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Oral history interview with Lee Mullican, 1992 May 22-1993 Mar. 4

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Lee Mullican on Mayy 22, 1992; January 26, February 11 & March 4, 1993. The interview took place in Santa Monica, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

MAY 22, 1992

Tape 1, side A [session 1, tape 1; 30-minute tape sides]

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Lee Mullican, May 22, 1992, in his studio in Santa Monica. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. This is tape one, side one. Without further ado, we'll just go on into this. What I'd like to do, Lee, as we discussed earlier at lunch, is rather quickly sort of review your own background. I mean, I know that you participated in the UCLA Oral History Program, that I'm sure quite thorough interview with you, but some years have elapsed, and I think it would be useful for the purposes of the Archives to have that biographical armature, if you will, starting in the beginning and perhaps then quickly moving right up to close to the present or at least getting you into the more recent years. And then in subsequent sessions we can go and dwell a bit on some of the more interesting periods. Because what we would like to do here the purpose of this, number 1, is to complement the papers themselves, which you are giving to the Archives, and then also to create a separate and specific Archives oral history document, which will be sufficient unto itself for researchers. And we'll try to live with the traffic noise out there.

LEE MULLICAN: [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anyway, with that introduction out of the way, what I would like to do is start at the beginning, taking you back.

LEE MULLICAN: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One thing we do know as a matter of record: You were born in 1919 in Chickasha, Oklahoma, and like several other well-known California artists you hale from Oklahoma. Maybe you could begin by thinking back to those earliest years, some of your own origins, and then this process, this pilgrimage, that led you ultimately to here and to Taos, which we'll get to.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, we'll get to that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, it is important to know that I was born in Oklahoma. I mean even today I'm still rather in awe of the fact that where I came from and how I got here today that I ever really escaped Oklahoma, but it was necessary that I do so. [In a way, Anyway] I'm really like the son of pioneers. My mother [Zula Jolley Ed.] was born in North Carolina, and lived on the banks of the something called the Broad River, which is very near Shelby, North Carolina, and she had quite a number of brothers and sisters. And at one point her father [Stanford Jolley Ed.] said, "If my children are going to have fine spouses, we're going to have to leave North Carolina." So it was at that time that they were homesteading in Oklahoma Territory. So he decided to move his whole family to Oklahoma Territory. And he and I guess his sons came in a wagon from North Carolina to a place called Rush Springs, Oklahoma. My mother and her sister came on the train and got off the train in this little town called Rush Springs, and they settled on a farm there. Some of the family stayed in North Carolina, so the family was really split up, but at that time my mother was in her late teens I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you know what year this was?

LEE MULLICAN: I can tell you because I just copied a lot of things down, somewhere. It was. . . . [looking through papers] I'll have to find it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, well, you know, about. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was about. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Early twentieth century.

LEE MULLICAN: No, it was late [eighteen hundreds Ed.] It was around 1900.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, okay.

LEE MULLICAN: And at the same time my father's family was living in Texas. My grandfather [Isaac Right Ed.] Mullican came from parts unknown. We were never able to find out where he came from. But anyway he settled in a place called Ross, Texas, near Waco. And at one point he and his family decided that they would move up into this Oklahoma Territory, and they did, and my father arrived in Rush Springs horseback.

PAUL KARLSTROM: About the same time.

LEE MULLICAN: About that same time. And my father had gone to school in Texas, and he was at that point appointed a school teacher in a place called Acme, Oklahoma Oklahoma Territory really. It was before statehood, you see. And so he was teaching a big one-room school all grades and my mother was one of his students.

Before my mother died I transcribed a lot of stories about her beginnings and all of that, because I knew I wanted to make a record of it, which I did. So she said, "Now, I'm gonna tell you about my secret love affair." [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, dear.

LEE MULLICAN: And I thought, "Wow, now what is this?" Well, the secret love affair was with my father who was the school teacher.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's not allowed.

LEE MULLICAN: Not allowed. But he would sneak notes to her, and she would sneak notes to him, et cetera. So those were [early, her] days in Oklahoma, and then she told me that one day he arrived on the farm on his horse. And he got off his horse and immediately practically before he said hello to anybody he began to wipe the horse down and look after it, and my mother's mother said, "He'll make a good husband. Anyone who treats his horse like that. . . ." [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs] Oh, boy.

LEE MULLICAN: ". . . will make a good husband." So that's what happened. They were married, and lived in this little town called Rush Springs. They moved into Rush Springs. He quit school teaching and began to work in a bank. And from then on he was a businessman. And my sister [Mahota Mullican Grigsby Ed.], who's still living, was born in Rush Springs.

It was a wild kind of country and my mother used to say how everybody really had to watch for the tornadoes and go into storm cellars, and it was a wild, marvelous country. And eventually. . . . Oh, statehood was I guess like 1907 or something, and so they moved out of Rush Springs up to a place called Chickasha. [pronounces it Chick-a-shay Ed.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: "Chickashay"?

LEE MULLICAN: "Chickasha."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Let's get that pronunciation right.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it's an Indian word, of course, based on. . . . Well, it has a resemblance to the Chickasaw Indian Tribe, but it's spelt s-h-a, so it's Chickasha. And that's where they made their home, and their final home.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you know why they moved there?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, because he was offered a job working in some kind of. . . . He was a secretary to the treasurer of the county, or something like that anyway. But he moved because he could have a better job, and it was a little bigger town and there would be more happening. And so they moved there and eventually. . . .

I was the third child. There was another sister, a younger sister that died. And then I was born, and then three years later my brother was born. So there really three of us in the family my sister and two brothers and my mother and father plus all the relatives.

And we lived in town. We lived on a paved street, but it was like a quarter of a mile to the country where we used to hike and walk and. . . . But the life was really a farm life, and all my uncles and aunts all lived on farms and that was a great part of my childhood.
When I started school, I could walk to school. It was like four blocks away. And I guess it must have been in like the second grade I had my first art instruction, which was really kind of like, you know, paper cutouts and. . . . I

don't really remember what it was. The one thing that really surprised me later [was] when I remembered that the art teacher's name was Miss Blue. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you remember that.

LEE MULLICAN: I remembered Miss Blue because. . . . Well, and of course later I got involved in. . . . She was the art teacher. But there was no really. . . . You know, public school art there just really didn't exist, and so I really had no involvement with art until. . . . I guess I was in high school, living in this small town and enjoying all of the attributes of small-town living.

I hated school. I hated high school. It was boring to me. I was no good at it, and I really didn't know what I wanted to do. The only interest. . . . One of the interests that I had was in theater, but it was a kind of children's theater, and we would put on "shows," as they called it, and I remember at one point I made a marionette stage and. . . .

As I say, there was no art classes per se. Maybe occasionally you would be, in one class they would let you paint a plaster cast of a parrot or something like that, but. . . . And I just didn't think about art except that my mother was an amateur painter. And she went to school there in Chickasha. She took a couple of art classes. And I think the art really evolved from an interest that all the ladies had at that time in painting china painting flowers on china and so forth, and she involved and she took a drawing class, out at the college, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: There was a college there?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, it was a women's college. Oklahoma College for Women. And so she took a couple of drawing classes, and then one day I was aware that she was painting, that she had set up a little easel and she was doing things in oil paint on little canvases. And I had never seen this before. And then later. . . . It gets very hot in Oklahoma, of course, so we would go to New Mexico and to Colorado. My father loved to fish, and my brother and I. . . . My sister was older and she was already gone off to college and all that. But my brother and I, we would go up to New Mexico and ride horses, and my mother would paint right on the scene.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: Make sketches, right on the scene, and so I was looking over her shoulder as she was doing all this. Well, eventually, I guess in like late junior high school, my mother and father went off to Florida to visit her sister who had a big tomato farm, and my brother and I were left alone in the house with my sister, I think. Anyway, at one point I came across her oil painting kit and decided that I wanted to try it. So I picked up a brush for like the first time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Had you been watching her enough to get some idea of what you had to do?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes. Yeah, that's right. I don't remember now what I did. But I remember working, doing some things on paper, just seeing what the brush would do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was she working with oil. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . or watercolor?

LEE MULLICAN: No, she was working with oil. And she loved Rocky Mountain landscapes and things like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm! Did she have some talent?

LEE MULLICAN: No, strictly amateur. Strictly amateur. But pleasant enough, and it was very influential on me. And eventually. . . . Let's see, that would have been, I think it was. . . . The Chicago World's Fair must have been like 1933. I think that's the date. Anyway my mother and father went to the Chicago World's Fair, and when they came back my mother had brought a catalog that she had picked up at the Chicago Art Institute, and I was very interested in it as I was in all kinds, at looking at all kinds of pictures in encyclopedias, the Book of Knowledge, whatever. Imagery was more important to me than anything. That's why I such a poor student, I guess. But anyway in the catalog were my first samples of modern art. Almost of any art really, because there were no art books. You know, there was no reproductions or anything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you really had no idea probably beyond what your mother was creating, the landscapes, of what the world of art. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: The only other thing was that we had a subscription to Life magazine. And occasionally there were articles in there on art et cetera, which I devoured.

Anyway, when I graduated from high school, it was already a foregone conclusion that I would go to a church school. My family was very religious, Protestant. It was just understood that I would go to a place called Abilene Christian College in Abilene, Texas. And that suited me fine. I was ready to get away from home. So that's where I had my first art class, really. I mean, I had to take other things, but what I was interested in mostly were classes in art. Also, another influential well, in this case, object was at one point, when I was maybe like 10 years old, I went with my mother and father to Washington, D.C. He was in what they called the abstract business. He did land and title abstracts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

LEE MULLICAN: [laughing] Had nothing to do with my kind of abstraction. And while we were in Washington the only thing I remember most important vivid memory was going into the Corcoran. And in the Corcoran there was a head carved in marble, and the head was in a shroud, so the features were behind this veil that covered the whole head. And of course I was in the Corcoran in the last 7 or 8 years, and that piece is there. It was still on exhibition.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that a Daniel Chester French?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I don't think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No?

LEE MULLICAN: I don't know who did it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I can see it, but I can't. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, it was a vivid image and one that I kept and still keep. Anyway, at Abilene Christian College I was immediately introduced to a woman who was the single art teacher [Mary Locke], and she was a much older lady. At that time she must have been, you know, like fifty-five, sixty years old, but still teaching. She was a very competent painter, and practically the first week that I was in her class she said, "Let me see your hand," so I showed her my hand, and she looked at it and then she looked me in the eye and said, "You are going to be a very distinguished artist."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs] Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you, of course, believed her.

LEE MULLICAN: I believed her. I thought, "Well, maybe that's something I can do. Maybe I'll believe that."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: So I took her class and did little still lifes, and then the following year I went back, and she had retired and there was another woman teacher [Juanita Tittle LM]. But she was more modernist, and she was more of an expressionist and I immediately was attracted to what she was doing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I was going to ask you that. Was this your first recognition that there were really differences in modes of expression and styles and so forth?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, that's right. And also, you see, at that time, through well, really I think it was mostly Life magazine or maybe Time I became aware that there was such a thing as modern art. There were articles on cubism, articles on surrealism, and occasionally I remember in the library finding an art book on Picasso and van Gogh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was in Abilene now?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, this is still at Abilene. So that was my introduction to modern art, and particularly modern French art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Could I go back just a minute?

LEE MULLICAN: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Remember the Chicago World's Fair and the catalog that your parents brought back. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: I still have that somewhere.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, do you?

LEE MULLICAN: Not here, of course, but I kept that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But do you recall the kinds of images that were there and how they affected you? Were there more modern. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: They were just strange to me. I mean, there were those things, you know, that were very representational, and, well, one accepted that, but there were other things. I seem to remember that there was a Chagall, Picasso, and other things that I had never seen before. And right away, I don't know, I knew that that's where I wanted to go. Even at that age I was not interested in just setting up a still life of flowers and working from it. I wanted to do more. And all this strangeness intrigued me, and something far beyond, you know, of what I had ever known.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Can you bring that back at all? You say the strangeness that these were weird, these were strange and yet they were attractive and can you somehow put your finger on just what it was that was appealing? Was it that you saw these images as sort of avenues to a different type of experience, a different realm. Or did you think about it all?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, no, I really think I thought of it as being a modern age, that I had entered a modern age. And also about that same time my father took my brother and I to the Texas Centennial Exhibition, and there, of course, there also was art and
painting, but what interested me the most was the kind of Art Deco architecture and that sort of thing design elements that were there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were interested in modernism?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, right away. Because, as I say, I think it's because I knew that there was a modern age, and here I'm entering into that, you see. I mean I had that possibility of entering into it. And because of those two years in that art school, everyone encouraged me, and I realized that I was on to something, and enough so that I realized I didn't want to go back the third year. I had to go somewhere else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You'd sort of the exhausted the possibilities there.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, at this small school with one teacher.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What kind of. . . . Excuse me for interrupting, but what kind of work did the second teacher have you do? The more modernist teacher?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, she. . . . We did landscapes, and she would set up still lifes much the same way, but there was a more of an expressionist method, brush work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You could use say an arbitrary color rather than a [local] color?

LEE MULLICAN: The brush work. And at one point, at one point I remember setting up a cowboy boot. Instead of a bouquet of flowers, I just drew a big cowboy boot, and she helped me with that. It was an attitude really. It was an attitude of paint that was very different from this older lady who more or less was more interested in maybe doing copies of calendars and things like that. So then it was decided that, yes, I could go to the University of Oklahoma.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who decided that? Your family?

LEE MULLICAN: My father, yes. My father. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what did you do. Did you tell him, "I really decided I want to pursue art?"

LEE MULLICAN: I said, "I've been to Abilene the two years, and you wanted me to go, and I enjoyed it. . . ." And as I say, it was the church school, and interestingly enough it's the same sect that's now at Pepperdine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. So I went to the University of Oklahoma.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What is that, Baptist?

LEE MULLICAN: No, it's something called the Church of Christ, which is a Christian church, Protestant church. So I went to University of Oklahoma, which was like 35 miles from my hometown. You want to check that? [referring

to the tape recorder Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Still okay.

LEE MULLICAN: That's okay. So I enrolled at the University of Oklahoma, and immediately, again, concentrated on my art classes, and there for the first time I was able to work from the figure. I took basic drawing classes, basic painting classes. And at the same time I met a couple of other students who were interested in what I was doing as well abstract. . . . There was one. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you really were at this time interested in nonobjective painting?

LEE MULLICAN: I began. . . . Because what. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [In say] Kandinsky and people like that _____?

LEE MULLICAN: Because I knew what was going on and all that. Yes, right away. And I knew, somehow I knew. . . . As I say, somehow I knew I was a different kind of artist. I was not interested in what Thomas Hart Benton was doing or John Steuart Curry or Reginald Marsh. All of those, all of those regionalists, that were very popular at that time, didn't interest me in the least. And I found that what I did in the art school that did interest me the most was what I did outside of classes where I had a chance to work with abstraction and which I did. And I had a small apartment where I had room enough to. . . . Like a little studio, and that's where I worked.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did. . . . I think maybe we'll turn it over. [referring to the tape]

Tape 1, side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Lee Mullican, tape one, side B. Lee, you were talking about, we were talking about the University of Oklahoma and your first real art school experience there and some of the opportunities you had the fact that you, from the very beginning, were clear that you were somebody who was interested in more progressive art, which I gather you then would describe or at that point understood in terms of abstraction to one degree or another. And what I wanted to ask you before the idea leaves me is what was your understanding of abstraction and its meaning at that time?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I'm not sure that I even knew. I was working probably rather blindly, except maybe influenced by what I had seen in reproduction, doing something similar, and I was very interested in what was going on in surrealism and Salvador Dali and et cetera.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, that's not abstraction, except. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, but it was part of the modern age. And there were degrees of abstraction. Anyway, it was far-out stuff, and that really. . . . Why, I don't know, but I was really hooked on this, and I mean, it's fair to say that even at that time I was like one of maybe four or five abstract artists in all of Oklahoma. There was just nobody doing it. The dean of the art school, head of the art school, was a man named [Oscar LM] Jacobson. He was Scandinavian, and he taught mostly art history and modern art history, so I saw a lot slides of what was going on in contemporary painting in Europe at that time. He was a painter and although he worked from the landscape he did it in a very expressionist way, so that there were degrees of abstraction already fitting in, and I only mention this because one day he had an exhibition in the lobby of the building and in the publicity they had reproduced one of his paintings upside down.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hah.

LEE MULLICAN: They reproduced it upside down. So [when] we came in the next morning to the lobby, he had turned the painting upside down.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He said, "That's fine."

LEE MULLICAN: And I thought, "That is an attitude that really hits home."

PAUL KARLSTROM: You liked that?

LEE MULLICAN: I loved that. And so I said, "Isn't that great. It can be upside down, it can be any way, and it's still okay." Well, also at that time I began to read I was doing a lot of reading and I discovered Gertrude Stein. You know like this is age 19 or something, and there again this was far-out stuff. There wasn't anything like this anywhere. Actually playing with words and ideas and, of course, she wrote about Picasso and then I read the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, and et cetera, et cetera. So I was really in tune with all that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What were you guideposts? What guided you then and pointed you in these directions to

come into contact with Gertrude Stein, to. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: I don't know, except I could only imagine that I wanted to be different, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

LEE MULLICAN: Whatever happens to artists when they realize that that's, that something, that they're going to be different and they're going to offer something that isn't seen anywhere else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you were probably hearing about, oh, the lost generation. Were you aware of the Americans, expatriates, in Paris and a little bit earlier?

LEE MULLICAN: Not really. No. . . . Oh, I knew of it, but it didn't, it wasn't. . . . I mean, I had no romantic idea of going to Paris or anything like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this was still very much at a distance. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: I was still a very. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and filtered through magazines.

LEE MULLICAN: . . . a very naive teenager really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did any of your professors help direct you towards readings? And I'm just curious to know. Somehow you knew what to do, [to] come in contact with.

LEE MULLICAN: I don't remember that they did. They were very traditional painters. And I also took a couple of classes in sculpture and ceramics and methods. So that was the advantage of the university being what it was that I had this opportunity to stretch out further. But after. . . . I also went to summer school there.

Now you have to realize that this was 1940, and I was soon going to be twenty-one and when I was going to be twenty-one I'd have to register for the draft and all that, so I wanted to get as much out of it as I could, and so I told my parents again, "This isn't enough. The University of Oklahoma is not enough. I've got to go to just a straight art school." So I began to inquire around and I discovered the Kansas City Art Institute, and I decided that that was probably the place for me. So I sent off for a catalogue and brochure and heard all about, read all about it. And it was decided that I could do this.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They were pretty agreeable, weren't they? They supported. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, my father didn't have hoot in hell of what I was doing. He did not have any sense of what I was doing, of what I wanted to do. As far as he was concerned, I was making a great mistake. I should be a businessman like he was a successful businessman like he was and a member of the church, and et cetera. But, you see, I think my mother saw in me a kind of continuation of what she could have done or should have done as an artist, and she gave me every encouragement and my father didn't win out. And so whatever she wanted me to do, I'd be it; whatever I wanted to do, she agreed with, and he went along and paid the bills.

So I went to Kansas City. Well, lo and behold when I got there the abstract world that I was interested in was not in Kansas City either.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

LEE MULLICAN: Because Thomas Hart Benton had been there in the school before, and when I arrived the painter Fletcher Martin was the artist-in-residence. So I took classes with him, and it was mostly figurative and, being Fletcher Martin, it was either a beautiful nude or a black boxer or. . . . Mostly figurative. And I did my first lithographs there, which were also figurative. But I still had this thing about abstraction and surrealism and that was kind of the real key.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you then. . . . You must have been a little disappointed when you arrived at the. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was still an excitement, you see, to go off to a big city like that and into an art school and meet up with other students and go to classes where that you could actually draw from the naked woman. You know?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. You couldn't do that in Oklahoma?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, no. No, no. All models were clothed. So there was an excitement being there, and I began to be a little less inhibited and discovered right away what I could do on my own. And then there came Pearl

Harbor. See I'd just been there, well, just a few months.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's right. If you went in the fall of '41, huh?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. And I realized that my time was short. I had already been exempted from the draft because I was in school, and they said, "Okay, you can finish the year," but that would mean in June of '42 I had to be out of there, and I was going to be drafted. Well, my father went into a panic and said, "You have to learn to type." [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

LEE MULLICAN: "You've got to learn something that'll keep you out of the front lines." So for a while I broke the art school, say for a few weeks, and went to Oklahoma City and learned to really do typing and shorthand and that sort of thing. But I just said, "Forget it! I can't do this. This is my last year in art school. I've got to go back." So I went back and I finished. By that time they gave me the degree, a 4-year degree because of my other. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you only had to do one year?

LEE MULLICAN: I only did one year. And became very friendly with Fletcher, and he was very nice, and we planned to meet in Mexico after the war and do all kinds of things, and he had a beautiful wife, and we would all go dancing. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm!

LEE MULLICAN: . . . and go down to a jazz, a burlesque. We went to burlesque a lot. He loved to go to burlesque, and a few of us always traveled along with him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But didn't he end up here or spend some time? I mean, he was in California.

LEE MULLICAN: He was in California before that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Before that, okay.

LEE MULLICAN: That was before that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. So then you didn't. . . . I'm jumping ahead a bit, but you didn't reconnect with him here at all.

LEE MULLICAN: No, I only reconnected with him in like 1960.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh. Where was he then?

LEE MULLICAN: He was living up in Woodstock, and I happened to have some friends in Woodstock who knew him, and I went by and said hello.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you, during this time well, brief time, one year at the Art Institute, two questions. One, Fletcher Martin: You must have had some discussions about the new art, the new painting, with him.

LEE MULLICAN: I'm not sure that I did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: I don't remember. I don't remember.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean you don't know what his attitudes were. . . . He didn't reveal himself?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, you see, there again, things were very conservative as far as what was happening. Regionalism was still a big thing, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You didn't talk about those crazy people in New York or in Paris who were doing these insane images?

