear that up, and then go into the development of your painting during the period of the 40s.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well in 1932, I think it was, when we stayed in Rockport for almost two years, there our monies began to banish little by little, and I found myself with very little money -- just sufficient to last for Barbara, my son and myself for another week or two. Oh, I forgot to tell you, I applied for WPA up in Massachusetts, but I'd waited for over five weeks and no answer yet. I knew I would eventually get it but I didn't know when.

I got a telegram from New York to come down. There was a contract offered to me to do some commercial work 24 weeks out of a year. Well, I was in a dilemma; what was I to do? From whom could I borrow money? There was no one from whom I could borrow; and I have never liked borrowing money. And I never liked, even to this day, to be indebted to anyone, in any way at all. Maybe it's a disease of mine, but there I was, I just couldn't do it. Neither could my wife.

So I accepted it. We went down to New York and from there on I continued working 24 weeks a year, and less and less as years passed by. And that sustained us for the rest of the year. I made sufficient amount of money, 24 weeks, working day and night, Sundays and everything -- I used to work about 11 to 12 hours a day.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Goodness, how long did this go on? It was tapering off but did it go on during the 40s too?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: It went on right into the 40s until roughly I would say about ten years ago I went from 24 days a year down to 20, then down to around 18; that stayed on for a while, until about four or five years ago I quit entirely.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was your painting like during these years?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Oh, I meant to tell you the tragic part of this: When I got back to New York -- I signed a

contract to work and moved all our belongings back to New York, we went to live in Freeport at the time, I got a notice from the WPA, "you're accepted."

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you would have had a decade of life to paint --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I'd have had a decade of painting all the time and I was bitter about that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I can well imagine.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well, I was in a dilemma, I couldn't help myself, there was nothing I could do. I suppose if I had been alone, I would have managed somehow or other, but I just couldn't -- I was too fond of my family at the time, I guess (laughing) I couldn't see them -- Incidentally, I once spoke to Joe DeMartini -- you know Joe --

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: And I told him, "Why don't you get married?" Not that I thought marriage is a wonderful institution, it isn't, really. But he happened to have mentioned, "Well, I live alone and it isn't the best kind of life." So I said, "Why don't you get married, Joe?" He said, "I don't want to be responsible for a family. I'm the kind of a person that would feel that kind of responsibility, I couldn't shirk it." So, that's the way I felt, having a family. You asked me a question, I've forgot --

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was asking what was your work like during these years when you were painting.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well, as I think I stated before, for a period of about ten years I painted in dark colors with overlay of one color over another, then pure pigment, then neutralizing the pure pigment by scumbling, which gave a brilliance, a depth of color and brilliance but muted. It had a kind of inner glow.

Well, about ten years ago I stopped that method of work and I started to paint directly -- also in pure color but instead of scumbling over it, I put one color over another, permitting one color to drip -- oh incidentally I work on six, seven, eight, sometime nine canvases simultaneously.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Rather small size, as compared with artists today are doing.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: That's right. They range anywhere from a little bit of a 9x12 to 40x50; 45x60 is the largest I've painted. Well, as I said before I permit the colors to dry. That gives me a chance to look over the field of paintings, of seven or eight canvases. And whenever I feel intuitively that this one, of seven or eight, is the one I want to work on at a given time, that's it. Sometime I work on two or three in a day, it depends upon the mood.