LEE MULLICAN: Didn't talk about it. I knew about it and I loved it. And of course there was this great museum there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

LEE MULLICAN: And they had a huge Picasso show that year that I was there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, great! Lucky you.

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, it was wonderful. Not only that, but one was required to take art history class, and I took a class in Chinese art, and the class met in the museum, and the professor, who I think his name was [Lawrence] Sickman, would bring these objects out and set them on the table, and we could fondle and touch them and talk about them, you know, so it's a great experience I had.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

LEE MULLICAN: Tremendous experience. But time was running out, and sure enough after I graduated I went back to Chickasha and the following June I was inducted in the army. Again, so naive I had no idea where I was going, what I was doing. I was a dreamer. I just dreamt of the things I wanted to. The whole idea of war, you know, and being stuck with all of these soldiers, it was. . . . You know, you can imagine, just totally. . . . And I thought I was entering the dark ages. I remember when I took the train from Oklahoma City to Fort Sill to begin basic training, I cried most of the way. I just felt like it was the end of the earth. It was the end of the world for me. I had no. . . . And I had never been athletic. I was frail skin and bones. I had no interest in sports. I only had, which I think is the only thing that I ever survived the army was, that I had a great sense of humor. A sense of humor and a sense of life, and I tried to get as much out of it as I could.

Prior to this, again, my father said you've got to do something, so it was agreed. . . . He talked with friends, and we realized that there was a topographic battalion where artists and architects could go and learn how to make maps, topography. So he knew some influential man who knew a colonel who knew a general or whatever. [chuckles] Anyway, I was. . . . After basic training, terrible, horrible basic training. . . . The only thing I learned, I was pretty good as a marksman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, good.

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's useful if you're in the army.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was a game, you know: Can you hit the bullseye? So I did the best I could, but other than that I hated the whole. . . . It was just a nightmare. But I was on my way to topographic school at Fort Belvoir after my basic training in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. So I ended up in Fort Belvoir outside of Washington, D.C. And it was there that I learned to make maps. It was also there and this is the great thing I was able to go into the museums in Washington, in Baltimore, weekend leaves in New York City. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

LEE MULLICAN: And it was at the Phillips Gallery in Washington, D.C. at that time that I saw my first Paul Klees a whole, large exhibition of Paul Klee. And, of course, I never really got over that. I never survived that until this day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You think that's one of the great revelations.

LEE MULLICAN: That's was one of the great revelations. One of the major influences.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember. . . . We can't waste this aside here. Do you remember what thoughts that encounter with Klee provoked? I mean, what did you see there?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, there again, it was a fantasy world to me, and there was something appealing about the size of the canvases. They didn't have to be huge Picassos. There's something about the scale of them that really attracted me. And plus just the sense of what he could do by making a mark, and then making another mark, and the use of color and abstraction. There was just no one else doing this sort of thing. So that was a great influence.

Another influence was at the Museum of Modern Art I saw the first things of Morris Graves, who later became a friend. But I was interested in what he was doing and the way he worked. And everything else, too. I mean, god, just you know, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan and the Whitney.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, it must have been incredible.

LEE MULLICAN: It was, you see. And this was why I decided I was in the army for. This was the reason that I was in the army.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was worth it, then!

LEE MULLICAN: It was worth it. And even if I was on guard duty all night, or whatever I was doing, I was making little sketches, I was drawing, I was thinking about drawing, thinking about painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Through these fortuitous experiences and contacts you had in the east, which. . . . Well, it must have been absolutely extraordinary for you because a whole world had to have opened up.

LEE MULLICAN: Sure. You know, I was a naive farm boy from Oklahoma suddenly thrown into this great world of art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you begin to develop some kind of an idea of what modernism may have been about beyond this notion of living in a modern world and the modern world should have its own forms and images?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, yes, because I was interested and excited about doing that thing that had never been seen before. And I felt that I was being [a, the] creator here, and I was creating things that no one else could create. I was creating things that no one else had seen or would ever see unless they looked at my work. So there was an excitement and a drive to do that thing. And it was based upon. . . . Obviously it was based upon modern French painting. Because there was nothing going on in the U.S. that really interested me. Well, outside of Morris Graves. So that. . . . Well, that's where it was, and that was Washington and New York. And, of course, again my great interest in theater. I was able to go to the theater, to the opera, ballet. All of that was suddenly available to me. And my weekends, weekend passes, were great.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you get interested in opera and ballet and all these great cultural forms, given your background?

LEE MULLICAN: You didn't see that. No, you didn't see that. But there were films. You know, things going on in films. I remember. . . . Curious, you know, there again it's those things that [we Ed.] just hadn't seen before. I remember I don't know which one it is but a Marx Brothers film, which I'm sure you could see today, that. . . . In this room in the film there was a piece of what looked like, it was a piece of modern sculpture, a very abstract shape, and one of the characters went up and put his hand through it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He punched it. [spoken very softly]

LEE MULLICAN: No, there was a hole in the sculpture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, oh.

LEE MULLICAN: Like an early Henry Moore, and everybody laughed. That was, you know. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was really funny.

LEE MULLICAN: That was really. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Cuckoo.

LEE MULLICAN: Really funny, really cuckoo, and I just loved it. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you wanted to be part of that kind of stuff.

LEE MULLICAN: I wanted to be a part of that kind of. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, your sense of humor it sounds to me, is a part of it.

LEE MULLICAN: I wanted to be a part of that kind of nonsense. And by then I was reading more and more and still a great fan of Gertrude Stein and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was it about Gertrude Stein that. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, there again, it was just putting the words together like they'd never been seen, and making sounds that had never been seen, and I was just crazy enough to think that's more important than _____. Well, I read other things, too. I was a great fan of Thomas Wolfe, and Steinbeck. I did a lot of reading, I really did, but what intrigued me was to be able to. . . . And of course I'd imitate. I wrote poetry that imitated Gertrude Stein, and William Carlos Williams, and imitated all those people, you know. It's just like I had discovered a new way of being, and I knew that that was for me. And at the same time here I was frozen in this army cell, which went on for three and a half years.

From Fort Belvoir we were put on the train and ended up in a place, just outside of Paris, Texas, called Camp Maxey, and there I was thrown into a topographic battalion, and everybody in it were either misfits [laughs], or

they were artists or architects or designers. Anyway, it was a rare group of people. And then one day I went into the latrine and saw this man sitting on the toilet, who I would have ignored otherwise, except he was reading the Life of Buddha. Well, it turned out his name was Jack Stauffacher. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're kidding.

LEE MULLICAN: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs] This was in Paris, Texas?

LEE MULLICAN: Paris, Texas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ah!

LEE MULLICAN: He was part of the print battalion, you see. As a printer, he was put in to learn how to print maps. Well, we became fast friends, because we were both crazy enough to love to listen to classical music, to read Buddha, to fight the army, to be a real. . . . Well, not to get along. We just swore we would not get along. And I remember. . . . I only mention this because, you know, it's because you know Jack.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I love it.

LEE MULLICAN: I had him on a cleanup. . . . I was in charge of a platoon that was cleaning up and sweeping up, and he just wouldn't do anything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

LEE MULLICAN: And I'd swear at him, "You know, you've got to help. You've got to help all these other guys. You've got to do your part." But he wouldn't. And so he rebelled from the beginning. He rebelled, he rebelled, he rebelled, and then he just couldn't take it any longer and they discharged him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I didn't know that. Is that right? He was incompatible or something?

LEE MULLICAN: He just could not fit into the army. They knew he would never fit into the army. And then. . . . I really think that it got to him mentally also, and so he ended up in a kind of psychiatric ward, and they just. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . gave him a sort of medical discharge.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right. Exactly. Well, I was going through the same kind of torture. I was drawing and learning to make maps from aerial photographs and all of that, but I was completely lost. I had a few leaves where I went home. You know, it was like a half a day away from Paris, Texas, to Chickasha. And I made friends with three other men, and we became kind of life-long companions, brothers. But I was always drawing, and interested in drawing, and of course in the topographic battalion there was all the paper and ink and pens, and everything that you wanted to work with was right there. So I did a lot of drawing at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So Jack was. . . . This sounds like the art and communication location for the service. Mapmaking. You say he was working in the print. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, he was printing the maps.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was printing the maps, okay.

LEE MULLICAN: See, my company, we drew the maps, and his company printed the maps, so he was actually a printer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that how he started printing, do you think?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no. He had. . . . No, no, he had his own little press. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Way before.

LEE MULLICAN: . . . in San Mateo, and that's why he was put into that company.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. Yeah, okay. That's right, I remember.

LEE MULLICAN: Because he had already had printing experience, you see.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

LEE MULLICAN: But it was hard, and I had a kind of breakdown also.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But not enough to get you out of the service apparently.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I didn't know. I wasn't trying to fake it, but I had terrible chest pains. As I say, I was like skin and bones. I mean, I was just so thin, and I couldn't, it was hard for me just to get through the basic training or to do the exercises every morning and all of that. It was a torture. These chest pains and aches got to the point where I had to go see the doctor, and so then I was given all kind of tests mental tests and it boiled down to an interview, and the question came up, said, "Do you want to get out of the army? Would you rather be out of the army?" and I said, "Of course I'd rather be out of the army." Says, "Well, then how do you feel about continuing on?" Well. . . .

Tape 2, side A [session 1, tape 2]

PAUL KARLSTROM: An interview with Lee Mullican on May 22, 1992. This is tape two, side A. And, Lee, we're talking about what must have been a pretty unpleasant experience.

LEE MULLICAN: I should have been discharged right on the spot, but I wasn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, and you went to. . . . We may have lost the last of that [when the tape ran out Trans.]. So you went to an interview and they asked you. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Went to an interview and also. . . . I mean, there was all kinds of psychological pressure. The war was on. The war going. And I felt that I had to do my part. And I owed it to my parents and to my country. And, of course, I had no. . . . I mean, I knew that what was happening in Europe with Hitler and all, you know was wrong, and I felt conscientious, but at the same time I was really sick. I was really ill. I'd have great crying jags and I would. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, was it depression?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, a kind of depression. Exactly a kind of depression. And so this interviewer said, "How do you feel about going on?" And I said, "The only thing that interests me in going on is that I heard, there's a rumor, that the battalion is moving to California. Maybe if I can get out of Camp Maxey, Texas, if I could get to California" where I had never been "that it would be a new experience and a new way of looking, and the basic training was over, we would really then get into [probably, properly] making maps." And so I said, "I'd be willing to try that." So, of course, they let me go on. So Jack and I would take long walks and listen to music and talk about what would happen after the war.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which was?

LEE MULLICAN: That we would do. . . . That I would make books, write and draw, and we would make books and he would print them, and we would set up our own little press, and et cetera, et cetera. So after he left, I kept in contact with him right through to the end of the war.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He went back to San Francisco.

LEE MULLICAN: He went back to San Francisco, that's right. Went back to his press in San Mateo with his brother, and I guess his parents were still alive at that time. So that I went on to California [with the army Ed.]. We didn't know where. Boy, we didn't know where we were going.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: When the train stopped, we looked outside, and this forsaken place, it was Indio.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [cackles]

LEE MULLICAN: And we were immediately out into the desert for desert training. Desert battalion. Learning to make maps, and making maps for the Pacific Theater. Or maybe not at that time. We were still in training really. But I loved the desert, and I loved being out of there, in the open. And we could take hikes, and it was hot and it was terrible and we lived in tents.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did they have date groves at that time?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, sure, in Indio.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The wonderful date groves.

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes, we spent our weekends in Indio and Palm Springs. This was. . . . You know, get drunk and have a great time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sounds good.

LEE MULLICAN: Me and my buddies. Yeah, we had a great time. And so I had more time to draw, more time to think, and made my first trips into Los Angeles, first trips into Hollywood, first into jazz clubs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were able to do that. I mean you had enough leave. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . .and sort of mobility.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right. They saw to that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what was it like then? This must have been like '44, '3 or '4.

LEE MULLICAN: Something like that. '43?

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what kinds of things did you when you came into L.A.? I [knew, mean] they have. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well. . . . I just noticed in the paper that they've done a big musical on Louis Jordan. Well, we went. . . . I was a great jazz fan and collected jazz records all during the war. I had a friend who would buy them and save them for me, and so I was into jazz and I remember being on the Strip, I guess, and for a couple of weekends we went to hear Louis Jordan, and it was. . . . And the two great boogie-woogie pianists. What was their names? Oh, I can't think of it. . . . But anyway Hollywood was Hollywood.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So was this along Hollywood Boulevard? Or Sunset [Boulevard Ed.]?

LEE MULLICAN: Sunset.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sunset, right.

LEE MULLICAN: But the only way we had to get in was. . . . Well, you could take the train, but that was too slow, or you could ride in the back end of a truck and freeze to death, which we did. But anyway, anything to get into LA, you know, that was great.

So the desert. . . . And I've loved the desert ever since. Still enjoy going to Indio. I'm still going out there. What used to be the desert training center no longer exists; there's just nothing there, unless you know exactly where to look.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's probably Rancho Mirage or something.

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, no. This is still out in the desert. Desert Center, it's called, on the way to Blythe. But as it turns out, of course, true to army tradition, if you are trained in the desert, you are automatically sent to the South Pacific. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, right, the most opposite environment.

LEE MULLICAN: Yes! Putting us through all this desert training, and we end up in Hawaii.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, well.

LEE MULLICAN: And that's where we actually started really making maps for all of the Admiral Nimitz and MacArthur, and then by that time I felt like I was really making a contribution. And I loved working with aerial photographs, which was a great influence on my painting later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's interesting.

LEE MULLICAN: This aerial view of pattern.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did it work? They would go up and then take photographs. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: They'd take the photo, they would send the photographs. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You wouldn't go up?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, no, no. No, we received the photographs, and these photographs we would make into a mosaic sometimes or we would make contour maps from them. There was a machine you looked through so could draw contours. And so this was Oahu, and we were there for a year. And we were, as I say, very busy doing the right thing, I felt. I felt like I. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you felt better, finally, about. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: I finally felt better. And there was the excitement of Honolulu. And even in Schofield Schofield Barracks, where we were stationed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where is that?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it's on the island.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Somewhere, okay.

LEE MULLICAN: Four years ago I went out there. I was in Hawaii, so I went out there to look at it. Hadn't since changed since the time of the war. It was exactly the same. It was amazing. It was amazing how they've kept that place. _____ this part of history. But I. . . . After a year it was enough.

The big event as far as my life today or what was to happen to me after the war was I went to the. . . . The Honolulu Academy of Fine Art was there, and they had a marvelous library where you could read art magazines contemporary art magazines and art books and I haunted the place. And it was there where I first saw a copy of Dyn magazine you know, D-y-n magazine which was published by Wolfgang Paalen in Mexico City.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this was where? In a library at the. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: . . . Honolulu Academy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Pretty advanced.

LEE MULLICAN: And this was very influential. And here again this magazine and what I found in there was a part of what I wanted to do. I knew this. And I read the articles, I looked at the pictures, and I was very influenced.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Can you explain why? Can you remember why? What was it? Because this is pretty important.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, there again, it sounds naive, but it was really I was attracted to that sort of thing which I had not seen before. This was different than straight surrealism. This was different than cubism, which had always before been my big thing. Here was a magazine being published with articles and reproductions about things I was not aware of, you see. And suddenly, also, through this magazine I became really interested in primitive art, folk art, pre-Columbian art, Northwest Coast art, which Paalen had put into this magazine, you see. And it was obvious that this. . . . There was a direct link between that and modern painting, for me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that was it.

LEE MULLICAN: So that was a big. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: A connection was made.

LEE MULLICAN: There was a connection there. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That made it made it what? somehow universal, timeless?

LEE MULLICAN: Before that I was not even aware that there could be an interest in primitive art, tribal art. Even though I grew up in Oklahoma. The Oklahoma Indians produced very little outside of fancy beadwork, but here I was aware of African art. As I say pre-Columbian, Northwest coast, American Indian, everything. And I began to realize that this was a source for me. And so it was a very influential moment.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did Dyn, did the articles there discuss these connections and provoke further thought or was it. . . . What kind of articles were they? What was the sort of editorial point of view, if you can recall?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, the articles. . . . I mean, there wasn't such a involvement with influence of one on the other. I mean, there was an American Indian issue, had all dealt with American Indian, and it had. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: A subject worthy of study, then.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right. And it made no really sharp connection with modern painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so, then in fact you were drawing. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: But then on the other hand, all Paalen's philosophies are in that book. You know, his ideas on science and color and what's possible, and being involved with that thing that has never been seen before, and all of that. So it was an influential magazine. And I didn't see all the copies. I mean I wasn't aware. . . . Until after the war. They were eventually all published in a book done by Wittenborn [Publishers LM] called Form and Sense. Until I saw that book Paalen was just another person in Mexico.

So it was a year at Schofield barracks, and then we were shipped out. . . . We had no _____. We were really going into the theater of war, we knew that. And it was a miserable time: sick on the boats, sleeping in a little tiny bunk, terrible food. The only thing that kept me going was I had a couple of pocketbooks that I could read and think, dream. I think the dreaming of what could happen after the war, if the war ever ended, just think what I could do, and that's all I dreamt about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you think in terms of teaming up with Jack?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that by that time a goal then?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, it was, it really was. And we had a casual correspondence, and I sent him a lot of drawings that I had done, which he showed to Henry Miller, who was very impressed. And Henry. . . . Jack published a book of Henry Miller's, and he used one of my drawings on the cover I mean, on the dust jacket.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I've seen that.

LEE MULLICAN: And so that was again, you see, that was a part of my dream was all this is waiting for me. Just have to get this war over. In the meantime, we were going right out into the Pacific. I mean, far into the Pacific. And we didn't know where we were going, and there was all kind of rumors that we were going to be turned into infantry, that our role as mapmakers was over and that we were really going to out and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: They don't even tell you where you're going?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, no, didn't tell you where you were going or what you're going to do. Oh, no way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Security.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, one day the boat docked and we were on Guam. We were immediately sent up to Admiral Nimitz headquarters, and we were attached to the navy. Top security. I mean, really top security and top work. But before this, another great moment when I was still at Schofield Barracks. One night in the middle of the night. . . . The radio was on I guess it was Armed Forces radio, I suppose. And, well, I already had known that Paris had been entered by the U.S., and they were freeing all of France and so forth. Well, I just happened to be there, and they said, "And now we are going to interview Miss Gertrude Stein." [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow.

LEE MULLICAN: And I said, "Hooray, Gertrude Stein has been. . . ."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Liberated. [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: "She has been liberated." And it was just one of the great moments, you know. I thought, "Oh, well, Europe is free now. Maybe things can happen in the Pacific." And she came on, and I remember she said something like, "Oh, what a day was today way today," or something like that. And I thought, "Oh, isn't that the greatest."

Anyway, we got to Guam and we worked, and it was just exhausting, and we were making maps for the invasion of Japan, and then one day it was all over.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you have any idea oh, no, you wouldn't what the strategy regarding Japan and trying to wrap the war up was?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, the strategy was we were going to invade.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, okay.

LEE MULLICAN: We were making the maps.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A more conventional. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: We were making the maps for the invasion of Japan.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This almost sounds like [diversionary].

LEE MULLICAN: And then one day I was on the night shift, and they picked me up and I rode the weapons carrier down to where we slept, and as I got into the weapons carrier, the driver said, "It's all over." I said, "What do you mean it's all over?" He said, "They dropped the atomic bomb."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know what one was?

LEE MULLICAN: No! I didn't know what, I just thought it was just another bomb, but then of course. . . . And I shouted and celebrated. We all did. And we just knew that the war was over. That was just. . . . We knew that it was ending, had ended, and we would soon be going home.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask a couple questions about that moment. You know, there you were involved with an effort for a more conventional sea invasion I suppose with maybe air as well of Japan, and then all of a sudden you get this news that this bomb with a new name had been dropped, and that instantly ended the war. Now what must you have thought? Didn't it occur to you that this must be some extraordinary bomb, that _____. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: In the beginning we didn't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. But how did you find out? Do you remember?

LEE MULLICAN: It was only later that. . . . Well, you read it in the newspapers and heard the radio. You found out what had really happened, what these bombs were like, what had happened in Japan, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that came quite a bit afterwards, I guess. Is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, within a week or two, I guess. And we all. . . . I remember getting together and listening on the radio when the surrender came, and then MacArthur was there, Hirohito, et cetera. So that I was. . . . I just knew that we'd be going home. Well, we didn't go home. [laughs] We went to Japan.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, no. So you got to see it first hand.

LEE MULLICAN: So we got to see. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you did get to invade after all, see. Occupy.

LEE MULLICAN: We got to see. . . . You can imagine what that city looked like. There was nothing standing. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did you go?

LEE MULLICAN: We landed in Yokohama.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

LEE MULLICAN: And moved into a department store that was still standing still stands today in Tokyo. But there was nothing but rubble. Between Yokohama and Tokyo, it was just absolutely leveled. There was nothing. Maybe an occasional bathtub or a safe or something that survived all of the bombing. And Tokyo was absolute mess. You can imagine: Homeless, hunger everywhere, people begging. And we were put up into this Isitan department store that was still operating as a department store, and we were up on the third floor. The first two floors were still operating as a department store while we were there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Geez. This is what, weeks? Couple weeks after. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: This was. . . . Well, I was only in Tokyo for a month before we were sent back to the States. But during that time I had a sense of what war was really like. And we able to make one trip up to Niko to see the Shinto shrines, and up to a high waterfall and a lake, and so we made a couple of trips just to get a sense of what Japan was like, the beauty of it. But other than that it was just a disaster. Of course. And then little by little, even though it may have take a couple years, at least I realized how wrong all of that had been. They could have dropped those bombs somewhere else and showed the power of them without having to hit those cities.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I was going to ask what the conversation was like, because as news came forward and. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, there might have been some of that, but on the whole the only thing anybody was thinking about was returning.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, sure, that's understandable. And in the beginning, did, well, the people you knew, at any rate, see this as necessary, legitimate, just another, well, weapon basically, a war strategy to end the war quickly.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think so, because even today, of course, they still discuss this. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, it's debatable.

LEE MULLICAN: . . . and debate this. If they hadn't done that, I mean, how many millions would have been killed with an invasion? I mean, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

LEE MULLICAN: I just think they went about it the wrong way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were very interested in this modern world, participating in the modern world. Certainly in the arts you were attracted to this. Did the amazing power of the bomb although I'm sure you weren't attracted to the fact that it was used in this way but did that seem to you just another amazing manifestation of modernity?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I think that. . . . Of course, one heard and one read about "We have now entered the Atomic Age," and I think everybody realized that that was something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Things wouldn't be the same.

LEE MULLICAN: Things could never be the same, that's right. And I think that's true, I think that's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you find this exciting, though? This is what I'm trying to get at.

LEE MULLICAN: No, I didn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

LEE MULLICAN: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Something. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Not exciting as far as. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Something new and unseen, maybe. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Not exciting as far as war maneuvers or, you know, ending the war or [anything]. I was, again, just, I was just naive enough to think, "Well, now my dreams can come true. Now I can get out of here." And so a month later I was on the boat back to Seattle, back to Chickasha, and it was all over.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you then, I believe, set up a studio to be an artist.

LEE MULLICAN: I set up a little studio. My parents wanted me to live in Chickasha for a year. I said, "Okay, I will live here for a year," and I found an empty office in a bank building and I set it up as a kind of studio where I worked and a lot of the works I still have. And then during my correspondence with Jack Stauffacher. . . . Well, I knew that I couldn't stay in Oklahoma. I had a choice. I could either go to New York City, or I could come to California. It had to be one of those two. That's all I knew. And Jack's parents had just died. He was living with his brother and said. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's Frank, right?

LEE MULLICAN: Frank.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

LEE MULLICAN: And Jack said, "Come and live in San Mateo with us," so I did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just like that?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it took me a year to really get there, but just like that I did. And he had his little print shop

going, and it was in Burlingame actually, and it was a beautiful place, and I loved walking the streets and the flowers and the trees and really felt free of the war.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'll bet.

LEE MULLICAN: Absolutely. And all of our trips into San Francisco that was the beginning of what I described before. You know, this was my Paris. And it was a new beginning, totally new beginning. And we printed a little book together. I did the drawings and a not too good long poem, and became fast friends, of course. And eventually they sold their house, Jack moved his press into San Francisco on Sansome Street, and he and Frank and I took a little apartment together up on Russian Hill.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember what street?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I don't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Rain Street maybe?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no. It was a very small short street. I should be able to remember it, but I don't. [Glover Street LM]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, well. The next time.

LEE MULLICAN: It was a tiny little place, just big enough for the three of us.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was Jack's studio?

LEE MULLICAN: It was on Samson.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's not the one he's in now.

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, my, no. No, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's on actually Broadway now.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not Samson.

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, no, this was another. . . . I used to hang out there, and I did some woodblock prints there, linoleum prints, and he had taken one of my paintings and hung it in his office where Gordon Onslow Ford saw it eventually, and so that's how I met him. But one of the interesting things is that when I began to paint in the house at Burlingame I worked outside a lot, and one day I told Jack that it would be nice if I had a palette knife, see, to work on my paint with, and he said, "Well, here." He went into the print shop and brought back a little printer's ink knife, a knife that he used to put ink on the rollers with. He'd dip it out of the can and smear it on. And so, I said, "Well, that'll be just fine." And that was the beginning of my striation technique. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, Lee, I think we ought to stop now because this is a real good spot and what we'll do is. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: And I've said enough for one day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, what we'll do is pick up though. It's perfect. We'll pick up with the early times in San Francisco.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Thank you.

Tape 2, side B is blank

JANUARY 26, 1993
Tape 3, side A [session 2, tape 1]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution, a continuing interview with the painter and sculptor, Lee Mullican, at his studio at the Barker Hangar, Santa Monica Air Center. This is the second session and the date is January 26, 1993. Lee, we started this interview a year ago not literally, but at least. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Last year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . last year.

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Last year, in '92, and I believe we last met perhaps in the early summer. I actually have the date here.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And we had to drop because of your plans and travel. Yeah, it was. . . . Well, actually it was May. And because of your travel and being out of town and other things, we had to let this time elapse in between, but I think that's perfectly okay. Since then you've enjoyed being involved in several exhibitions one that I should mention that's currently still on at Pepperdine University, at the Fred Weisman Gallery there, which is basically a Dynaton-revisited exhibition. It's really quite wonderful. But at any rate there is it seems increasing attention being paid to these times and we're talking about the late forties, early fifties, I think basically and a reconsideration of the art and the individuals active, and this of course is part of what underlies this Archives interview.

We left you moving in our biographical, chronological pattern we left you having just arrived in San Francisco. This was in 1948, if I'm not mistaken. In part, the culprit involved in your decision to move there was Jack Stauffacher, your friend, about whom we talked on the last tape, and meeting him in the army and so forth, so there was an individual and presumably then a circle of people or at least several individuals with whom you felt a sympathy, a compatibility, presumably in creative or even if was at that point not defined art vocation way, that these were. . . . Jack was an art friend. There was the potential for this kind of interaction.

At any rate, you arrived in San Francisco, and your term for the city by the Bay, you called it my Paris, which I think is a very telling remark, and so obviously that city at that time offered something for you as an artist, someone who wanted to grow as an individual within the framework of an art world. And what I'd like to do is pick up there, and carry it on, and first of all ask you what you found when you arrived in San Francisco: the scene if you will, what was going on, what was exciting about it for you, who were the people you interacted with, and what you felt were your responses to your new home.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, as we may have already talked, I had a chance after the war I mean, after I stayed in Oklahoma. I knew I didn't want to stay there. I had a chance of either going to New York or going to the west coast, and San Francisco was high on the priorities. And because I had met Jack Stauffacher in the army and we had corresponded, and he said, "I'm now living alone with my brother. My parents have died, and we have this house in San Mateo down on the peninsula. Why don't you come and stay with us?" So I immediately took them up on their invitation, and I moved in to this great kind of suburban home with a garden, and it was my first really experience with that kind of California. The California I knew before was when I was in the army in the desert ____.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Quite different.

LEE MULLICAN: Quite different. And of course the peninsula I mean San Mateo was maybe an hour away from San Francisco, and there was a lot of traffic back and forth. And Frank and Jack and I [would] go into San Francisco. Their friends came out that I met all kinds of poets, writers, architects, like Warren [Callister] and Jack [Hilmer] and poets like [Philippe] Lamontia and Jim [Broughton], and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember some of the others, especially art-related writers, artists?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, maybe they'll come to mind, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

LEE MULLICAN: Anyway, Frank was a commercial artist at that time, but his greatest involvement was with what he later called art in cinema. He published a book, and it had to do with early experimental films that were just now being discovered. He had this series at the San Francisco Museum, so that was one area besides painting. You know, there was film and music. My gosh, we used to go to the San Francisco Symphony and get cheap tickets [chuckles]. Through friends we happened to meet Stravinsky back stage and talked [to, with] Stravinsky. And [Darius LM] Milhaud was there in the area.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Teaching in Oakland, at Mills [College].

LEE MULLICAN: Teaching at Mills, that's right. And at the same time there was this great interest I had in jazz, so that going to jazz clubs, discovering Dave Brubeck immediately after he had his first kind of almost engagement there in. . . . What's it called? Blackhawk, I think, was it?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, The Blackhawk was a famous one.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, well, and then we'd go to the clubs and I saw Dizzy Gillespie because that was really getting going at that time and Joe Turner, [Amons, Eamons] and Johnson all these people. Billie Holiday. I remember spending an evening in a club with Billie Holiday and who else? Sybil Moholy-Nagy was with us that evening, and I don't know think she that much taken with Billie Holiday, but of course I was dying and swooning all over the place, having collected her records for so long. So there was that part of it, and then there was the excitement at the museums. There weren't that many galleries.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're talking now about really the late forties.

LEE MULLICAN: Late forties, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '48, '49.

LEE MULLICAN: And eventually Jack. . . . Jack had this little press outside in a kind of a small outer building behind his house, where he had his press. While we were in the army together we would take these walks and fantasize about what life would be like afterwards, and we decided then that maybe we would publish something together. We didn't know what it might be. So we eventually did that. We had one publication. It was called The Illuminati, was the name given, although it was really, of course, it was Jack's Greenwood Press.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was it called Greenwood from the beginning?

LEE MULLICAN: Greenwood Press.

PAUL KARLSTROM: From the very beginning?

LEE MULLICAN: From the very beginning.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because it still is called Greenwood Press.

LEE MULLICAN: Still Green. . . . And I'm not sure he'll have to tell you whether it was because it was near Greenwood Avenue or. . . . I just don't remember now where it came from. Anyway, in that place in San Mateo, Burlingame, we made this little publication. I'd written this kind of obscure, and I don't think it's a very good poem, but the drawings are very nice. And we had this publication.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's just one poem?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, it was just some thoughts and ideas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it's called The Illuminati?

LEE MULLICAN: No, it was called, it was called "The Gain of Aft," A-f-t, which means the gain of the afternoon, gains of the afternoon, having to do with painting and drawing and. . . . Well, actually I've tried to forget it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: Even though I have copies of course. And it's a collector's item now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

LEE MULLICAN: But after that Jack and Frank. . . . I'm not sure just what the connection is, but at one point they knew they had to sell their house, which they did, and either before the house was sold or immediately after Jack moved his press to Sansome Street in San Francisco. And that became a kind of hangout. And Jack took one of my paintings and hung it in the office, and at that time. . . . By that time Gordon Onslow Ford and Jacqueline had arrived in San Francisco, and he was preparing an exhibition.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's Gordon Onslow Ford?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, Gordon Onslow Ford. He was preparing an exhibition and a publication for the San Francisco Museum, and Jack was going to print it, so he came into the Sansome Street press and saw this painting of mine and immediately recognized that I was someone that. . . . I mean, that we had to meet, and so that's how I met Gordon actually.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, tell me about that, please, in more detail, because that's very interesting. You say that he saw your work.

LEE MULLICAN: He saw my painting there. And I talked to Jack recently recently! in the last few years about that

painting, and wondered whatever happened to it and it's just disappeared. I don't know. I don't even remember very much about it, but it was there.

And by that time Frank and Jack both were very involved in the literary world, the cinema world, the music world in San Francisco, and I was just right there tagging along, and met a lot of their friends. And even before we were. . . . While we were still in San Mateo, one of the first persons I met was a Swiss couple no, I guess they were Dutch by the name of [Frank, Franck], last name was Frank [Louis] Frank, I think. Anyway, but they lived in a Frank Lloyd Wright house in San Mateo, and we used to go up there for dinners, and that was really an occasion.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They had a kind of salon?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, kind of, and just friendly dinners you know, barbecues and that sort of thing. And I remember on one occasion Frank Lloyd Wright was actually invited to come see the house after many years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did he show up?

LEE MULLICAN: And he came. They were terrified that he might be very critical, but he wasn't. He seemed to like everything that was, what was hanging on the walls in the way of paintings and the furniture. The furniture was all intact. And I haven't seen them now for maybe ten years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I should know this, but what is the. . . . Does the house have a name in the Wright literature?

LEE MULLICAN: I don't really know. I'm sure it does.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's actually in San Mateo.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because he did several in the Bay area.

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, well, this was one, and so that was a great. . . . She was a marvelous woman, and she was very interested in what I was doing in my art at that time. But eventually Frank and Jack and I moved into a tiny little flat on Russian Hill the three of us. The rent was like $20 a month, or something like that. [laughs] Anyway, none of us had any money, and so we were living very cheaply, and we stayed there in that house, oh, I don't remember now how long it was, but it wasn't until Jack got married and then Frank got married and then I moved into a. . . . Well, I moved into several places, and I had a studio up on, what was it? Also on Russian Hill. I think it was Green Street. I lived there for a while. I lived on Twin Peaks for a while. And. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you were on your own at that time.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, see, after. . . . But I mean Frank and Jack, we all kept up with each other, to be sure. And by that time Gordon had taken a great interest in and Jacqueline also had taken a great interest in my painting, and they were great mentors for me. I mean, going to their home, and I went very often they would have me for dinner, and they had a kind of an adjoining studio where I would go and Gordon would fix me a drink and bring out some paintings [Max .] Ernst or [P.] Delveaux, Picasso, Klee and _____ now that this is a part of their storage, not to say what was hanging in the house, in the living room itself. And he would prop these up, and just said, "Now I'm going leave you. You just look at these." And he'd leave me there with a drink, a little Scotch and water.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Had you seen any comparable works, surrealist works, beforehand to speak of?

LEE MULLICAN: I'd never seen Delveaux. I was very aware of Klee and, of course, Picasso and Braque and cubists, and I wasn't that. . . . It was really an introduction also to early [Yves] Tanguy and Paalen, and anyway just many, many marvelous works from their collection. And then Jacqueline would give us a leg of lamb or something. And then they used to have parties also, inviting other artists. And they would have teas. I remember once having tea with Duchamp in their house.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you have to tell us about that.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I don't remember that much, except that he came alone, and it was in the afternoon. We did have tea, and that he was talking. And the only thing that I remember that impressed me was when he said that painting was an olfactory disease. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. So I guess he was thinking about the lure of paint smells and turpentine and all that sort of

thing. And then I remember having tea also with this marvelous dancer, English dancer and actress who was in The Red Shoes. That was her big hit at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow.

LEE MULLICAN: I mean, what the hell. I can't think of her name now [Moira Shearer LM].

PAUL KARLSTROM: I can't either. Of course I've seen. . . . You mean the movie?

LEE MULLICAN: The movie The Red Shoes. She had just done that, and so she. . . . I mean these are just an example of people. And then there were other artists who they would invite and Jack. And by that time he had married Josephine [Grimaldi].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did they live? I think we actually have photos in some papers.

LEE MULLICAN: Where did they. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Gordon and Jacqueline.

LEE MULLICAN: The Onslow Fords. Oh, it was marvelous flat on Chestnut Street.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Chestnut.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, there are several Dynaton photographs taken in their house before a big mirror. And, as I say, they really. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Took an interest in you.

LEE MULLICAN: . . . took an interest. And then there. . . . There were exhibitions, although I. . . . But I really kind of. . . . I spent most of my time in my studio or alone. I was a kind of loner actually.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You didn't hang out in North Beach or anything.

LEE MULLICAN: No, at night, you see, I'd. . . . I think I went to [the, The] Black Cat maybe once or twice you know, and I didn't go out and drink in the evenings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you. . . . And I don't want to get us off the track here.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We'll pick up. . . . But that's taken on almost a stature of myth, that whole scene, which evolved then into the beat generation, the beat period with [Allen Ed.] Ginsberg and ["Jack" Ed.] Kerouac and City Lights and all that.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, but see I had left by that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that time came a little bit later. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but I guess what I was going to ask: Did you have any contact with the early, the germs of that whole movement? I mean, some of the poets were around and so forth; you had interaction with them.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, no, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was there any sense of sort of mission in San Francisco in that crowd?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, mission in the sense that there was a struggle of trying to get things going. It was very difficult for Broughton to. . . . I mean, he seemed to be fairly well off, but to make films at that time was very difficult. And he had this press that he was working on. I illustrated one of his books called Musical Chairs. And so I was very involved with him and his friend, Kermit Sheets. They lived together out on Baker Street. And who should turn up one day, but they were publishing something of Anaïs Nin, and there again, even in those days, she had to struggle, too, to get things published, to get things printed, and was vying for recognition.

And I remember when Merce Cunningham and John Cage came through town, and played in a very small auditorium, very few people there. They couldn't afford to really stay in a hotel. They had to find someone to put them up. So it was a struggle. And at the same time I think we all realized that we were helping to establish something you know, that this was a post-war era, and we were all trying to be caught up in it and wanted to do

things.

And also Jack was a close friend of Henry Miller's, and he published a book of Henry Miller's and used one of my drawings on the cover. Miller was very interested in what I was doing, and I have letters from him, saying that he really felt I was, you know, someone to be reckoned with and he loved. . . . For some reason he thought my name was just the right thing [chuckles]: Lee Mullican. Somehow that kind of turned him on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, he was a word guy, after all, the writing.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right. And I have a postcard. . . . But he lived in Big Sur, and he was struggling. And I have a postcard in my files from him thanking me for the $5 that I sent him! [chuckles] He was actually asking for money from friends and associates and so forth. And at that same time. . . .

At that same time another big influence and absolute delight was Jean Varda, and he was in Monterey at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was before any houseboats in Sausalito.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that was when he lived in Monterey. And I had an exhibition in. . . . One of my first exhibitions actually was in Monterey.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why was that? Because of Varda, a connection?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was a connection really through Broughton. And there was a painter whose name was [_____] Zev, Z-e-v, and his wife. Oh, dear, why can't I think of her name [Gertrude Harris LM]? Anyway, she ran this gallery in Monterey, and that's where I. . . . She gave Gordon a little show, and then she gave me a little show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember the name of the gallery?

LEE MULLICAN: It's called the Pat Wall Gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Pat Wall?

LEE MULLICAN: Pat Wall. Now I don't know who that was, actually, I can't remember. Her name was Gertrude. . . . Gertrude something [Harris LM]. Anyway. So there was a connection all up and down, and I remember the Hearst papers, you know, who are notorious, talking about the venom that was being fed into the Bay area from Monterey through Big Sur, up into San Francisco. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, what did they mean by that?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, they meant all of this. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sounds like a polemic of some [type, kind].

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, they meant all of this rank bohemianism, I guess, or liberal ideas, liberal thoughts probably all of this preceding the sixties generation and all of that. Preceding all the hippy things, because absolute. . . . There was no question that Varda was one of the first, sort of the first great hippy persons, and everybody around him, you know. It was superb.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why did this even come to the. . . . Why did this bohemian infection venom come to the attention of the Hearst papers?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it certainly did, it certainly did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That seems. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: It would be interesting for somebody to check that out, to go back and see that. But it was there, no question.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because that suggests that there was some kind of visibility for this avant garde or bohemian [activity].

LEE MULLICAN: That's right. Well, it could have been what was going on in the galleries this rank modernism and abstraction or it could be the poems that were being written, the wild music and dancing. I mean, there's no. . . . It had been a very sedate, conservative place until after the war.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now were the artists you mentioned earlier and again, not to derail you from this narrative

but you mentioned that there was in this post-war era a sense of trying to establish something or trying to do something, is what you said.

LEE MULLICAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what's very interesting and curious to me and to historians, I guess, is this: Was there any sense of what that something could be or should be?

LEE MULLICAN: [Oh, No, and] I think we always had that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, could you describe it?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think, you know. . . . I mean, it was shortly after that that Paalen arrived, Gordon brought Paalen up, and so right away we knew what we wanted to do and of course we developed. We each had exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum, which was run by Dr. [Grace LM] Morley at that time. And she was very responsive and gave us exhibitions. She took leave at one point, and actually I had my show with a man who was running the museum at that time whose name was [_____] Freeman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Leads, Leaves] at the San Francisco?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, that right. But then she. . . . We had approached her about the Dynaton Show and that the three of us would like to show together, and we were making this manifestation. And so we knew where we were going with that. We knew what we wanted to say. Paalen was our spokesman, and he wrote beautifully and Jacqueline also Gordon's wife. And so we knew where we were going. And I think you could say that's true also of Jim Broughton with his writing, and Broughton and Frank Stauffacher with their filmmaking. And Jack with his topography and printing. We had other friends who were in theater, who were doing early things, things that had not been seen before such as No Exit Sartre, and [Eugene LM] Ionesco. And so there was the theater part of it, too, and it was all kind of still underground but emerging I guess that's the way you would put it. At least, that's the way I remember it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you felt part of this. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, very muchly so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . general movement, this underground movement that wore the clothes of bohemia. We'll have a chance, of course, when we talk specifically about Dynaton to describe that in more detail, and try to pin that down, but I'm very interested, again, in the general ambience, which you have indicated involved a quest, if you will, an effort to do certain things, which you felt and you feel Dynaton was very much a part of. But what in general do you feel were the objectives? What was the project? Those of you involved you've mentioned the film, theater, and everything else have an idea of it as a project, trying to achieve something, and what was that?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was, I think, a personal achievement. We were not trying to come together like a movement or a school, or weren't even really aware that we were actually involved in a kind of sociological movement at that time in the arts there in San Francisco. We all. . . . It was as I say, a struggle because no one really had any money. No one wanted to buy paintings. Fortunately, there was the San Francisco Museum, which yearly put on exhibitions that anyone could enter, and _____ exhibitions came through the sponsorship of the museum.

Tape 3, side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Lee Mullican, tape one, side B. Lee, let's pick up. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I can say that when I had my exhibition at the museum, it was a great occasion. When Paalen had visited there before, he said he would be willing to write an essay for my catalogue, which he did and which he sent to me from Mexico, which was really great. And Jack printed a small catalogue with a few black and white reproductions. And the opening went really well, and I remember having that through the influence of Jacqueline we had a tea party in the gallery, with some maids serving tea and cookies and all. It was a great social occasion. And the outcome of that. . . . Well, there were two things. One is that Alfred Frankenstein gave me an incredible review in the Chronicle. I mean, to this day. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's no small accomplishment.