I find that by putting a canvas aside, once you reach a kind of cul de sac, it's better to put it aside and not be tempted to push it too much. Sometimes the temptation is so great I go ahead with it and I spoil the canvas, and if I put it aside and let it kind of germinate, the idea to germinate in my mind, then suddenly (slapping his hand sharply) just like that you see it, and you wonder how is it that I didn't see the possible progress in the development of this canvas before? There it is, clear as day for me. So I find that is a very good way of working, and I'm not very much annoyed by the slow-drying process of oil. Sometimes I am, but not as a rule.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Martin, your canvases always seem to me to have a great beautiful serenity and simplicity - I mean there's an intricate counterpoint within the simplicity, but they never have the look of having been tortured or complicated. Do they go through a stage in the middle before they get resolved, where there maybe are many things going on and all sorts of complications? Or do they develop with this kind of, well, simplicity isn't quite the word, but --well, (she laughs) lack of complications, I guess --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No. I still have a sort of a kind of a residue of my younger years of painting, in which I struggled -- incidentally, the struggle is a struggle the inability to project because of lack of technique and lack of skill and lack of painterly knowledge to project a passion and an idea. And now I have a greater skill, of course, and I find it easier -- my struggle now is to clarify an idea in my mind or on a canvas. That is a great struggle, I've had that before; it's even greater now. And I sometimes, being very honest with myself, I ask myself whether I have the kind of passion that I did before.

Well, I've been told by other painters "it's very possible that you may or may not have it, but on the other hand you have a deeper understanding of the possibilities and the potentials of painting." I meant to tell you that I find that I look at a work much longer than I used to heretofore, and the physical act of painting is much faster than heretofore, in spite of the fact that it looks very simple and serene and rich. It comes easier, but I have to think about it for a much longer period. When I was younger I attacked it with ferocity, and there was a desperate effort to get through, you know? Beyond the skill that I didn't have at my disposal.

It was very gratifying to hear that I wasn't the only one that suffers. (Seckler laughs) Also, that I wasn't the only one that thinks more about his work and less about the physical act of painting. Or, rather, the physical act of

painting doesn't take as much of my time as heretofore, more of my time is devoted to looking at it and thinking about it and feeling it. Thinking about it is not enough --

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, it's the sensing of it.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: The sensing of it is more important. And when you sense that this is the next step, then you know; that's it, then it comes with ease. What is also so surprising -- I'm sure you've experienced it -- is this feeling of the continuity of a sensation that you have going through, it's a heartfelt kind of a feeling, and intelligence is involved, I'm sure, to a degree, and it sort of goes right through one's arm onto the brush right onto the paint onto the canvas. But at the time when that happens you're not aware of it. It's only when you're finished with that period of application of painting that you suddenly realize.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, you've been in, like, another world --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: And then when you come to a fallow period, that's a miserable situation. (with emphasis) That is miserable. I've known a lot of painters who suffer from that. Because you're worried about -- you're not concerned so much about the fallow -- if it's a fallow period and you're cognizant of the fact that it's a fallow period, that's all right; so you wait, although I continue working. But you wait, the time will come again, but you're afraid that this is the end, you're never going to get another idea!

That is the difficulty of painting from imagination. If you're painting from nature, well, it's there in front of you, so you go around until you find a place and it gives you a kind of impetus to paint. But there's nothing to draw on but your imagination --

DOROTHY SECKLER: You would not be tempted at that point, then, to set up some still life (overlapping voices) --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No, it doesn't interest me at all. What I did, as I said before, was hire a nude and I'd do some sketches and the result was painting from the sketches -- actually I lose the sketches and if I do find them once in a while, my painting is totally different from the sketches that I've done.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's become a residue in your ability somewhere. Martin, you've mentioned your colleagues. I've been wondering: here you were, working through the 30s when "social realism" was in the ascendent, then through the 40s when, gradually, "abstract" and then "abstract expressionist" movements came to the fore. You seem to have gone your own way without being very much involved with any of these things. Did you get "thrown" by that -- all --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I'm glad you brought that out. Actually, it only occurs to me now, in a clear sense now that you mentioned -- you clarified it for me -- but I was never affected by any of these movements. Oh, I enjoy good painting, I don't care what school of painting it is. I enjoy de Kooning and, well, some of the other painters too, although the enjoyment of it is of a limited dimension. That's an approach about painting that I think we spoke about before.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How do you feel about Rothko?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well, may I go on? (Seckler assents) I was never affected by any of these "schools," and you clarified it for me in a way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's really remarkable, because almost everyone, at least after a period of trying to assimilate something and then finding it wasn't right for them, you seem never to have been disturbed in your --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: No. I was interested in them, and I didn't deliberately not want to do it. It's just that I had my own -- I don't know, maybe it's a manifestation of (laughing) an ego. I don't know why, I didn't deliberately want to paint this way. This is IT. I always ask myself this question: Am I being honest with myself? I was tempted, or I meant to say, I did do one or two abstract expressionist paintings. It didn't satisfy and it wasn't enough. This wasn't me, I knew right away, so I didn't bother with it, I just tore it up and that was that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The only reason it occurred to me to mention Rothko, you mentioned De Kooning, but often in your landscapes, sort of these revery paintings -- they always seemed like reveries on landscapes to me -- there's a quality of a slight quiver in the way tones are put on that sometimes does recall to me just a sense of some of Rothko's most beautiful things where the color is thin and spreading. There's something of the same thing.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well, I like his work, although I think that -- well, I shouldn't comment on whether --