LEE MULLICAN: You know, where he said, I was as accomplished as any young painter anywhere in the world as much as saying this, you see. So that was really great. And one of the important figures in the architectural world at that time was Eric Mendelsohn, and he was completely bowled over by my paintings, and the golden quality of them and all, and he actually bought two paintings out of that show. And his wife [Louise LM] was absolutely beautiful and gracious, and we were friends right up until the time she died not too long ago. But he

was very enthusiastic about my work and he wanted me to help him with some projects, so he had this idea that I. . . . He was building a synagogue in St. Louis, and he thought that I should decorate the walls. And it even got to the point where we went there together; he took me to St. Louis to meet the people in the synagogue. And actually nothing really came of it because I have a feeling that they thought that there was some Jewish painter that could do it better or just as well. And before I could really get going, Mendelsohn died. And he wanted me to do the doors of the Ark at the was it [Maimonides] Hospital? in the. . . . Well, wherever the ark would be in the _____ chapel. And I was going to do those doors, but with his death that died, too as well as a memorial. I was going to decorate a kind of dome in New York, a rather. . . . I don't think that was even ever built. I think it was just something that he had planned and hoped for.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you see yourself in that role as a large-scale public. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, not really. Yeah, no, I really couldn't see myself doing that. And I'm sure that I told him. But he was one of those persons that once he made up his mind he wouldn't listen to anything else. I mean, you just had to go along with him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you, in your judgment, was his interest in your work and then application to these big projects or at least potential, was that based on a response to a decorative aspect, [of, a] decorative strength?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or a spiritual one? I mean, in his case. Did you feel. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: In his case I think it was more decorative. I think so. I don't think that he really got involved with the content of the paintings. He could just see that there was. . . . It was like I was weaving with golden threads, and that sort of thing. And so I think it was more than that. Certainly, he had no interest in Paalen or Gordon except socially. And so I think that's kind of what it was.

But it meant a lot to me that he wanted to buy these two paintings. His daughter still has one, and another one is now in a private collection in Santa Monica. So there was that aspect of life and times.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the other reaction or result of your first exhibition which, by the way, was in '49. Is that right? 1949?

LEE MULLICAN: That sounds like right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mentioned there was another. . . . Was there anything that came of that exhibition for you?

LEE MULLICAN: That came out of that exhibition?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Critical interest of Frankenstein.

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sales to Mendelsohn and the. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, other people were interested. By this time I had met a man named Martin Metal, who was from the Chicago Institute of Design, and he began to live with Sybil Moholy-Nagy. After her husband died, she moved to San Francisco and she joined the group too. She was close friends with Paalen and Gordon and Jacqueline, and et cetera, Varda. So she was also one of the intellects, and through her I met other art historians in Berkeley Walter Horne particularly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Walter. Walter was interested in your work?

LEE MULLICAN: He loved my work very specially.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Could you speculate on why that was?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, he told me. He made a connection with The Book of Kels. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: What, can this be something medieval?

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs] And he felt it was like illuminated manuscript sort of thing. He told me that's what. And then I met someone named. . . . She was a neighbor in Mill Valley. Lucienne. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Bloch?

LEE MULLICAN: . . . Bloch Dimitroff. And [Ernest LM] Bloch was teaching at Berkeley at that time, and of course I never met him, but she showed him some of my paintings and he was very excited to as much as say, "If my music could be put into paint, this is the way it would look." And that was a great encouragement and a highlight of things that happened in San Francisco. Quite often, just a little subtle thing like that meant a great deal for someone who was just really feeling their way.

And the Dimitroffs were great and still are. We still see them occasionally. And that was in Mill Valley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were living in Mill Valley at the time?

LEE MULLICAN: By this time. . . . It's kind of complicated and it involved. . . . Did we go into this? It involves my present wife, Luchita.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, we didn't talk about your meeting. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, this is all very kind of personal history, but I don't know any reason why it shouldn't be related. I mean, other people. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, this, of course, is an official oral history.

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs] Anyway, Luchita Hurtado was married to Wolfgang Paalen, and before that she was married to a man named [_____] Delsolar, who was a Chilean newspaper man. And after they were divorced, Paalen and Luchita married and they moved to Mexico City. And she had these two children [with Del Solar LM], and the two children were put into a kind of German residence school and. . . . Well, I think it's just fair to say that things were difficult for the two of them after they moved to Mexico, and then very unfortunately her younger son died of polio and their marriage was not really going well, so they decided that. . . . I think Luchita at that time felt, had to get out of Mexico. She felt it was a deadly place, killed her child, and so they decided to move to San Francisco. And Gordon and Jacqueline, you know, encouraged this and they came to San Francisco and then that's how I met them.

And they looked around for a place to live and they found this fantastic old Victorian house in Mill Valley, in the redwoods, beautiful place, and they decided that's where they would move. Before that, when Jack and Frank and I had this little flat, we invited Gordon and Jacqueline and Paalen and Luchita to for dinner. And after dinner Frank showed some short, foreign films, which was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: The arty thing to do.

LEE MULLICAN: The arty thing to do, and it isn't the sort of thing that you would find very often, so we were looking at these and one of the films. . . . I don't remember very much about it, except that it had to deal with the death of a child, and that marked on my memory is a tombstone with "baby" written across it, you see. Well, she was terribly upset by it. Luchita was terribly upset. And I could feel it and I think everybody felt it, because we didn't know. We didn't know the history. We were just meeting these people for the first time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? This was your first meeting?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I mean that trip was our first time. We'd met them maybe a day before I mean, a week before. They were staying in a hotel. Anyway, they found this great house in Mill Valley, and that's where they decided they would move into. But after they purchased the house, they needed a caretaker and I said, "No, well, I can't live there. I mean I have my own studio in San Francisco, that's right, but I'll go out once a week and be sure the garden is watered et cetera, et cetera." Well, their plans became very muddled, and I knew there was terrible complications, but by this time we'd committed ourselves to the Dynaton show, and so Gordon and Jacqueline decided to move into the house, which they did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So they gave up their place in San Francisco.

LEE MULLICAN: Not really, but they moved into this Mill Valley house, and I would go out for weekends. And we would have great dinners and play surrealist games. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: . . . and listen to music and. . . . I mean, Gordon really didn't care that about much about jazz,

but I did, and I later remember Luchita and Jacqueline and I dancing to Sister Rosetta Thorpe and clapping our hands and having a great ball. [laughs] Well, eventually Paalen arrived with all of his great collection of Northwest coast, pre-Columbian things, so the house became an absolute museum, and they invited me to stay in the house. They needed to try and make ends meet, so I said that I would rent a room from them if that was. . . . So they gave me this room in the corner top floor, and neither one of them could drive, so Paalen bought a car and I began, like a chauffeur, driving them around.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But a chauffeur who was paying rent!

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. [laughs] And by that time I had moved into Varda's old studio in North Beach, and I was working very hard there doing a lot of things that eventually came into the Dynaton era. And, well, so eventually it really hadn't worked out between Paalen and Luchita.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How long were they married?

LEE MULLICAN: I don't really know. But there was a divorce, and by that time. . . . I mean I had realized this before that I was very much in love with her, and she was very interested in me, so we waited around until. . . . We stayed there until after the Dynaton show, and then we. . . . [When], it was all over. And Luchita and I were aware that we were going to have a child, it was going to be my child, and this was after the divorce, so we went to Santa Fe. And with us all this time was her older son by the first marriage, whose name was Daniel Daniel Del Solar and so he was with us all the way, of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you go to Santa Fe to kind of make a break, to get away?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, to decide what we were going to do. She was pregnant. I had committed myself to four exhibitions in Oklahoma. And it wasn't going to be very proper for me to be around anyway, so she was invited to come to Los Angeles and stay with Giles and Sheila Healey. Which is another story, how they fitted in. Anyway, she came to L.A., had our son, who is Matt [Mullican].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Matt? [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: Of course. And she found this house in Santa Monica where we still live.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Amazing.

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs] Yep. And then after I was finished with my exhibitions in Oklahoma, why, I came to L.A., too. But it was all very sticky. You know, who was living with whom and whose son was this? And et cetera and et cetera. Because in those days, you know, it was a very different time than what's today.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, the divorce was already completed, or in process?

LEE MULLICAN: It was processed. It was finished. But I think if the word had ever gotten out, that she had a child after the divorce, it would have been very difficult indeed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did this do to your relationship with Paalen and Dyaton?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, after we left that summer. . . . We went to New Mexico, and then she went on to L.A., he went back to Paris. I dare say their relationship was strained, and yet he and Luchita remained friendly, and there was a considerable correspondence, and he wrote to her very often. And I think that he understood all along, though, that Matt was my son. He only came to Santa Monica once, and he was very friendly and said, "I would like for you and Matthew and Luchita to come visit me in Mexico." And I said, "Yes, of course, we would love to, but I hope you really understand about Matthew." "Oh, yes, I know, I know," he said. We never did go. He went back to Mexico, and he married again and lived there until he died.

So you can say that after that summer of 1951 we were pretty well scattered. Gordon and Jacqueline moved back into. . . . They stayed in. . . . No, maybe by that time they had bought their land.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Inverness.

LEE MULLICAN: Up in Inverness, and Gordon by that time had bought the ferry, in Marin City there, Sausalito, and Varda was living on the ferry and Alan Watts was living on the ferry, and Luchita and I visited them often. You know, we would go up and they came down, and so that was a real living relationship, and it still continues, of course. Very sad when Jacqueline died. So it was a great, difficult romance. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: But romantic, that's for sure.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, and today it would be very different, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Easier.

LEE MULLICAN: Much easier. There are not the conventions that there were then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe too easy. But, that's a different story.

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs] So that's very much aside, but to the point. And eventually I had to legally adopt Matt, because when he was born, he had to have Paalen's last name and so that was [easily done].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's a distinguished lineage for an artist, isn't that, to get two artist fathers.

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs] Well, I've really only been the only one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask a couple more questions about San Francisco and we'll be able to. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Is it still going?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. We'll have a chance to move back and talk about Dynaton and surrealism and other aspects of the visual arts and painters in that place at that time, but I want to ask just a couple other questions about this transition. One, well, we'll get into this of course, but obviously it wasn't an invitation to teach at UCLA, which turned out to be your long career, that brought you to Los Angeles at all. You came. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, I came because we wanted to have a new beginning. Oh, absolutely. Although before I left Berkeley I mean, before I left San Francisco I was invited to teach at Berkeley, or at least apply. But I decided not to [because] I didn't really that I was up to teaching, and I was still trying to formulate my own career, and I just didn't think that was the thing to do. And I wanted to leave anyway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you have, speaking of Berkeley, much contact with the University of California group of post-modernists? You said you knew Walter.

LEE MULLICAN: I knew them. . . . I knew. . . . Ah, well, names. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Who were the painters that. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . some of the old guard? Erle Loran?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: John Haley.

LEE MULLICAN: Loran was the one who asked me. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Worth Ryder, was he still around?

LEE MULLICAN: Loran asked me if I would be willing to teach, if I would like to teach there. And there was another man who had some handicap. What was his name? He liked my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was a painter or an historian?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, a painter. Can't remember right now. And I knew some of them socially, that's right, because I knew a lot of artists just socially, but you wouldn't have called them close friends.

But what was interesting at this time also is that by then I had met Marian Willard and was now part of the Willard Gallery in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And wasn't that one of the results of your exhibition at the San Francisco Museum? Is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was. It was, and I think that Paalen. . . . I'm pretty sure that Paalen spoke to Marian about me, and she came to San Francisco about the time of the Dynaton Show no, before, much before, a year or [two, so] before and liked my work and said, "Sure, I'll take you on, give you a show." So she did, and then up until the time she retired I showed there very regularly as part of the Willard Gallery, which was an excitement to me, out of San Francisco. Here I was involved with a social group that I was really kind of awkward in, I guess you would say, except that I did meet people like her other artists, which were Morris Graves and Mark Tobey and David Smith at that time he was with her and [Lyonel] Feininger. She was showing Feininger.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you met all those people?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Yeah, I was part of her stable at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you feel a sense of connection to these others, international group I guess, certainly. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, as I say, I felt awkward, kind of out of place. I couldn't fit my way in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that because of you or because of geography that you were from the west?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it's just the fact that, partly because of my youth, partly of my insecurity, partly of I was still feeling my way, not really quite sure what I wanted to do. But even so I know over the years my first exhibition made quite an impact. A lot of artists and a lot of people have told me about seeing that show. And it was in a very small gallery. Marian had. . . . It was next to Curt Valentin, on 57th Street. And of course she was marvelous, and she introduced me to all kinds of people, and every time I had a show with her I would go to New York for ten days or whatever and help arrange the show and go to the theater and see museums and et cetera. So that was a part of my life away from California, which was rather difficult to deal with, although I tried.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, because of. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: And I think, well, because if you weren't a part of the New York group it was very difficult. It was even difficult for Tobey, and Tobey had to actually move to Europe to ever be accepted in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you by any chance ever talk with Tobey or any others that are not from New York about this problem?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I didn't talk with him about that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is of course. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, but we all knew it, and Marian was the first to admit it, that we are. . . . As much as saying, "Well, we are a spiritual group, and we are just outweighed" by what was happening in abstract expressionism. And we no sooner got through abstract expressionism than I remember Marian saying, "Well, it's happened again. Now we've got to face Pop."

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: And so she was and we were all kind of pushed down in relation to what was happening around us. It all was all the New York School and [Leo] Castelli, and that's all the curators, collectors, that's all they were interested in. So it was very difficult. Although several museums bought my paintings, the Museum of Modern Art bought one of my wooden constructions, and I would be included in exhibitions. I was in several Carnegie shows, the Whitney show. So there was a center there, but as far as really being really visible it was very limited.

Tape 4, side A [session 2, tape 2]

[This tape side was recorded with a bit more tape noise, and the traffic noise seems to have increased, so that some phrases, particularly at the beginning, are partially inaudible. Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is continuing a second session with Lee Mullican after a break. This is tape two, side A. And, Lee, we finally at the end of the last tape relocated you here in southern California, where you've been pretty much based ever since, and what I would like you to do is to bring us along with you from that time up to the present and remind me again what year it was that you moved to Los Angeles and married your wife I guess '51?

LEE MULLICAN: No, while my wife was setting up housekeeping here in late '51, early '52, I was having these. . . . I had already scheduled these exhibitions in Oklahoma at the Philbrook museum in Tulsa; the Oklahoma City Art Center; University of Oklahoma, Norman, where I went to school; and the college in my hometown of Chickasha where I grew up. So I took care of all of that. Then I moved here, '52, and immediately established a studio of my own, a place to work, a place to live if I wanted to, and Luchita and Matt and Daniel. . . . Daniel and Matt lived in the [Santa Monica Canyon] in our house. So we began a life here. And right away we moved into the kind of artistic, aesthetic, cultural things that were going on here having to do with the film industry, art, architecture, all that, meeting everyone from Ray and Charles Eames to Mary and Paul Wescher. Albert and Millie Lewin, who was the producer/director at MGM. And [Christopher LM] Isherwood and Don Bachardy, who lived next door. Dinner parties with Jean Renoir. Et cetera. Also, James Agee was a good, close friend.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: Yep. He and his wife Mia. They were both very fond particularly of Luchita, and we saw a great deal of them. They came by for visits. Poor Jim, by that time he had his first heart attack right after African Queen, and he was in kind of bad shape, but he was always very interesting to be with. He loved to stay up all night and drink.

So life began. And I was soon introduced to Paul Kantor, who had just opened a gallery, and he asked me to be a part of it and I said, "Absolutely." And in the gallery by that time [Richard] Diebenkorn was getting started, as was. . . . Oh, Emerson Woelffer was in the gallery. Ynez Johnston, and others. Even Luchita showed some things in the gallery for a while. And that was kind of the. . . . There were very few galleries of course at that time. Landau and Frank Perls and Kantor, they were kind of like the three main ones.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was considered among artists and others interested in art, the preeminent gallery?

LEE MULLICAN: Those were the ones, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, they weren't thinking anymore of Dalzell Hatfield [galleries]. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, Hatfield, of course, absolutely. And Stendahl, of course, in his range. And, well, there were others, but this was of course before the Ferus group. That came later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you find more or fewer opportunities here than in San Francisco in terms of the gallery situation? Because there weren't a lot of galleries up there either, but what was your experience, again in terms of commercial galleries, with some interest in contemporary [painting]?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, all I knew was what went on with Kantor. And he was difficult. I mean at that time he was married to someone named Jo [Kantor? Ed.], who kind of ran the gallery, really. At that time he had a business of his own dealing with dog food or something, I can't remember. [chuckles] Anyway, it was a struggle. Absolutely. Everybody was having a struggle, but at least it was a functioning gallery on Beverly Boulevard, and it was a nice space and there were a few collectors. There were interests in what was happening by people like Vincent Price and his wife.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did Vincent buy a work of yours?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I don't think he ever did. But he was very interested in me. He included me in a couple of shows that he curated, but I don't think that. . . . I can't remember that he ever bought anything. But we knew him socially and we had dinner together quite often. And other people were like Jules Langsner.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The critic?

LEE MULLICAN: The critic, who was really quite marvelous, and at that same time I was invited by Art News, God knows why, to do an article on "Mullican Paints a Picture." At that time every month they had a different artist who explained how he painted. And Jules wrote that piece for Art News, and there are some nice photographs. That must have been '52.

Jimmy and Barbara Byrnes were involved. I saw a lot of them. So it was a different kind of scene than San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In what way?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think. . . . I don't know. Of course, just speaking personally, I felt that I was more mature, in where I was going and what I was doing. And also about this same time we met Rico and Constance Lebrun, and they were, he was very interested in what I was doing, and in us as artists. So it was about that time that I felt that I should really do some teaching. So with getting to know people like Fred Wight and. . . . Well, we also knew Anna Bing. She was a very close friend. Particularly with Fred Wight and Oliver Andrews, who was teaching at UCLA, and Bill Brice who was teaching at UCLA. They wanted to get me in on the faculty, and so I met with two other faculty, who turned out to be my nemesis, really Gordon Nunes and Jan Stussy, who came. . . . I'll never forget when they came to our house to interview me. And I guess they were considered to be the committee that had been appointed. And what they came up with was that they would give me a class in University Extension.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How generous. [tongue in cheek? Trans.]

LEE MULLICAN: So I did. I took it. I took the class, and after I had the class for one year Lebrun encouraged me to try for a Guggenheim Fellowship, which I did. And the first time I tried I was turned down. But then I got a letter from. . . . What was his name? Mull or something like that. Moses? Anyway he was head of the Guggenheim at that time. . . . wrote to me and encouraged me to apply again, which I did. And I got it. So here I was with a Guggenheim Fellowship.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now you were teaching. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Extension.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . extension, but you weren't really on the faculty.

LEE MULLICAN: No, no. In the meantime, even before this Luchita and Matthew went to Venezuela to visit her family, and during that period. . . . Before that I'd always been interested in theater, and I was interested in playwrighting, so I persuaded through a friend Kenneth McGowan to take me on as an auditor for his playwrighting class at UCLA. And I enjoyed that very much and I wrote several one-act plays. Three of them well, four of them actually were produced in their one-act program. I even won a drama award for the best play of the year. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: From who?

LEE MULLICAN: From the college theater group, whatever it was called.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was a national thing?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good for you. Congratulations.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I mean it's like a fraternity. It was like a fraternity, and they gave awards. And I was very hooked on playwrighting. In fact, I'm still writing. I still work on plays. But at that time, I really got involved in it.

Also, I had an awful lot. . . . I was painting, but at the same time I was very lonely and missing Luchita and Matt, and I was looking after Daniel, which was easy because by that time he was, you know, in junior high school or. . . . Anyway, he was very much on his own. So I decided. . . . I found out that there was a person called Rachel Rosenthal, who was teaching, she had a theater class, and I decided I would join it just to learn something about acting. And I found her very personable, and I liked what she was doing and her exercises, and she was establishing improvisational theater. In fact, the whole teaching had to do with developing oneself as an actor through improvisation. And then she had the idea that she wanted to establish a theater, an improvisational theater. And I said I would like to join it, so I did. And there were about four of us and we declared ourselves to be a part of something called Instant Theater. We had our own little theater in Hollywood. We gave performances, and to this day I run across artists who used to come and see us perform, and say how good we were. But it was a great experience for me. Everything, all the sets were improvised on the spot. Music was selected on the spot. Costumes, you never knew what the next person was going to do. You had to relate to everything that was happening. If there was a plot line, you'd have to follow it and et cetera.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That sounds difficult.

LEE MULLICAN: It was difficult. It was very difficult. But I was very good at it. And Rachel gave me all kinds of encouragement, and then she began to translate some. . . . She's very [accomplished, competent] in French, and so she began to translate some French one-act plays and we did those, like Ionesco. But then Luchita returned via New York. She stayed in New York for a while, and I realized after about a year with Instant Theater that I had to choose that I couldn't continue with this sort of thing, and that really I was a painter more than anything else. I could continue to write if I wanted to, but I was really a painter, and so I more or less resigned from Instant Theater. Now this all happened before I began to teach that class.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Before you taught even the extension course?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, that's right. This happened, this was like '53, '54.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this was like a what, maybe a one-year interlude or involvement?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right, while Luchita was gone. Then she came back, and we got married. We felt that by that time we were in a position to marry, and we did. And then shortly after that I got the Guggenheim, and we. . . . I had applied to go and work and paint in New York, but then we realized. . . . I read some articles about what was happening in Rome, and we decided it'd be more exciting if we went to Rome, which we did.

And we lived in Rome, and I established a studio. We sublet a studio. It was really a marvelous place in an old building down near the Tiber and the Campo dei Fiori, and Matt at that time was like eight years old, and so we put him into an overseas school, and I began to work and we began to meet people there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was this?