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, only as it affects your own thinking, you mean.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Oh, it hasn't affected my work because I worked that way long before --

DOROTHY SECKLER: You came at that quite independently.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Yes. I worked that way long before Rothko. I mean, my style had been already developed; yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I realize that. I just sort of felt, when you saw it you just said, "this is what I'm doing but on a different scale and with a different kind of" --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I have an empathy for his approach, and I can understand it. Barbara, incidentally, doesn't care for his work. But I do. There's a quivering kind of sensation, as you said --

DOROTHY SECKLER: That light look, a sort of breathing through other layers is there to some extent. Anyway, I knew you arrived at your exploring, it wasn't a question of influence --

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Oh, I don't mind influences, it just so happens that I devolved this way of working a long time ago. Except it was more dramatic before. Now it's more lyrical -- that is really the difference.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When has the shift mainly taken place?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I would say around (he ponders) ten years ago. No, ten years ago when there was a definite shift but it became more evident -- you mean from the dramatic to the lyrical?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: About ten years ago, when there was a definite departure; it started earlier than that. END OF THIS SIDE, B of TAPE 1

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MARTIN FRIEDMAN: My work is definitely much more lyrical now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'd like to see some of the earlier works, because I think that at the moment I first knew your work, it was pretty much in the lyrical vein. So I would love to see some reproductions or see the work itself if any of it is still in your possession.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: I have very few examples left of it, but I'll be glad to show them to you.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We have about three or four minutes left. I wonder if there's anything you'd sort of like to sum up? What your outlook is ahead -- (she laughs) the greatest painting is always the one that you're going to paint tomorrow!

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: That's it!

DOROTHY SECKLER: What are you thinking about right now? What's on your mind?

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Well, I'm thinking that when I return to New York I do want to continue a series of drawings that I'm making of the dance. I'm very much involved and love the dance. Not because of the physical act of the dance so much but because of the color and the choreography; especially the Modern dance, although I don't illustrate them; most of them are sort of semi-abstract in character. They're very lyrical. The one or two examples that you saw are more realistic than some of them. It's strange, I don't understand why it is, I don't paint these dance figures, I haven't made any paintings of them, I did several of them years ago but not in the last seven or eight years. And I haven't any of them left.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You've been a rather successful artist in selling your work, then.

MARTIN FRIEDMAN: Yes; fairly successful. Not in the way the outstanding painters that are very well known are; nowhere near that. But I've managed to eke out a living somehow or other the last few years. It seems that the sales of paintings, which doesn't bother me much one way or another, aren't -- well, there haven't been as many sales this year as there have been in the last four or five years, but I'm not concerned by that at all. All I'm interested in is the possibility of painting -- and I will continue painting all the time from now on. Provided -- there's a Hebrew word "provided mahkamullas [purely phon.sp.] doesn't tap me on the shoulder." You know what...

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