LEE MULLICAN: This was '59. And we entertained people. De Kooning came for dinner once, and [_____] Afro, who was a leading painter at that time. And we entertained Peggy Guggenheim and met Jack [Zajac], and at that time. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had to go all the way to Rome to meet Zajac, a Californian.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, right. Well, he was just getting started, too. And that time Rico Lebrun was artist-in-residence at the Rome Academy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, so you got to know him better?

LEE MULLICAN: We got to know him really well. And after a while, through an introduction, we met Frances [McCannes, McInnes], was her name. She had set up something called the Rome-New York Art Foundation. She had a beautiful gallery, wealthy woman. She had a beautiful gallery on the island in the Tiber. And for the summer of 1960, which was the Olympic year there, she put on an exhibition that lasted all summer in her gallery, and that was myself, Louise Nevelson, and the sculptor from France whose last name was Martin [pronounced to rhyme with Chopin Trans.]. Can't remember if Frank was, can't remember his first name [_____].

PAUL KARLSTROM: M-a-r-t-i-n?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes. And when summer came we decided to leave Rome. We had by that time bought a little Opel station wagon, and we decided we would see Europe, so the three of us took off on a camping tour of Europe, going to all the prehistoric sites from Altamira, to Lascaux, to Brittany. We went to London and back through Paris and Switzerland, Italy, and that took care of the summer. We camped. And during that time I think we only stayed in something other than a tent maybe three times. If we were rained out [or whatever] we would go to a hotel.

Then I had the chance. . . . They wanted me to come and teach at USC, so I said I would. So we returned. . . . I mean, that would have been the next summer, I was going to teach at USC. So we returned and we weren't anxious to get back to Santa Monica. We had sublet our house, and we wanted to stay in New York, so we were very close friends with [Isamu] Noguchi.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes. And he came to Rome several times and visited with us. Well, he was like a brother to Luchita.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I didn't know that.

LEE MULLICAN: And they'd known each other since the late forties. And Noguchi's sister, Ailes, lived in upper state New York, about an hour in Croton Falls it was north of New York City, and so we rented a farm house there for the winter. I had a show with Marian of a lot of the work that I did in Rome. And we stayed there until late spring, I guess it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm losing track of years. Are we in '60?

LEE MULLICAN: This is '60. No, this, let's see, this is '61 now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '61?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, this is '61.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Guggenheim was over.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that just lasted a year. Ailes was a ceramicist, and she had a kiln in her house, and I began to do my first ceramics there in her kiln.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's her name?

LEE MULLICAN: Her name is Ailes Spinden.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ailes?

LEE MULLICAN: A-i-l-e-s. And she was married to a man named Herbert Spinden, who was a retired director of the Brooklyn Museum and of the Museum of Natural History. He was a great traveler and collector and a wonderful man. So that was our life, in and out of the city, and we met people in the city and people came out to see us. I remember one summer one afternoon we entertained Wilfredo Lam, and by that time Sybil Moholy-Nagy was living in New York, so we saw a lot of her. And Marian Willard, we saw a lot of her and her husband, and artists in her gallery, et cetera.

So it was a minor social thing, but we weren't in New York City, and you'd be surprised how few people were willing to go outside of New York to come see you. I mean, if you didn't live in New York you might as well live five hundred miles away. But then we were anxious to come back to California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: By this time you had been offered the teaching post at USC?

LEE MULLICAN: At USC, I was going to teach there in the summer. So we came back, and in the mean time Alan Watts was living in southern California, and he wanted to stay in our house, so we let him stay in our house till we came back. And it wasn't his fault, but the house was all run down. It was very depressing. People that had lived there before took advantage of us and painted the walls different colors. Anyway, it was a mess. So homecoming was not the greatest. So I taught that summer in USC, and they wanted me to come back in the fall, but by that time Fred Wight was determined that I should come to UCLA.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was he chair of the department by then?

LEE MULLICAN: That's right, he was chairman. And he was determined as well as Bill Brice and Oliver Andrews and a few others, but Nunes and Stussy and others fought against me the whole way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did that ever change? I don't want to digress here, but this polar relation. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I don't think it ever. . . . I just got bored with the whole thing you see, and I took no interest in whatever Nunes was doing. I mean, "To hell with him."

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: Stussy finally kind of came around I think. He objected to the kind of. . . . Well, he would have called me a mystic, you see. He couldn't understand that. He was so totally academic. He couldn't get beyond his freshman teaching of drawing and anatomy and all that. It was a dreadful, dreadful time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Isn't that ironic though that he was the anointed disciple of Stanton Macdonald-Wright?

LEE MULLICAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Isn't that the _____?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, well I. . . . And of course he was a close friend of Macdonald-Wright's, et cetera, et cetera. But I found him to be a terrible artist, very opinionated, certainly dead set against me, and as the time grew on and Diebenkorn came to teach. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was '65, is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: I don't remember.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think, yeah.

LEE MULLICAN: And that was a wonderful time, and we really. . . . You know, Dick was marvelous, but Nunes and Stussy and Ray Brown were determined to get rid of him. They couldn't bear it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I'm going to have to. . . . This is something that cries out to be pursued. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I just. . . . What's your take on that? I mean, how do you explain this rather foolish. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, Dick wanted to continue teaching, but he didn't want to get involved with all the faculty politics and all of that. And Newness and Stussy, very jealous. They were anxious to get him out of there. They said, "He cannot stay here unless he does his share. He's got to take on all of these minor commitments whether he likes it or not, and if he can't do it then we don't want him." And so Brice and myself and Andrews were determined. We felt that he had to stay on. Fred Wight almost demanded that he stay. And the dean, whose name was [_____] Speroni.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Speroni?

LEE MULLICAN: "You've got to stay." So it was decided that he had to stay, and as I kept pointing out, "It's like having a Nobel prize winner on your faculty and you're kicking him out because he doesn't want to vote on a particular subject." And so Dick, of course, did the only thing he could. He says, "I couldn't work here in this atmosphere," so he left. Well, we don't want to get into the whole politics of UCLA. That's a whole 'nother thing. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not yet, but. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Not yet, okay. So I stayed on there, did my thing, had my exhibitions, and kept working. In time I was given a faculty studio in the new art building at UCLA, which was a great help to me. But before this I had my studio on North Venice Boulevard, where the LA Louver is now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hey, same place!

LEE MULLICAN: It's a storefront, yeah. And I worked in there, and a lot of people came. It was a great studio. That's where I met Sam Francis, and Betsy Grant who's Cary Grant's ex-wife, got very interested in my work, bought quite a few things, even brought Cary to the studio once. Other friends came. I remember even Martha Graham. So if I look back it was a time of real celebration. And I guess this was before I got the faculty studio. Now where are we? [in terms of the tape recorder (and events?)]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, now actually is a pretty good time to stop.

LEE MULLICAN: Okay.

FEBRUARY 11, 1993
Tape 5, side A [session 3, tape 1]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a continuing interview with Lee Mullican. This is session number three on February 11th, 1993, this time at the artist's home on Mesa Road in Santa Monica Canyon. This is tape one, side A.

Well, Lee, we of course are picking up on what has been pretty much a chronological retrospective account of your life and career, and we certainly haven't come yet right up to the present, but what I would like to do is pause a moment and look back again to the Dynaton, about which of course you've had to talk on many occasions and you have written things as well. Nonetheless, this is a topic of very real interest, of growing interest, perhaps-which you must find gratifying-to a number of younger scholars. And what I would like to do is then step back in time a little bit to the late forties and to the show in 1951, with what amounts to a retrospective. . . . Well, revisiting the subject as much as anything else from the prospect of four decades. And there are a number of things I would like to know, but perhaps, first of all, thinking of the people involved. We've heard the account of how you came together, and it was really just a few years, but at any rate I suspect there was a certain dynamic at work, of interaction between you, Wolfgang Paalen, and Gordon Onslow Ford. I wonder if you could tell us just a little bit about that: how it worked, what different roles you may have played. And then, in addition, what really were the common goals and objectives? Because it's described as, not a movement exactly, but at least you were coming together and presumably for a period of time shared very specific goals. How do you feel about that at this point in time?

LEE MULLICAN Well, as far as reflections, that's rather difficult, because, as you say, four decades have passed, and after the exhibition was over, for many reasons-personal and otherwise-we kind of all split up. Paalen went to Paris and then eventually back into Mexico. Gordon and Jacqueline of course stayed in the Bay area, so I actually saw more of them. But as far as. . . . It's difficult to look back because so much time has passed, and we all have gone our own ways, and I have really been involved with what I'm doing than looking back and thinking about what Paalen did or what Gordon did. I am more interested in what Gordon is doing now. So in a sense I'm kind of fighting this whole historical thing. It's great to be historical, but I'm really more interested in what I'm doing now. And that's where all my thoughts are.

But it was a time, as I say, that just ran out on a personal basis, and in '59, when I had my Guggenheim, and Luchita and Matthew and I went to Rome, and, as one does, one keeps up any kind of messages or correspondence through American Express. So we went to American Express to see if we had any mail or what, and there was this telegram from [Luchita's son-LM] Daniel saying that Paalen had died, and we were just not prepared for that. We're still not prepared for that. We still are not sure what really happened, what concerned him for him to kill himself like that. And we just. . . . I've just not made really any investigation into that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was there a mystery surrounding. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think there is. I think there's. . . . As far as I know. . . . I think Gordon probably knows as much about it as anyone, but he's never really spoken of it either. These are things that may come out, but it was a kind of grisly thing, for whatever reason, and. . . . But anyway, that was just another step of removal. You know, we had just arrived in Rome and we were ready for our life there. And this is something that we-because we fully intended to continue our relationship with Paalen. He and Luchita were still corresponding very regularly, even though they were divorced and all that was finished. And he admired her and just wanted to keep in touch, you see, as did I. But life sweeps you around in such strange ways, and there suddenly we were going to spend a year in Europe. And so in a sense it's been like that ever since, really, just being kind of swept and moved around in my own world, occasionally going to see Gordon, of course-maybe twice a year, three times a year. It was great going up for holidays with Gordon and Jacqueline, and so that that's always been here kind of on the edge.

But Gordon is going his way; I'm going mine. Every time we go up there, it's a great occasion to go into his studio, and he with great pleasure shows us everything that he's done, and we talk about what has happened in the last six months, in the last year. If there are exhibitions, we try. . . . We've missed very few of them.

And yet there was something in that Dynaton period that we all recognized and that held us together, and that we wanted to make this statement, and Paalen particularly felt this was very important, and so did Gordon. Paalen just said one day in a letter-I think to Gordon-"The time has come. We've got to do something."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this a letter from Mexico?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, I think so. Well, he had already been in San Francisco, but at that time he went back to Mexico and was making plans to move to San Francisco. And so we began planning things right then. But of course all the dynamism really came from him and from Gordon. If I think back, I was just kind of like a young bystander, you know, just listening and absolutely fascinated with everything that was said, everything that we did. There were these great dinners, all this great food, cuisine that I was certainly not used to, and intellectual talk, and they were always [so impressed, sort of depressed] that I was so silent. [laughs] You know, all these guys. And Gordon would often say, "Well, Lee is the smartest one. He is the one who knows it all and then he just doesn't say a word." [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you were just listening, and soaking it in?

LEE MULLICAN: I was just listening and thinking, but I really had nothing. . . . I didn't have anything to speak to in a kind of totally intellectual way. I just was not that clever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you this then. Clearly there was a social and a personal simpatico?

LEE MULLICAN: Totally. Absolutely continuous.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, and so there's no question that this was an important ingredient of brought you together and what kept you together through this period of time, and as you say it is something that you, no matter which way your careers or work went, would hope to keep up after Dynaton, after the exhibition. But what I'm interested in is trying to understand in a specific way what were the goals, the objectives, the ideas that were articulated about art-what it could be-especially by Paalen, I guess, but by Gordon as well-that attracted you? What appealed to you as you listened?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, I see, that attracted me because. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: From your point of view.

LEE MULLICAN: All of that's been recorded. I mean, everything he wrote and everything. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But from your point of view, how did you see this project, this mutual enterprise of Dynaton?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it opened my eyes obviously, and particularly when I found myself in my studio and was working and not really giving it great thought that we were preparing a Dynaton statement. I was just working. Working from what I had known and what I had seen and what we had discussed, and of course Gordon and Paalen came out of a European situation- surrealism-and I was very interested in that, interested in the paintings, all of the paintings that Gordon had. I was interested in all of the artifacts that Paalen brought up from Mexico. I mean, this great Victorian house in Mill Valley was filled, I mean, absolutely filled with these incredible pre-Columbian Northwest coast objects! And I looked and I saw, and it was through his Amerindian number of the Dyn magazine that I realized that here was a source that I was very interested in. So right after that, I remember one day I went into a store in San Francisco that dealt in antiques, and there was an absolutely beautiful feathered [Pomo] basket that I just knew I had to have, you see. The kind of feathered surface of the basket was a little bit like what I was doing in painting, and so that was a strong in[fluence]. . . . That's the two.

Coming from Gordon, the history of what he brought from his times in Europe and in Mexico and in New York, and his association with Matta and other surrealists, and of course as I say-I'm probably repeating myself-but their flat there on Nob Hill was. . . . I mean, not Nob Hill. . . . Chestnut street anyway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Russian Hill.

LEE MULLICAN: Telegraph Hill.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Telegraph.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. You know, this was a knockout, and I seem to remember we talked about this-going into he setting me up in the studio to look at these things. And so all I could offer, really, was what I was doing in my studio.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So did you feel in a sense that they adopted you. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Exactly. Oh. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and in a sense they intellectually tried to form you?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, not to form me, but to. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Guide you?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, certainly to guide me and educate me. Because they saw that I did have this kind of natural talent that was just kind of exploding on the canvases, and maybe I wasn't even sure of where it was coming from, and of course it was my adaptation of French modernism and what had gone on in Europe, actually, with the cubists and surrealists, and I've spoken to that, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask the question still another way.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As I follow you along in this revisiting the past trying to recover, it seems to me that what you describe as an influence here is being put into contact with certain sources for inspiration, certain patterns, certain objects even, that you saw as useful to you in realizing your art.

LEE MULLICAN: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that is one thing-I don't want to say it is formal or stylistic, but it tends. . . . It doesn't necessarily involve the philosophical or the intellectual metaphysical side of it-the theory which both Paalen and Gordon seem to embody, and which by your own account you were somewhat innocent of, and which of course is an underpinning of Old World, of European modernism. But over time you certainly have developed your own notions about this, which presumably are connected to the Dynaton revelations and ultimately to surrealism and other forces that came through them. Looking back once again, there were certain terms, for instance, that Paalen, in his introduction to the Dynaton catalogue, I think, talks about a metaplastic art-that this was metaplastic.

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was into giving terms to things, trying to give terms that were new, that separated your concerns from other movements.

LEE MULLICAN: Exactly, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And the new subject. I can't even remember all the terminology. This is a building of a kind of theoretical grounding for your art, and once again, I'm curious to know to what extent you felt that you were finally participating in this or understanding that side.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, of course I was understanding it, and I was seeing it and reflecting upon it continuously, as any artist would from what he sees, and what he hears. And what was going on in my painting of a very personal nature may have come from my interest in theater or interest in music-jazz in particular-things like that, which were totally personal and a part of the studio. And of course I was, up to that time and still, very involved with nature, so that experiences in the desert and in the southwest and in Hawaii, where I had been, and Japan and just living with Oriental ideas in San Francisco. All of that was helping me create whatever I was involved with-I mean, painting and drawing, primarily. But it was there, but in my studio, you see, and when I was working-still today-I mean, you are there, locked within yourself, and having understood the whole sense of [automatism,

atomatism] and surprise and chance and accident and all of those things that came out of late surrealism. All of that by now I had really assimilated, and it was just being fed through me as another painter, and that was. . . . And of course going to Gordon's studio was very important, wherever he set up to work. Interestingly enough, Paalen did very little work in San Francisco. After he moved into this great house, he took a little kind of shed that was attached to a garage where he did a lot of very small paintings. But he never really, for whatever reasons, whether they were personal involvements with Luchita, pressures from Mexico, pressures who knows from where, he actually did very little work. Practically everything that's in the Dynaton show I think was done in Mexico before, and so it really was not a very productive time for him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds to me like it may have been a time of consolidation, as much as anything.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think he was just kind of lost.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

LEE MULLICAN: I think he was kind of. . . . He was trying desperately to build a new kind of life there in Mill Valley in this beautiful house, and he was trying to move the house around. He spent a lot of time taking out old stained glass windows and putting in clear glass, and for whatever reason trying to. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Taking out the stained glass windows?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. [laughs] Well, they probably weren't very handsome, you know, and they diffused the light.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, then tastes change. They probably looked old fashioned.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right, and you can't look at, it's hard to look at paintings coming through colored light. And for whatever. . . . But he was really spent up on that. And of course, by then-well, even before-he was continuously writing and thinking on his, on what he was, on his essays and what he wanted to say. And it was a time that just was. . . . It was more productive in that sense and less productive as far as actual works, I think you could say. Anyway the point was that he couldn't invite me into his studio to see anything, or if I did go into this little shed, he was just working on things hardly more than ten or twelve inches square. But at the same time I think he was still living his life in Mexico, in Mexico City. He still had this great studio down there, and in this great house where he. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was he going back and forth at that time?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, yes, he was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you ever go down with him?

LEE MULLICAN: Only once. The first time, shortly after I met him. Gordon and Jacqueline and I, we all went down. Maybe like, well, it was right before Christmas, after Christmas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was what, 1948, maybe?

LEE MULLICAN: Something like that. And of course he introduced me. . . . I mean, it was marvelous, and I saw Mexico for the first time-the Pyramids and the museums and we went to Oaxaca and various places. That's the only time I ever really traveled with him, or saw him in Mexico.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did he operate in the world primarily in terms of his art? In other words, did he interact with his environment, with individuals-I don't want to say self-consciously, in terms of art, but saying that these were the sources, it had to have a relationship finally to the art. Was there that kind of dedication?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, the dedication was there, and of course there were many hours and much time in the studio, but he was a man possessed by collecting and understanding pre-Columbian art particularly, and Northwest coast, art and all of that that he put into that Amerindian issue of Dyn. So that was like a consuming-I mean really consuming-thing, and one saw it happening continuously-absolutely continuously-and there was buying and selling and trading objects, and he worked very close to [Miguel] Covarrubius and all the collectors in Mexico. It was a consuming passion, absolute passion. And I'm not sure that it wasn't even a stronger passion than in his painting. But all of this developed after he left Europe. This developed on his way down the Northwest coast and his living in Mexico, so that in a sense his formative years of painting I think were really in Europe, and that's why all those early canvases that deal with [fumage, fromage] and those strange apparitional subject matter. And that's very different than what happened in Mexico.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did he introduce you to the art of-well, what do they call it now?-non-Western cultures? They used to say primitive, but we don't say that anymore.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was through him, yes, and through the magazine that I realized. . . . Because, well, I had seen very little that wasn't an interest of mine outside of. . . . Even growing up in the Southwest, it was only later that I really got caught up, say, in collecting artifacts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was wondering if maybe on this trip in '48-and that was the year-did you pick up something?

LEE MULLICAN: I bought a pre-Columbian sculpture, and I didn't have any money to buy anything really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What were you attracted to in terms of the different cultures or styles? West coast, pre-Columbian? Do you remember?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I was more attracted to those things that I saw, like [medla] outside of Oaxaca and the pyramids outside of Mexico City. Actual places, sites, that's what. . . . As far as pieces of material, well, the museums were filled; I was excited about that. And the Paalen collection was incredible, everywhere. Well, I was interested in that, but I was not trying directly to put that in a context with my art, with my painting. If it was there, it would come out. I mean, I didn't look at a Kachina form and copy it on the canvas or something, except in a very general way.

So, I think, if it's one thing I've learned as an artist, and that is, whatever that plane is that you're on when you're in your studio working, that's where I have always wanted to be and where I have been, and that's where things have happened. And when they're happening, one is not really concerned, or doesn't even think or consider, what one has really seen before or "Oh, yeah, that was a great Paul Klee exhibition," and so forth. But when I actually begin to work on my canvas, I'm not really thinking about that Paul Klee exhibition or Paul Klee. One is moved and one is put upon by all kinds of different elements, and sometimes they are very direct and sometimes they are very indirect-and sometimes it takes years to really figure out what it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We may have a chance to return to Mexico, no question about that, but in case I forget to ask you this, on that trip, did you have occasion to meet, well, any of the artists, Diego?

LEE MULLICAN: No. There was a great tension between Paalen and Rivera and Kahlo, and all of that, and it was hardly even discussed. I mean, Luchita knew more about them, but there were several artists. . . . There was a woman artist whose name is [_____] Remedios, who I met, and one or two of them, but they were already very close to Paalen. And I seemed to have also met his former wife, Alice Rahon. No, I didn't, I met very few artists. Well, you have to realize that this was just maybe not even a week.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, okay.

LEE MULLICAN: It was a very short time. I arrived first, and then Gordon and Jacqueline arrived, and Gordon was very funny. Oh, the one thing that Gordon and I both kind of latched on to at that time was in the markets we would find these great skins you know, hides, cured leather with still a full shape of the animal. And we went off, and Gordon and I bought up a lot of these, and he painted on them and there was one or two in the Dynaton show. I used the skins, and I burned in designs on the leather, and they're in storage. I've never shown them really, but there was. . . . Anyway, the thing was, we went to the market and Gordon gave us this long lecture about, "You have to be really careful or you will get robbed. You have to be really careful what you're doing, and be aware of what's going on around you and so forth." We were getting ready to leave. Gordon said, "Well, I hate to tell you this, but I have lost my wallet." [laughter]

It was fun being with him, and we went out and we went to several places and, again, great marvelous Mexican lunches and in restaurants and. . . .

Tape 5, side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: [This is the third Ed.] interview with Lee Mullican, and this is tape one, side B.

LEE MULLICAN: Back in Mexico?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Back in Mexico.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, you see, I think it was also a time of kind of figuring each other out and understanding, and I have a feeling that Paalen was having great difficulty with me. [chuckles] You know, we had nothing in common as far as background goes. I was closer to Gordon and Jacqueline, and, well, I had known them longer, and we had spent more time together, but this was such a short time with Paalen. I'm not sure just what he thought about me, or what he was trying very difficult because with his European heritage. . . . Someone from Oklahoma just had to be a little confusing to him. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, he likes primitive cultures.

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs] Yeah. Well, Oklahoma's not that primitive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not primitive enough.

LEE MULLICAN: But American Indians, sure. But if I just think back of what was that time in Mexico, and even after we got to Mill Valley it was a time of. . . . And I was trying to understand him, too, you see. I mean, he was very moody and he would have these attacks of moodiness when I just knew that he didn't want me around. I don't know who he wanted around. . . . Well, there were great problems of course with Luchita, and so it was. . . . Although there were times, as I say, when we were very social. We could be very social and have a real life going, and Paalen would be. . . . He would make marvelous jokes, and he was intrigued with making up words in the English language.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was going ask, was he fluent in. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes, he was very good, he was very good. Like, well, recently Gordon just had this big birthday party, and I was there. So we were asked to speak, and so I had a little thing to say about the forming, at the time of the Dynaton, I was working on these wooden constructions, and I remember being in Jack Stauffacher's office, and we were talking about them, and Paalen said, "Well, I think we should call them something. You just can't say wooden constructions." So there was this great discussion this was the tale I told at the birthday party and Gordon said, "Well I think we should call them "The Lovelies." [laughs] I said, "Well. . . ." You know, this hasn't been recorded so it's good anyway, even though it's just a recounting, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good, good.

LEE MULLICAN: "The Lovelies." And I thought, "What is he talking about? Is this some kind of surrealist joke that I'm not in on that he wants to call these spiny looking painted primitive things, he's going to call them "the Lovelies?" And so I laughed about that, and then Paalen spoke up, and here I was saying how he loved to work with the English language and words and so forth, and he said, "You should call them Tactile Ecstatics'."

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so you did?

LEE MULLICAN: And so I did. And that's what they were called, Tactile Ecstatics. And then at the birthday party, I said, "Well Gordon, here it is your eightieth birthday, and I just want you to know that you are indeed a lovely person." And then I couldn't help saying, "But alas, you're not the loveliest. The loveliest was a person named Jacqueline." He loved that. Later he told me he thought that was great.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did "Tactile Ecstatics" mean? What was that supposed to mean? Or was it just simply playfulness?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, they were tactile because they had all of these kind of spines sticking out on them, you know, and the "ecstatic" was just a word that he liked. And he put those two words together. But he was doing that all the time, and I think. . . . You spoke earlier about the word "metaplastic," you see, he had great fun with that word. And for a while that's what we were going to call the show. It was not going to be. . . . Dynaton didn't enter into it. And when we had. . . . The first exhibition of the three of us together was at Stanford University, and. . . . Now I can't remember whether Paalen spoke, but I know that Gordon spoke, and Sybil Moholy-Nagy, who had joined us by that time. She also spoke, but that was the title, "Metaplastic," and it was only later that we decided to call it "Dynaton."

PAUL KARLSTROM: How serious was he or were you and Paalen about these works? Because the words and terminology seem to loom fairly large in the Dynaton, more so perhaps than in some other areas of modern art or at least American art. And this actually then leads me into my next question. But I was wondering, did the words themselves have meaning in and of themselves, or were they really denoting or connoting something very profound beyond?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh yes, very profound. I mean, Paalen's essayist abilities were considerable, and all those articles in the magazine which were later put into a book. Oh, no, that's very serious, of course. But it doesn't mean that occasionally. . . . He loved to play with the English language. But that he did. Oh no, that's. . . . What was connoted there was very important to him and to us. Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the words. . . . Well, the fact that "metaplastic" at one moment was to be the word denoting an activity what you artists were about at the time and then _____. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was just to give it a title. It was just a title. He obviously used the word in the essay, and we understood that, but it was just. . . . Well, for whatever reason, and I don't remember, "Dynaton" seemed to be a more impressive title, and of course it made the connection with Dyn magazine, which Paalen published. And he was the spokesman, no question. Whatever he wanted, you know. But by that time Gordon was dealing

also with his new subject ideas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what for you and I won't belabor this, because I know that this has been gone over. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, please, please.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but what for you did. . . . Let's take "metaplastic." What did that mean for you? How did you see yourself fitting in to the ideas, the clusters of ideas and directions around that term? What was its meaning for you?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was just what it says. "Meta" was either metaphysical, and plastic means. . . . Well, it's just a process of painting, which I continue, and so it's an attitude that you are caught up with. It wasn't just working with plastic or modern plastic. I'm really not sure that I can define this term as Paalen would have meant it, not at all. But. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But did you still feel an affinity? Do you still think that term. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, absolutely. Oh, absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this established. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh yes, no question. Absolutely no question. In the sense metaphysical, and in the sense that it's something that you really cannot get a hold of, try as you may. It's like Zen. You just can't hold on to it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we'll of course talk, I hope, much more about this, but I'm interested in what you say right here, that it's something elusive that you continue to work towards that never really [ends], is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: No, it's a state of mind, and. . . . Well, eventually of course. I mean, as you are working through this process of painting, the painting's there. You know, there is an end to it. I mean the painting is there, but you've gone through this metaphysical process you know, whatever you want to call it, meditation, I guess, more than anything and it's a meditative act.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, is the work of art then the object, the document equivalent to the process. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . or just a record of the process?

LEE MULLICAN: It's just a record of the process. That's what I feel. I mean, it's just a record of my being an artist, and the real vital thing is that I am that artist. As I say that I am standing on this particular metaphysical, almost unexplainable plane in my studio, and the canvas is there before me. And it's in this attitude that makes the painting appear. And once it appears, you just put it aside, and whatever reason, it's there now, and you're not quite sure how it got there. If you examine it. . . . You don't and I'm speaking of myself you don't want to examine it that much. Just accept it, you see.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you feel in this process again, we can go later on to talk further about this but that there is involved here or your involvement may be with the quest for something that is transcendent. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . some kind of a universal truth that you may not entirely attain, but that is there?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right. Transcendent is the right word. But you see, I'm just speaking for myself, because Gordon is much more analytical. He doesn't let himself go the way I do. I mean, if he lets himself go, if he is being totally free, it's within the confines still of notes he's made or drawings, sketches, he's made, which have come up to the painting. Now we're speaking of an actual painting. That's why a lot of, I think. . . . Personally I think a lot of his notes and notebooks and so forth, things like this up here, are more interesting at times, are more exciting to me than the finished product. But he's always been that way. He's always been very analytical, and at times I feel that he does, of course, become very responsive to this, to automatism although he hates that word where things just happen. But it's always in a confine. I think Paalen, too, was very analytical, except maybe in his last paintings. They seemed to be very much more freer, and not held down by. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Theory?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, not only theory but by an actual formal concern, of say a drawing or. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't want to put you on the spot. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, please.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but would you say that to a certain degree in Gordon's work, and Paalen's perhaps, there was a constraining self-consciousness at a certain level or at a certain point? Is that a fair way to. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, I don't like that word.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not self-conscious?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I don't think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What term would you prefer?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I would say just totally conscious and totally conscious of all kinds of elements that make up what we were concerned with, which was, as you know, from the word "Dynaton," we were concerned with the possible. And if something is possible, then I think you're wide open. You really are. But it's just what those steps may be from the attitude in the studio, from the attitude with your paint and a brush in hand and so forth. That attitude has to be all-important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what about that which you have just described in connection with Gordon's work or some of it, and this is not a value judgment becoming perhaps overly concerned with formal considerations that made them possibly limit this expression or to close at some of these possibilities?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or maybe open on one side, but then to be so imbued with. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I don't think that they were ever as open as I was. I left myself wide open still do and that's why there is such a great range and change in my work from one canvas to the next, and from year to year, and exhibition to exhibition. At times it even worries me that it's seemingly all so different, and I can only hope that one day it will all kind of all fall into place as really being mine. But, no, I've always been kind of. . . . That's the reason that I made those Tactile Ecstatics, because I wanted to get off the canvas. I really wanted to construct something that came off the canvas, and I loved the whole idea of the surrealist sense of making an object, as many did. And I was like totally. . . . I just gave a lecture at USC, and the final slide I showed was the Giacometti Palace because not only is it one of the great sculptures of our time, but it was something that I really felt, and understood and it wasn't just a volumetric sculpture. It wasn't just a painting of a surface. It was something more akin to, well, theater or, you know. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: In which you were always interested?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, which I've been always interested in. So that was a very important piece, and wanting to get away from painting, you see. And Paalen made a few sculptures, as we know. But on the whole I don't think Gordon has ever done anything in that realm, and yet I've tried to push beyond the surface in whatever way I can.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, is it possible that pre-Columbian, other American Indian, African artifacts, which almost exclusively are three-dimensional, whether they are pots, ceramics, figures, wood sculpture, do you see a connection, or do you see them as a source at all for your desire to break away from [gesture]?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, not. . . . Because in that sense. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess I've already asked that, but. . . .

LEE MULLICAN; Yeah, no, no, what you speak of is really volumetric sculpture and carvings and things like that. I've done very little of that. What interested me most was like Navajo sand paintings, or, as I spoke of, that basket with the feather work, Navajo weaving, Saltillo blankets from Mexico and things like that, which really were not totally thought of as sculpture per se. That's why I love that Giacometti. I mean, I like all his bronze figures and chariots and all that, too, but it's that open air, that open space, that you really can't grasp.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's turn again briefly to Dynaton, and what I would like to investigate is a self-conception you may have had the three of you at the time, or perhaps you can now project back with current thinking, and that has to do with the relationship of Dynaton mid-century with the broader idea of modernism, with twentieth-century art. I mean, obviously, you felt, the three of you, that you were different, you had some thing special to say, you had your special approach. How would you now place that within mid-century modernism, international modernism?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I would give it more importance. I would give it more strength, I think, than we had then. Because we were just forming these ideas. Well, abstract expressionism was just being formed also.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's right, and I am very interested in your own awareness of that and how you. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, the simplest answer to that, which I have to give quite often is that I felt that what we were. . . . What we felt, what we were doing, the difference was that there was this content of the possible, and that it included many things. It did not just include the formal use of the brush, like [Franz] Kline, or [Clyfford] Still and so forth. They really didn't want any content. They didn't want it to be known. They were insulted if you even suggested there was such a thing. We were totally involved with our content, and it was unique, probably. Although a lot of surrealism were [sic] also very involved in primitive cultures like Max Ernst's collection of Kachina dolls and things like that. But that's the primary. . . . And we didn't give it that much attention, I think, really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean abstract expressionism, you didn't pay much attention to?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, we didn't. . . . It was going on in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you feel in competition with [that]?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, no way. I didn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

LEE MULLICAN: I don't think so. I think Paalen's competitiveness and Gordon's, too came out of. . . . They wanted to disassociate themselves from surrealism. You know, they were both Breton surrealists. Now I didn't have that background, so it didn't really bother me. [chuckles] But that was a primary urge for creating what they did. They wanted to get away from this whole idea of dreams and illustration and et cetera, like the early surrealists. And as Gordon says, we were really more interested in this new subject which came out of [_____] Tanguy and Ernst and Matta. So we didn't, I didn't really think of modernism really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: It was just modern art. I mean, it was modern because it was then and now, you see. There wasn't such a thing as post-modern then. [laughs] This is all. . . . And it wasn't really pre-modern either. So it was just modern and one didn't even really concerned with it, except in the sense of it what was happening now or had just happened, and in the sense of what a museum of modern art was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's very interesting to me, because of course now from our perspective, here we go back, and there's the whole effort now, it's practically an industry of how you define modernism.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. That's right. And that's where I belong, and I really feel like I'm one of the last modernist painters. [chuckles] You know, there are not many around any more.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why is that? Please tell me why you would describe yourself that way. I'm very interested.

LEE MULLICAN: Because I. . . . Well, I'm modern because I'm not post-modern, as far as ideas. [laughs] Although I'm interested in conceptual ideas and video, and I've done computer art and experimental theater and sites and so forth, that actually helped create has created so-called conceptual art. And it intrigues me. . . . And even there I think a lot of it has come out of surrealism, believe it or not, you know, in the whole sense of Dada and working with chance and accident and so forth. And of course I am totally involved with it now, as far as Matthew is concerned. But modernism just kind of ended. You know, it reached a height. We recognized where it came from you know, cubism, surrealism and then the whole, what went on in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, when you would talk with and again I realize _____ in the beginning, that this is looking back 40 years. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, it's hard.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . so you're not held absolutely to this, but it is very interesting to try get a little insight into how these other two were regarding themselves and your particular project together, vis-à-vis notions of modernism, and so I want to make sure that I understand this, that your recollection is not that there was an awareness of conducting an activity that somehow fit into some idea of modernism, that you distinguish that perhaps as a concept from modern art, from modern painting, because it was of the time. So does that, in terms of. . . . Does modernism take on a new meaning for you beyond just being of the time? You say you are the last of the modernists?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, of that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But is there more to it than that? Is it just time-tied, or does it have to do with certain emphases, perhaps formal considerations over others. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yeah, I think so. I mean, you know. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____ unity. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, well, the whole modern thing began in Europe, of course, and we knew that these were a part of our family, you might say, but we felt that we at the same time were adding to that. Through the Dynaton we were going to find a new subject. We were adding something that really hadn't been seen before, and went beyond, in its own sense, beyond surrealism and beyond cubism, of course. Beyond those artists that we totally admired, like Seurat and van Gogh and Cezanne, et cetera. And we felt we were modern because we were not un-modern. [chuckles] We were not a part of the great American Theme you know, regionalism. We were not a part of the great. . . . We weren't all that American.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, well, this is exactly what I was going to ask you.

LEE MULLICAN: You see, we were not into the American Scene. Whatever the scene was came from Europe, it really did, and took over.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You see, you were very much then. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: We were part of that scene.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . grounded in a European modernist tradition? This is how. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: That's right. I think so. I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And at the time you were aware of this as a _____.

LEE MULLICAN: I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No use for anything "Amurrican."

LEE MULLICAN: No. I rebelled against that in art school. Everybody else was well, I mentioned this before, too everybody else was interested in what Benton and Curry and Wood and Reginald Marsh and Hopper and all those people. That was American art. That was the great thing going on in America. And the whole sense of dealing with something that came out of Europe, whether it be through Mondrian or Tanguy or Paul Klee, was just. . . . Well, that was of more interest to us, and we were not really part of that American scene. I didn't want to be. Curious. I guess I don't know why. Just obsessed. Just obsessed with a sense of rebellion against it. [chuckles]

Tape 6, side A [session 3, tape 2]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a continuing interview with Lee Mullican. This is the third session, tape two, side A.

Before we broke for lunch, Lee, we were talking about several different things, but these discussions grew out of my questions about the Dynaton and your recollections the ideas, the philosophy, the individuals involved and one of the things that we got on to was the concept of modernism, but modernism as you may have thought about it at the time, how Dynaton fit in to the movements of mid-twentieth art, and you pointed out that modernism wasn't something that you thought about, and we talked a little more about that and I found that very interesting. [chuckling]

I'd like to pick up just a couple things in connection with modernism, because I want to make sure that I have this right. There's a lot of interest in that whole concept, trying to pin it down, what it means, or more to the point how artists that we now perceive as involved with modernism as modernist artists saw it at the time. Saw their alignments, what their affinities were, what did this mean? And I believe that you said correct me if I am wrong that you didn't think, nor did the others, in terms of historic concept of modernism, that you were participating in that, but that instead you were perhaps modernists involved with the new, involved with the time. Is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I don't know that we would even call ourselves modernists. We were just artists living at that time and we didn't know that that was going to be called modern times. Well, modern times really meant since the industrial revolution, but we did know what our connections were with European modernism, and as to

what it meant in the sense of well, I've gone over this cubism and surrealism, et cetera. But we certainly knew that it was very different from what was known as American art. We weren't documenting like Hopper. We weren't doing impressions like Marin. Maybe I felt a little closer to Arthur Dove in what he did with nature. And [we weren't an aspect of] all the regionalism, which I've already gone through. So, I think we knew where we were, but we just didn't consider it; it wasn't that important. What was important was what was happening right at that moment now and what we believed in and where it was going and all of that was in the Dynaton. And so, I mean, descriptions, essays and so forth in the Dynaton catalogue cover all of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, clearly you had and we went through this pretty thoroughly a sense of self.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. And also, as I point out in the catalogue, Jacqueline's statement, that we were like a theater of action. That's what we were.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One of the things I really have to ask you in connection with this. . . . Well, there are really two questions. One is we've drawn a distinction between call it modernism or not call it modernism but advanced ideas in art from Europe, a European tradition, and then what was going on in America at about the same time, which wasn't the more conservative regional school, but of course was the progressive side specifically, abstract expressionism which, as we all know, had in some cases, with some of the artists, a very strong sense of America and was practically anti-Europe. I mean, it was a goal to find a new painting, a new American painting.

LEE MULLICAN: Such as?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Jackson Pollock for one. These grew out of the idea. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: You don't think. . . . He was an abstract expressionist, though.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's what I am saying.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, what I'm saying is. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: I thought you said Americans that were not abstract expressionists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, were not regionalists.

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And at any rate that they had a strong sense of identification with a new vision, a new painting, that was American, that grows out of the American experience, and at least their rhetoric tried to separate them from a tired European modernism. So there at least was with some of these artists at this junction. . . . Obviously the Dynaton people did not feel that way because you very much, as you said, identified with the European tradition, and that that was where resided the inspiration, the background, for the work that you were doing, presumably though pushing it even further to a new stage. So there's two questions I have, and one has to do with the reception of Dynaton, which I don't know a whole lot about, but it seems to me that there's a revival of interest now and that maybe in some ways there's a stronger interest than followed the show itself. Certainly it wasn't something that caught on _____.

LEE MULLICAN: Exactly. No, it didn't. And the reviews were not. . . . I haven't seen one for years. If I own them, I don't know where they are. But as I remember they were very lukewarm, and I don't think any. . . . Very few really understood what we were doing, as what we were doing together. Certainly I had, in my first show, in the Modern Museum show, I had an incredible review from Alfred Frankenstein. I mean, just one couldn't expect more. So there was some enthusiasm there, but for the show itself, I don't remember if it really was covered that well. But it was a different time, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, it was California and then. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: That's right, and there's no art weekly. There's no [very] art magazines, and maybe one review in one newspaper, or something like that. That's all there was. So the enthusiasm probably isn't recorded of what other artists thought, although we were certainly a part of the intellectual art in San Francisco at that time, and everyone saw it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: On the other hand, in San Francisco at that time the dominant force was definitely abstract expressionism out of the California School of Fine Arts.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So I guess part of my question, or maybe the whole thing, the thrust of this question, is in terms of the reception of Dynaton and the success and so forth, do you feel that its European connections maybe worked against it at a time when these GIs had come back from the war?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, they didn't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was it too European, is I guess what I'm saying.

LEE MULLICAN: No, well, they didn't realize that what they were doing really came out of Europe, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, eventually. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Gordon, as you know, lectured at the [New] School for Social Research and shocked everybody. No one had heard of these people. They didn't realize, about Paalen, Gordon, Matta, Tanguy, Max Ernst. All of those late surrealists, who were true surrealists, but what they were interested in was the _____ and I may have gone through this before automatism, chance, accident, and all that, which abstract expressionism grew out of.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. But nonetheless, what matters is how they saw it, and is it possible and again is a question. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, now like students didn't know any of this, you see. All they saw was Clyfford Still and Rothko. They were standing up there talking to them, or working with them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, perhaps, was it too programmatic, I guess? Dynaton has an intellectual _____. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and it sounds European, this kind of [serial, ethereal], like surrealism.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So do you think this was off-putting for some of the younger artists who had now become imbued with the subjectivity and independence of a Clyfford Still?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, that's right, and, like most students, they're really influenced more by those artists who are most visible. [If there's a] chance for Still and Rothko, who already had reputations that's why they were there then that's what they're going to look up to, and there just wasn't. . . . So I really don't know; I don't have an answer really. Except there was not any really great movement. We didn't expect it to be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: We weren't looking for a movement. We were only. . . . We weren't trying to establish a school of action or anything. We just knew that we had a manifestation to do, that we were thinking things in a different way, and that the future was going to be very different because we were there and in showing them this, if anybody wanted to look at it, fine. If they didn't. . . . Because as I say, there was no Dynaton. [Two, Too] there was no other thing printed. There was never any real follow-up any place else, and if we had been driven to do something else, we would have done it, but we were not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So beyond the fact that things worked out that you were dispersed shortly after the exhibition itself, beyond that fact. . . . Or if that hadn't happened, was there any expectation at all of continuing to maintain this alliance, this contact, and work towards those common goals? Any exhibit _____ _____.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think so. I don't think that we just suddenly thought, "Well, this is the end, this is it." I don't think that's true at all. But things were left in suspension, and if personal circumstances had been any different, it may be that we would have pursued this, that maybe Paalen would have started up his magazine again, or he would be writing more essays. I mean, it wasn't that we just said, "This is it." It's just that, "Well, we're going to have an interim now." Things have changed and Luchita and I wanted to come down here. Paalen didn't know but he knew he wanted to go back to Paris and exhibit there and Mexico, and Gordon and Jacqueline loved San Francisco and stayed there. But we did. . . . It just happened. That's history now, and that's the way it happened. It isn't that we planned it or that we thought anything about it, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you obviously would have been perfectly pleased, if things had been different, to continue to pursue these objectives together?

LEE MULLICAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So there was really the basis for _____ [close] movement.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, as I said, you know, in our tape, I guess it was last time, that Paalen encouraged us to come to Mexico, and we could have done something more down there. We didn't know, but it was awkward and by that time I was on my way with my Guggenheim, and so it was not possible.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, before we move on more directly to a phase of this interview that will deal with your work subsequent to Dynaton, there are a couple of bridge questions, I think. And one of them has to do with the idea of openness. You keep using this term of openness, of being open, and then on the other hand, exposivity, and I've talked with. . . . And I'm not thinking so much of you, but I'm frankly thinking of Gordon Onslow Ford, who is very convinced of the truth, the legitimacy of his particular approach, and his grasp of what I would have to call the truth, and I've had a number of discussions with him. And I say this with all respect, but I can't help but comment on it, that there is at least, in talking with Gordon, a sense that he has discovered "the one true way" and that others are missing the boat.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is this something you feel that maybe developed for reasons through Gordon's career. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . that is not part of the earlier Dynaton?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I think it probably comes afterward. As I also may have said before, I don't think. . . . Neither Gordon and I had really great works in that show. We were still kind of forming ourselves. I certainly was. And it was only after that that Gordon discovered his [line-circle-dot, line circled off] theory, and tried to understand that his world was beyond dreams, below dreams, or whatever he says. And then he got involved with Zen and Alan Watts and calligraphy, and all of that and so forth, which formed his, formed that role that he still pursues, and in my sense. . . . I mean, I really think it's. . . . It's too limited, I mean, for my tastes and I think that he's just repeating himself now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you see your work differing from their work in fundamental ways? We've touched on this already, but I'd kind of like to use this as an opportunity now to shift over to Lee Mullican beyond beyond, as it says in the exhibition catalogue.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Well, I mean, my techniques, the way I worked, had to do with developing not only on the formal side, layers of paint, but also on the philosophical side, of layers of life or layers of nature, layers of patterning and elements that I felt more strongly about than they did. And I was one minute grasping outer space, and the next minute I was grasping what's below the desert floor. And I really hadn't. . . . I could never be as dogmatic as Gordon is, in saying "This is the only way. If you're not painting the way I'm painting, then forget it." He won't enjoy reading that, but that's as much, that's his attitude, I'm afraid. It gets down to that, and it's not good, and so he should continue certainly with what he believes. Well, I'm not going to get into a critique of Gordon. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, no.

LEE MULLICAN: So, I don't know, I just know that I'm a pretty kind of wild and open creature by comparison.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, and do you feel that and I think you've indicated as much already, but to reiterate that your own background, your Americanism, almost predetermined that this would be the case?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I don't know that it has to do with being American. I've never really thought of myself as being American. Certainly in my studio I don't feel that I'm American. Obviously I am. This is where I live, and this is where I've always lived, and the kind of landscape around me being American has been very influential. But at the same time I go to India and, boy, I'm swept away by the patterns and senses and the spiritual life that's there, which is certainly not found in America.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course the way you absorb that process could well be determined by all those other aspects of your background, your Americanism. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . _____ well, so it's something you really can't get away from.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you. . . . This leads exactly into another topic that I wanted to discuss, and that is the whole notion of regionalism of the sense of place, of a particular place, then expressing itself in works of art, in ideas. The way an individual responds to location, maybe not directly in landscape terms. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, yes, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about that?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, that's all very important. And you may say that there is such a thing as a California school of painting or whatever, and that it really exists because of the sense of light in California and color in California and the closeness to the Orient, and so you can begin to document all kinds of, in all kinds of ways. But what I do and what I want to do and what I think about is much more universal, and I could never think of myself. . . . I was talking about this to David Witt the other day. I could never document what I see going on in America. I want to escape from the sordidness that one finds in America in politics, in life in general, crime, drugs, all of that. My studio is my refuge, and my paintings are my refuge, and so that's why I prefer to think of myself more as being universal, and working hopefully with some kind of universal truths that go beyond what I find here. As one sees in, say in India, or maybe with the Hopis. So it's hard to pin it down to say, "Well, he is an American artist. But if he's an American artist, it may be that he happened to be born in America." Like I'm sure that they will say Paalen was Viennese. but his life was not in Vienna, you know. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, but by the same token I think most people would place him with the European sensibility.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, they would. They shouldn't though, but they would. Of course, what his life, what he did with his life was primarily I mean, my way of thinking was in Mexico. That's where he was. He was a citizen of Mexico.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

LEE MULLICAN: But he was not, but he was beyond that, too. That just happened to be. . . . Well, he had to be a citizen somewhere, so he chose to be a citizen in Mexico. That does not mean that he was ever involved with Mexican art. He's been adopted now as a Mexican artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think so. I think they show him in the museums as being Mexican, you know, being. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean like we adopt David Hockney?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, something like that. I guess so, yeah. But he was never. . . . He was always, it was always. . . . As I said before, it was difficult for him to identify with the Mexican school there, or Tamayo, or any of that. So I can't. . . . I can identify with a very few American artists. Pousette-Dart was one. Sorry he's gone. Tobey, Graves. People like that. They are the Americans. . . . Well, Dove, I think. I'm very fond of Dove. And I recognize that there are those American spirits, like Stuart Davis and Mark Tobey. . . . Not Mark Tobey, John Marin, et cetera.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you would never place yourself, describe yourself as a California artist? I mean. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it's hard because. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or a Southwestern artist?

LEE MULLICAN: Because that's where I've lived and that's where I worked, and that's just the nature of. . . . You tell me why the nature of that puts it in a historical sense, and that's just how it's called. I mean, Henry Hopkins does a book, Contemporary California Painting, and it brings in everybody who happens to be living in California.

LEE MULLICAN: Not that it has anything to do with. . . . Well, Hockney, of course. I mean, he illustrates and so he does Santa Monica Canyon and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is right out the door, by the way, as we sit here.

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs] . . . and of Beverly Hills housewives and things like that. But I think he probably would be better off being known as a universal painter, not a really American, not English, and not. . . . His work has actually become very French, you know. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very Matissey?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

[Interruption in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Lee, we were talking about this concept of regionalism, which we obviously don't want to overplay, and I can certainly understand, and. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: By regionalism you mean artists living in a particular region?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, not the regional school.

LEE MULLICAN: I know that's what. . . . I know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, a sense that. . . . Well, regionalism to me would be, for instance, in Italy you have a Florentine school, and you have a Sienese school, and in fact it is possible to distinguish characteristics, and I realize that it's probably much less clear in this age of communications. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, of course, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Here in America and maybe it's getting even less and less apparent to the extent that there were these differences but let me just try one idea. The fact of the matter is you chose for a variety of reasons to pursue your career in California, those years in San Francisco, but then over the long haul. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: It was Los Angeles, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in Los Angeles area, which has certain events, certain artists, certain stylistic developments associated with it, so there is in the broader consciousness an image, a picture, of that. Then associated with that as well for you is an interest in certain other places and cultures especially, I would say, the American Southwest and one might expect these factors to have played some role in the way your idea and art developed, maybe not a predominant role. And the other thing that's part of the story of regionalism, it seems to me, is that work is viewed and critiqued and given significance to a large extent on the basis of region or center. In other words, if you work in California, your work is often critiqued that way, or perhaps it doesn't get the same kind of attention that it would if you were working in New York. And so that, at least, in terms of how the work is seen, and how accessible, that may be a factor in the way your career has developed. I realize those are two different things. There's the work itself, and then its reception and your fortunes, shall we say or of any artist who's based in California. Does that seem. . . . Do you have thoughts on the regional situation in those terms?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I didn't at the time. I never really. . . . I don't know how many people did. Now there are such a thing, you know, as a southern California watercolor society or something like that, but I don't think that we thought of ourselves as being a Los Angeles painters' group or a. . . . I mean, [thinking, speaking] of people that were here Diebenkorn and [Emerson Ed.] Woelffer and some of those. We weren't, we didn't think of ourselves, we didn't think that southern California at least, I didn't think that southern California was all that important, except for a place where our studio happened to be like Diebenkorn and Ocean Park. How big our studio was seemed to be more important than anything else. [chuckles] So it wasn't a matter of being part of a place or an area, or at least I didn't feel that. And I also had numerous exhibitions in New York, but I never really thought, I didn't think that I was coming from California or bringing something from California to New York other than myself and my painting. It would have been the same if I had brought it down from Canada, probably, or wherever. I mean, that is generally true. Although if you have tried to break it down, there may be details of certain places, that a certain sense of ornament or pattern thinking of the Southwest that I found purposefully entering my painting. Particularly I think now of the Southwest and the pueblo. . . .

Tape 6, side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . an interview with Lee Mullican. This is session three, tape two, side B. Lee, we were conversing about the phenomenon, the idea of regionalism and the extent to which that does or does not make a difference in one's work or the reception of one's work in other words, say, the critical attention that one receives and I gathered from your response that you've never thought that that was much of a factor in your career, that the work was somehow other, that it was independent. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was always from my studio and wherever my studio may have been. . . . Obviously, there would be an influence of what goes on outside of the studio. I think particularly. . . . Well, here in a studio in southern California, or the time that I spent in Rome, where I had a studio there. And, curiously enough, I went there just to paint and work like I ordinarily would, but was so completely seduced by Italy itself it was hard to stay in the studio when there was so much to be seen outside. And before I had worked mostly in color, and there I was in Rome, and quite unprepared that. . . . It was just at the time that acrylic paint was getting going. They had marvelous acrylic paints, particularly in black and white, in the art stores in Rome, and marvelous, beautiful paper. So actually all the time that I was there I worked with black and white acrylic on. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I've seen those.

LEE MULLICAN: . . . on canvas and on paper, mostly on paper, and developing a kind of imagery which was related to the kind of grotesquerie that you find in sculpture in Europe.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's certainly a response to place, isn't it?_____, I guess.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's what I say. But, see, that's just a. . . . Yeah, that's right, that's right, and quite often it has to do with formal techniques. Whatever kind of a brush you have that's the kind of painting you are going to make. And also at the. . . . Well, travel is. . . . You know, you travel, and then you bring it all back to your studio. So having a chance to travel and go places and do things and particularly that time after Rome during the summer when Matt and Luchita and I camped for three months all through Europe looking over, finding pre-historic sites and going to Lascaux and Altamira.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that?

LEE MULLICAN: '60. So that. . . . And that's all been very profound, but when you. . . . All of that, seems to me, just makes it that much more universal when you bring it all back into your studio from here and from there and Spain and what you saw in Barcelona and whatever a great storm in the Alps or whatever. All that's very important, and I guess the region, the real region is in your studio. [laughs] I think it really comes down to that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, aside from the work itself which you seem to feel happens, takes place internally, or at least within the studio, and then in effect that dialogue between you and your work and your concerns could be moved, it's portable.

LEE MULLICAN: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I understand that maybe doesn't respond, at least in your experience, so much to exactly where you are, but on the other hand the way your work is received and your opportunities are determined definitely by where you are. . . . I mean, the whole story of American art and where the focus is and where the most attention is given bears that out. And so did you feel do you feel, did you ever feel that you made a kind of sacrifice in terms of career, professionally, by casting your lot or. . . . I mean, you had job here for one thing at UCLA. Do you think that that has had a significant impact on how you are viewed and how you're. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I would have no way of predicting that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You say you have had a number of shows in New York, so it's not as. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. No, that's right, that's right. And I always knew that New York was very important and it still is and I think that's. . . . I really didn't even have to advise Matt to go to New York. He knew he had to. If he'd stayed in LA, I think things would have been very different. He wouldn't have had the success that he's had. I really don't think so. Just as I knew after the war that I had to go either to the east coast or west coast. There was no point in going to Denver or Dallas. [laughs] It had to be San Francisco or New York, and I went to San Francisco. And it turns out, one can never predict if what one did was correct, but I think it really. . . . Now I'm in a position to say my life has been pretty terrific.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting that you say, in that post-war period, you get out of the service and you understood very early on that you had to go to west or east, to New York or to San Francisco. And of course you ended up, have had really your career in Los Angeles, which certainly in terms of the market, shortly thereafter or sometime thereafter definitely eclipsed the opportunities in San Francisco. Why San Francisco?

LEE MULLICAN: Jack Stauffacher.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. No, I understand that, but in your mind it sounds as if, again, you have a romantic idea of both places.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think. . . . Well, I'd been in Los Angeles because I was stationed down in the desert, and it didn't really, I didn't have any great. . . . It was Hollywood. There was an excitement about Hollywood, I guess. But the minute that I thought of San Francisco. . . . Of course, I had read and seen and knew all about the glory of the Bay Area, and so that just seemed like a natural choice, and I think it was a very good choice, because at that time I think there was probably more going on in San Francisco in the arts than there was down here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But for a visual artist that was not necessarily [a good role].

LEE MULLICAN: Well, no, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, in terms of the real active art world. New York was infinitely more active I think at that time.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Well, I just. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: In fact, most San Francisco artists finally left.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, no. Well, I guess I just didn't feel I was ready for that. I didn't think I was that good. I didn't think that I was. . . . I just didn't think I was ready for that yet. I had to feel my way. I was still just really out of art school. And it was just too big too big a choice. And even after Marian came and took me on in her gallery, and my first couple of shows there. . . . The first show I didn't even bother to go. I said, "I'm not ready for this. I just can't face it." And the second show, I went and she was marvelous and introduced me to all kinds of people, who I have just forgotten who they were, but I do know that at a cocktail party I felt very sheepish and didn't really. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You didn't feel much schmoozing.

LEE MULLICAN: I just. . . . It was exciting to be kind of in the art world, and being introduced around, and visiting with Curt Valentin, and going to a party at his apartment, and. . . . Who was the sculptor that did the [Endless House, Innless] House [_____] and designed Peggy Guggenheim's gallery? What was his name?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ohh. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Funny little man. Oh, I can't think of his name.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not [_____] Hodsey?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know who it is.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, if I said the name. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, maybe it'll come back.

LEE MULLICAN: I mean, he was a big shot, and he came up to me and said, "Where did you leave your horse?" [laughter] And I was later telling this story to Jacqueline, and she said, "You should have told him that the horse was in your pocket." [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, now, what. . . . So why did he say that?

LEE MULLICAN: I don't know. I guess, he knew I was from California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, see, there you go. There's already. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Already. . . . I mean, it had nothing to do with my painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

LEE MULLICAN: I doubt if he even looked at my painting. He just knew I was an artist from Los Angeles.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm! As if everybody's riding horses. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Or San Francisco. Yeah, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the response. . . . Do you remember at any of the reviews or any. . . . How was your work described in whatever critical attention these shows received?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, the main attention, of course, was given in the Art News article, "Mullican Paints a Picture." There was. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

LEE MULLICAN: . . . show was given like one paragraph in Time magazine. They just didn't cover that much. They made references. . . . I don't think. . . . They didn't like the color of my painting. They didn't like the color, because at that time, and still is, I'm really hooked on, oh, a kind of monochrome, earthy thing unless I purposely fight it off. And the other thing that they were kind of cynical about was my titles from the Navajo. [laughs] Because I used Navajo poetry as some of the titles like He Rain, and Happily the Chiefs Regard You, and things like that. They thought that was funny.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They thought it was corny?

LEE MULLICAN: I don't know. They thought it was worth reporting. [chuckles] And the other review was in. . . . Well, these are just the ones I remember. There were some in magazines Art News and so forth. But a later exhibition. . . . Well, it really wasn't an exhibition. It was just a report from California, from Los Angeles, and I was interviewed, and it was written up with a reproduction of one of the paintings. And it was. . . . Well, you'll get all this in the papers eventually. [laughs] Well, it said "Landscapes of the Mind." That was what. . . . They had to hang it on to something, you know. They just couldn't report a person or a show. You have to have. . . . I don't know what the newspaper term is, but there is one that you have to have a hook or something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, a hook.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. So, never any big deal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The first show was when?

LEE MULLICAN: I can't remember. '48?

PAUL KARLSTROM: The first show in New York?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. '48, '49. It was before my show. . . . No, it was after. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: '49, I think, is the _____.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Anyway. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: 1950, one-man exhibition at Willard Gallery _____.

LEE MULLICAN: Okay. It was before the Dynaton, I know. That's '50, okay. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you were getting, you felt, perfectly good exposure in the market then in New York?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, people were seeing them, and through some of the first exhibitions, Detroit museum bought something, [Duncan] Phillips came from Washington, and he bought a painting for their [_____] collection. I mean, things did happen, and I got into the Museum of Modern Art, one of my Tactile Ecstatics. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Lovely [show].

LEE MULLICAN: It was selected by Alfred Barr for the museum. It's the only piece of mine that they own maybe some prints. But so there was exposure. I mean, I'm not saying that nothing happened in New York, because it did, and I met all these people. It was great to be with Tobey and Graves, [_____] Leopold and et cetera. But I never really felt comfortable there, I really didn't. And I guess I always knew that the only way to be comfortable there would be to go and live. If you live there, you could be comfortable there, and probably more will happen for you. And I think that's still true today.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think that that's as true, though? I mean, do you sense any changes for _____?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, for the younger artists, I think it's essential. They're not going to pay much attention to you if you don't live there. They really won't. The galleries won't. I mean, if you are already established out here, well, that's different. You might be able to get established there. No question, you know. But the whole dealer thing is awkward and pretty disgusting. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in a sense, though, you would agree, I gather, that the regional phenonomon has a negative side, and it's in terms of it has [no] prospects. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, I think it does. I think it does.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that is a constant. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: I think the only positive side is. . . . Well, it's historical. He was a California painter. "Oh yes, Fritz Shoulder is southwest," you know. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You don't see this changing. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: It has changed, it has changed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in a way where we are looking more broadly?

LEE MULLICAN: It's changed. Well, it's changed because we're looking more broadly, there's more ways of

looking, there are more magazines, there's more videos, television, there's. . . . You know, it's incredible what there is as opposed to what went on in those days, when you had just two or three galleries and maybe one museum I'm thinking of San Francisco where you could show. And today it's a whole new thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, much more active. Well, you were here obviously during those heady years in southern California, Los Angeles, starting, well, we say the sixties. We usually talk about the decade of the sixties and the. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I had already been here like ten years by then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. And of course in the late fifties this began to happen. The Ferus Gallery opened up, and for whatever reason attention unprecedented attention was focused on southern California. It was rather quite dramatic.

LEE MULLICAN: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And a number of galleries they seemed to proliferate that didn't mean that they stayed in business, but nonetheless there seemed to be a lot of activity, and it was actually noticed and followed in New York, quite an interesting time. But what was your connection to that? Did you feel any kind of connection to the scene?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I didn't have any connection. I just continued to do what I had to do. I exhibited where and when I could which is not to say that I ignored the Ferus Gallery or what was going on. Maybe the only connection I had was at that time when I was with Rachel Rosenthal in Instant Theater. You know when the Ferus people [_____] Berman and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's pretty avant garde.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Berman and George Herms and so forth used to come, as a regular part of the audience.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that right? I didn't realize that.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wally Berman and Herms?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, oh yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting. Boy, those must have been something to see.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, there was nothing else like it, and it was a part of the time. You know, it was all real happening Instant Theater.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, did you have any then connection. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: But that had nothing to do with my work, you see. This was a separate thing. Well, it had to do with me as an artist, of course. But it had nothing to do with me as a painter or. . . . I was really interested in theater at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about these artists? Who were the artists here in the area that you did feel an affinity for, or at least had contact with?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, Emerson Woelffer, Diebenkorn, Ynez Johnston. Let's see, who else? Well, I just can't think of any more at the moment. I mean, people that I really had great respect for and were friends with.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know McLaughlin at all, John McLaughlin?

LEE MULLICAN: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you aware of his work?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I wasn't even aware of him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So your sense is that in some ways there wasn't a lot of information or communication here. Or at least for some _____.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it may be that it was there and I just didn't tap into it. I mean, the Ferus Gallery was fascinating, but I didn't go all the time, and I was not interested in all the artists. It was just almost enough for

me to try and understand what I was doing, much less what anybody else was doing. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you did meet Berman and some of those other rather interesting strange figures.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I had met them, but I was never really friendly with them. And it was only years later you know, like Herms came to me and said, "I remember you in Instant Theater. We used to be there every Saturday night." And I wasn't even aware of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about some of the. . . . [I'm] not wanting to give up quite yet on that sixties crowd and what they call the Venice Group and all that? What about some of the slightly younger artists who became well known? Did you have well, maybe through teaching at UCLA, I don't know but contact with. . . . Oh, we were talking earlier about Ed Ruscha, whom you seemed to have_____.

LEE MULLICAN: No, I never did have much contact with him. But, as you say, it was [to, through] UCLA. I mean Laddie Dill came to teach. He was a very good teacher and a very good painter. I'm sorry he got involved in all that decorative stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Llyn Foulkes was there, I believe.

LEE MULLICAN: Llyn Foulkes I like very much. I like what he was doing at that time. And Ed Moses, that was great.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did Ed teach at UCLA?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Yeah, I purposely sought him out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you chair or. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, but I was in a position to suggest names.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fred Wight was chair then?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about Hockney? Did you have any involvement with David's coming to UCLA?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, we wanted him to come as a kind of regents' lecturer, I guess it was, and he was supposed to be there working with the students for two or three weeks. And it was part of my faculty job to. . . . Did I tell you all this?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not on tape. Go ahead.

LEE MULLICAN: [chuckles] And I was responsible for his class. It was a class that met you know, it was supposed to meet twice a week, say Tuesday and Thursday afternoons or whenever. And if he was there, he was very good. But at the same time he was doing his first stage sets for the Metropolitan, so he was continuously flying to New York. He wouldn't show. Days on end he wouldn't show up. And then the faculty would jump on me, "Why isn't Hockney in his class?" and I said, "I don't know. He left for New York yesterday." I said, "He is very difficult." And I don't think really he really enjoyed it that much. Or maybe he did, but he was just too involved with other things. But it was an exciting time. I mean he invited Luchita and I to come over and see the sets that he was doing for the Ravel [opera]. I mean, miniatures that he'd set up. He was a charming man. And then the highlight of all this was the regents' lecture itself in the auditorium, and I was responsible to pull all that together. You know, with a big reception afterwards and so forth. And like twenty minutes before the lecture he arrives with all of his slides just loose, like in a sack, not even in a carousel. We had to go through them and put them in a carousel and just barely got into. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was there any order or did he care?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no. Well, I, you know, forced him to put them in order whatever he wanted, but it wasn't done until just a very few minutes before. But the lecture really went off well. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's a good speaker.

LEE MULLICAN: . . . and everybody was excited to meet him at the reception afterward. The dean came up and

congratulated me that it all had gone very well, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So that was my experience with David.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he was already a celebrity of sorts?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you think was his. . . . There certainly weren't many stars in California art when he appeared. There were some of course. But what do you feel. . . . Do you have any thoughts about the impact he had on the art or the image of the art scene in California, particularly southern California.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, the impact, it seemed to me. . . . Well, it came from his being here, and his illustrating the California scene: the swimming pools and the palm trees and all of that. That was the real impact. And I think that was probably some of the best work that he did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [sotto voce:] Yeah.

LEE MULLICAN: And a very. . . . I mean, not to get into any critical analysis of Hockney, but. . . . Or the early stuff, even before that, was really remarkable. I thought he. . . . There's no question he started out. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in some ways. . . . God, I don't know if I want to do this, invoke once again the term "regionalism," but perhaps with Hockney we then have an example of somebody who absolutely is responding to a locale. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: That's right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in a way that was very salubrious.

LEE MULLICAN: And you can recognize. . . . You know, the regional thing is through the work itself, while, as I say, mine comes out of a studio that I could transport anywhere.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. But is that true for the Southwest? You might find it, I would think, a little more difficult to separate your work from the imagery and the environment, the ambiance of the [Southwest].

LEE MULLICAN: No, it's all the same.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's all the same?

LEE MULLICAN: It's all the same. I may have a different kind of conditioning in the Southwest. I might be more aware of light and air and so forth or a particular Indian dance or something like that but on the whole, it would be hard to say. That's why I. . . . Interestingly enough, I sign my paintings on the back, and the date, and I always say where it was painted. It's either Taos or Venice or UCLA, and now of course I'm at the airport. [laughter] But anyway it shows exactly where it was painted.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you wouldn't be able to tell it from the. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Not if I hadn't. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I have certainly exhausted all of my arsenal on trying to pin you down as a regionalist, Lee! [laughter] Which perfectly. . . . I mean, that's perfectly okay.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, this is something you have to resolve and find out for yourself. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah. Let me see if there's anything else I can ask, though, specifically about the situation here. You've mentioned several artists whom you knew. Were there any artists around here and actually you didn't mention any, except maybe Diebenkorn, I'm not sure with whose work you felt an affinity? In other words, not just a friendship, somebody you happened to. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think those that I mentioned: Emerson and Ynez Johnston and Diebenkorn.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it's not just the individuals, but the work actually shared. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right. One of the other persons is, like we talked over lunch, was Rico Lebrun, although I. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know him?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes, knew him very well, and we went to Italy together and lived in Rome.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I didn't know that.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I happened to take my Guggenheim in Rome partly because he was in residence at the academy at the time. But our work certainly had nothing in common.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, actually that sounds like something we'll want to pick up on in our next and perhaps final session, the connection with or the contact with Rico, but it looks as if. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: We've done it?

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . this is it, we might wrap up for the day. Thanks!

MARCH 4, 1993
Tape 7, side A [session 3, tape 1]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a continuing interview with artist Lee Mullican at his home on Mesa Road in Santa Monica, California. The date is March 4, 1993, and this is the fourth and, we expect, final session. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom.

Lee, what I would like to do today in a final session with you is to return to an account of your life and career. In the previous three sessions, we've moved around somewhat in time as ideas emerged from what basically was a chronological development or framework. Now this basic diachronic structure, biographical approach, brings us now at this point to Los Angeles in 1961. I think that this would be [the, a good] point to pick up. What I'd like to do is begin there and discuss then subsequent events and above all the evolution of your work right up to the present.

But first what I would like to do is clarify two points, perhaps three, that were made in the last session, which I know you think you answered perfectly adequately, but if you'll excuse me I would like to put them one more time. We can deal with them very briefly, but they struck me as interesting. One was your comment, as we were talking about modernism in many different ways, that you were one of the last of the modernists, and I'd like to know what you mean by that. What did you have in mind when you described yourself that way?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, for one thing, I am a painter, still a painter, and curiously enough I think modernism has to do with painting and of course with sculpture and with modern ideas that came out of a European tradition, and so that's where I feel that I am or that's where I began. Now, after World War II and after I came to California, I guess then I really began to consider myself, well, as a California modernist, really as an American modernist. Before that, America was caught up with all kinds of regionalism I think we went into that but at the same time beginning to feel something waking that really was a part of America, even though the tradition was very European. And if I say I am the last, I guess partly it's because of my age, and partly because there are not very many painters from that time still around, and so. . . . It isn't really fair to say that I am the last, but I am of the last, I think. In that sense that. . . . Now of course we have been caught up with so-called post-modernism, which I'm really not a part of, although I have a great deal of interest in it and what is happening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you said that, and that's a sub-question I wanted to ask, because you said that last time that. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think this interest comes about. . . . I felt it was necessary as a professor, as teaching art today, you see, at UCLA. I felt that I had to be really, not on top of, but equal with what the students were producing, and where did it come from, and I had to have something to say about that, because I worked with all kinds of young people graduates, undergraduates who were dealing with these post-modernist ideas. And so I had to be a part of that and understand that as best I could so that I could work with them. And then of course my son, Matt I mean, he immediately went into that, and so I wanted to keep up with him and be able to talk to him about what was happening and so forth. But none of it really interested me as far as what my own work would be. I was still hung up on my original ideas of what I wanted painting to be and what my concepts were, and what the content was going to be, and et cetera. So that the only time I ever came close was with that Instant Theater improvisational group, which I've already spoken of. But beyond that. . . . You know, I really don't like the idea of making a label for it. But I suppose that modernism is a part of it, and when we had the exhibition Gordon and myself and there was a third artist. We had this exhibition at Artists' Space in New York City, and we were wondering what to call the exhibition, and I suggested to the curator that a good title would be "Moderns in Mind." So that we were moderns, but we were also mindful moderns, so to speak. [chuckles] So there was a double play there. We're in mind because we're in the exhibition. We're in mind because that was the nature of our work. So "Moderns in Mind," it was a good title. And so it's been used, and it's a great word. We still have museums of modern art, even though they contain everything, of course, up to the present time. So it's a curious word, and I think really if I say I'm one of the last. . . . I mean, painting would appear to be on it's way out, I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, they keep saying that. They announced that at least a decade ago. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . but then people keep doing it.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, they keep doing it, but there are very few I think I've even mentioned this before there are very few really good contemporary painters. There's just not very many that have been doing it say for the last ten years. I don't think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about somebody like your neighbor, and I don't mean to get into this too much talking about other artists, but what about Susan Rothenberg? How do you place her in this _____. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I admire her, of course. I think she's a great painter, and she has stuck by her guns, and she is a painter; you're exactly right. But she's been around for ten years or more, I would think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

LEE MULLICAN: And so. . . . There are painters, no question, but they are in a minority, and younger people don't seem to be interested. . . . Well, I don't know. I'm kind of out of contact with it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, but as a teacher, this is interesting, your own observations on what the interests of the students over the recent years. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, yes. Well, of course, in selecting candidates for graduate school, we would find five or six painters we thought were painters, and they'd come and after one year they've given up painting and are doing other things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They're tricksters. That's what they are!

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They give you painting so they can get in and. . . . [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think a lot of it I'm sure is that they don't realize how difficult painting is. [laughs] It's very hard to say what [you'd want, you're going] to do with painting. It's easier to throw stuff on the floor and say "Oh, this is the chaos of the modern world," you know, and so that's what happens.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this is, though, how you would describe what appears to be something of a break, in fact. I mean, you recognize and you're willing to acknowledge there is kind of a break between an idea of modernism with its interests and media and so forth and then what has been called post-modernism something different in some way that comes afterwards, right?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And how would you, in ten words or less, describe the difference you mentioned that painting seems to be on the decline in terms of where the action is, let's say, or the interests of the younger artists? What is replacing it? Is it language? Is this what you see happening?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, that's part of it. Of course. Anything and everything. And I went to Documenta this summer, and there was very little painting and what painting there was. . . . I mean, back to Ed Ruscha and Ellsworth Kelly. . . . Well, Rothenberg was in the show, et cetera.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's like an endangered species, you suspect?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I really don't want to say. I don't think I am in a position to say, because I am kind of out of it. I really don't like to go to that many galleries and really see what. . . . Nor do I like to read about what the critics are telling us is going on in art today. And so I'm just kind of out of it, really. I'm only interested in what I'm doing, and I have a very few friends who are painters that I'm interested in. And then they're very good Ed Moses, for example. And so I couldn't make any kind of. . . . I don't want to be too general.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. No, that's right. Do you ever talk with Matt about this question?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, never.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You pretty much stay away from [those, though]?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, yeah, no. There's no point, there's no point. He loves to tell me what he's doing and what

his next commission's going to be, and he shows me things, and we talk about that and so forth. And he looks at my paintings. He comes to the studio, and he may have a few questions and so forth, but we don't sit down and talk about the state of art today. No, not at all. We want to have a good time when we get together. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____.

LEE MULLICAN: When we get together, we just want to have a good time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That sounds pretty healthy to me.

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about. . . . Well, in part you've answered the second question I have, but I'd like to return to it briefly once more.

LEE MULLICAN: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that has to do with your sense of your own roots, if you will, in a European tradition that in many ways for you, your own sources, that were most useful were within the European tradition, more so than what you perceive to be an American tradition.

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes. The only thing that really interested me in American art was art of the American Indian really whether that's Mexico or North America, Northwest coast. But that was [only] just far as content of what I was doing. Everything else was cubism, surrealism, impressionism all the well-known artists, and even into the Bauhaus and et cetera. All of that was really what interested me the most as a young person, as a young artist, and I've just hung on to that, and still work within that range, I think. Because the studio is a rather quiet hallowed place, and things that happen there are very unpredictable, and change from day to day. I mean, I'm on a different plane, as I once described it. And so things are more from time to time. You know, they're more expressionist one month, and the next month I'm very tight in dealing with all kinds of refinements of technique and so forth. So I move around, and that's about as much as I can say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, is your idea of a European tradition, does it have to do with the "grand tradition," the history of European art? In other words, rounded in centuries and with this ongoing tradition? Is this what you're . . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . rather than a stylistic thing, like specifically, "Well, I'm interested in this cubism and this futurism. These are European movements." In other words is it a bigger. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, there were bound to be particular artists within all of that that I responded to, such as Miró, Max Ernst, and so forth. German expressionism, I've never really been that fond of. It was mostly cubism and the late surrealists, et cetera.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course a lot of Americans were influenced in that way.

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes, the whole New York school came out of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But then. . . . Most of these artists . . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But of course many of them took great pains to say that they were somehow recasting this European tradition and making it home-grown in a sense.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I was recasting too, but I don't think that I was recasting it in a great American sense, you know. By that time, there's a universality that I really hoped for. And if it was involved in any kind of regionalist modernism, et cetera, that's what I found in San Francisco and to a lesser extent here in Los Angeles, when I came down here. So I think there was a great difference between what was happening on the west coast as opposed to the east coast as opposed to England or Spain or Italy, wherever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what do you attribute that to?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think it's just a matter of where the artist lives, and what he subjects himself to, and what he surrounds himself with. And I think the artist cannot help but be influenced by what he sees in the morning, what he sees at night, where he lives, what is on his dinner table, who his friends are, what kind of theater is down the street, what kind of film is showing nearby et cetera, et cetera. All of that is a part of one's life. And of

course now, in recent years, the artists those that can afford it live in three or four different places all over the world, and jet here and jet there.

Sam Francis is a good example of that. He's very European, he's very Californian, he's very New York, he's very. . . . Because he moves mentally around as well as physically. And times change as one gets older. I mean, one doesn't move around quite that much. One doesn't see as many exhibitions, like we didn't even get to New York this fall like we always usually go. But there were other things doing, and one cannot accept it all. So we are a part of the world, and the artist has to be a part of the world and keeps up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think then that mobility will begin to erase some of these perceived distinctions between regions schools, shall we say?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The school of Florence, the school of Siena way back when, but nowadays do you expect this will be less evident?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I don't really know. I really don't know. Even now, there's a California school, there's a Chicago school, a New York school. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: A German school?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, German of course. Yes, that's right. And a few artists in England and et cetera, et cetera. So that's going to be always there, but I think it's a mistake for the artist to perceive himself as being a part of all of that. He has to be. . . . The only school he really is, is his own school. But what he is, and where he is, and what he's doing, that's more important of course and that really goes without saying.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's go back to our chronology, to this journey through your life and career. In 1960 you had a Guggenheim, you were in Rome, you traveled in Europe during the summer, I believe.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then you talked a little bit about that and then you returned, I believe, to New York.

LEE MULLICAN: To upper New York state. We found a house there in the country, where we lived up until. . . . Well, I guess that was '61. Was it '61 that we came back to California?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. Why did you do that? Obviously you made. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, we couldn't hang on there. There was no point in hanging on there. We had a house here; we had to get back.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I see.

LEE MULLICAN: By that time I was offered a teaching position for the summer at USC, which I thought, you know, that was going to get my foot in the door again as far as teaching goes, and then almost immediately I went to UCLA. And so that whole period of the sixties was here, really, in Los Angeles, trips to the southwest. Our younger son, John, was born in '62, and Matt was very much involved in school and becoming an artist. Our older son, Daniel, by that time had graduated from Harvard, and he was into a world of his own world of sociology and economics, et cetera. So we just came back here to lead a very quiet personal life. And I fortunately found this great studio on Venice Boulevard, which, as I pointed out, now is the LA Louver Gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

LEE MULLICAN: So it was great being down there, and it was the height of the Venice years. And I did an awful lot of work there. I did big paintings. I did just a tremendous amount of work. And by that time I had established myself at the university. Almost immediately I had only been there like. . . . I was put on the ladder right away, and so I'd been there well, for less than a year when the powers that be in Berkeley I guess Clark Kerr was really the one responsible set up this institute of the arts, where a faculty member could be appointed just to do his own work in his own studio and get the same pay and no teaching at all! You know, it was a great thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Gee!

LEE MULLICAN: And I just. . . . I was one of the first ones to apply, and I was one of the first ones to get it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Whoa!

LEE MULLICAN: Which was terrific for me, but it put me in a very. . . . [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Awkward?

LEE MULLICAN: . . . awkward position with the faculty at UCLA. They say, "Who is this guy? How did he come in and hadn't been here a year, and he's given this," and so forth. Well, eventually they all got their turn.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was it, is it a year appointment?

LEE MULLICAN: It was a year appointment, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's like a sabbatical?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it paid. . . . Yeah. It was a fully paid sabbatical, really, to do your work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And after one year, hoo!

LEE MULLICAN: And so I did that, and there were. . . . Well, I don't really need to go into all the problems, faculty problems at UCLA. I was very content. I was teaching what I wanted to teach, and I had my say. And then there came the time for. . . . Again, I guess it was Kerr, who made this deal with the Ford Foundation to set up a mutual exchange program between the University of Chile in Santiago and the University of California. And this interested me very much. Kerr insisted that the arts be involved; it wasn't enough. . . . I mean, the major thrust was from Davis agriculture and veterinarian practices and so forth, that could be taught in Chile and so forth. But he said, "The arts have to be involved, too." So this was established, and right away I applied for this. Other artists I guess also applied, but I seemed to be really in the running, and Jan Stussy was a little disturbed by all of this, and wanted to be a part of it, too. And I only mention this because he took a trip to Santiago. Once this [convenio] was set up, a lot of people found it, you know, just a great holiday, just whatever reason to go to Chile and supposedly to check out something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: So before. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Kind of a boondoggle.

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, it really was. So there was this great flow back and forth, and Stussey went down to check on the arts. And, as I say, I only mention this because he made a great mistake. [chuckles] He came back and said it was all set, and that I was to go, and so I made my proposal, which was to go as an artist in residence at the university. I would set up a studio there, I would have an exhibition at the end of my year. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So only one artist from the entire system. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: At one point, at one time, yeah. So I packed up my family, and away we went to Chile. We stopped off in Venezuela to visit Luchita's family, and first thing you know there we were in Santiago. [phone rings]

Tape 7, side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Lee Mullican, tape one, side B.
Lee, you were talking about Luchita. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Well, it was a big move to get my family down there. We arrived, and right away I could tell that there was going to be problems. The man who was in charge from the University of California and I didn't get along. He was very anti-art I could tell that right away and I didn't really think he was going to respond or help me very much. And I was right, he didn't. And so we moved into an apartment and later we began looking and looking. There were four of us; we had to find a decent house to live in, which we did. And then I had to find a studio, which took months and months, just ridiculous. I got no help. I had to practically do it all myself, and it took quite a while before I actually found a studio. But. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about. . . . Stussy had. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, Stussy. The big point was. . . . I don't know what happened between the time he was there and the time I got there, but he should have been able to see it coming, that the Communists took over the art school. Totally. I was not welcome, absolutely not welcome. There was no way I could do any teaching. There was no way that the faculty was even going to recognize my being there. And as it came out later, a lot of this was because the whole program had been funded by the Ford Foundation.

I remember there was one artist, a marvelous man. His name was [Edwardo LM] Bonati. We got along really well, and shortly after I arrived he gave a party for me, for the faculty in the art school, set up this great dinner party, and no one came.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was a Chilean?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, he was a Chilean, and he put himself out on a limb to do that for me. But we hung in there, and of course Luchita was marvelous. Of course she spoke fluent Spanish, and looked very Spanish, and very social, and so what happened is that we met all the faculty, one by one, and the artists, and we had a great social thing, but it was not recognized within the art school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So they liked you just fine, but. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: It was the whole. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a political issue.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right. That was a political issue. And so I said, "Well, what can I do?", and I said, "Well, I know exactly what I'm going to do." We could come home, but I said, "No, I'm going to stick it out. I'm going to work in my studio. I'm going to invite people to my studio. They can either come or they don't come. And I'm going to have my exhibition at the museum, the Bellas Artes." And that's what I had planned to do all along. So I stuck with that. In the meantime we enjoyed living there. It's really a beautiful country, and we went out into the country, along the beaches, and the two boys were in a kind of overseas American school. So we just stuck it out, and I think it was a great experience.

On our way back we came back through Peru and Machu Picchu and Ecuador. And so we got to see. . . . It was better than just another year here in southern California. So I worked very hard. I had my exhibition well received. Everybody came. I asked this one faculty member. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, people did come?

LEE MULLICAN: To the exhibition, yes, I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They didn't boycott it because of the. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, the only problem was that someone in the school wanted to write the introduction to my catalog, which he did, which was a disaster because he immediately attacked me and attacked the Ford Foundation. Impossible, so they had to throw it out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were viewed as an instrument of the Capitalist Americana?

LEE MULLICAN: Exactly, exactly. "Yankee, go home!" [To, I can] remember those times when there was, "Yankee, go home!" "Yankee assassin, go home."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, this was the time of the Vietnam war, you know, and it was really a rough time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm surprised that the program continued, then, under those circumstances.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, well, I think that was kind of the end of the art program down there as far as. . . .
PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the other professors in the university? Did they run into this kind of problem?

LEE MULLICAN: Not so much. Most of our closest friends were from Davis, and they were in agriculture and veterinarian sciences.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that was okay?

LEE MULLICAN: That seemed to be fine and history and all of that. I don't really know. But the art school was a building to itself, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. So it was more radical. Which was seen as radical politics.

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, of course. Oh, exactly, exactly, exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting.

LEE MULLICAN: So that was. . . . We were glad to come back.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was it just UCLA faculty, or did students go on this exchange as well?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, it was faculty.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Strictly faculty, okay. [Hands across the borders]. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, it was faculty, and it was also graduate students a lot of graduate work. And I intended I still intend to write a history of all this, because I just found it so fascinating and distressing. I don't know if I'll ever get around to it, but at least I indicated that it happened, on this tape. But I was glad to come home.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you make any efforts with your colleagues to come to some kind of a compromise, to maybe separate art and what you were about from politics? Or did you see it as futile?

LEE MULLICAN: No. We just accepted it, and we moved into it. A lot of the artists were definitely Communists, and they turned out to be very close friends. [chuckles] One of my closest friends, a marvelous old lady, was the ex-wife of Pablo Neruda, and she held forth these great salons in her home. We were always invited, and we met lots of other artists, but there was also well-known. . . . She had this great enlarged photograph of Che Guevara there on the wall, and we met artists from East Germany. We met. . . . I mean it was. . . . And we were just a part of it, and I didn't talk politics. They didn't talk politics. Maybe occasionally they would bring something up. And of course I was very, very my wife and I both very against the Vietnam War, and embarrassed by the whole thing. So we moved in the art circle there I'll say that in spite of being ostracized within the halls of the art building. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: But of course that was in your official capacity as opposed to your calling as an artist? I mean, I guess what I'm. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: But, you see, that's just what I. . . . I think the point I wanted to make was that "I'm here as an artist primarily, and I've set up a studio, and I'm going to paint, and I'm going to have my exhibition, and I hope you will come, and accept me as an artist, not as a part of the Ford Foundation."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, the question I think this is very interesting and the question that comes to my mind is whether or not the strong Marxists with very, very strong political or ideological convictions could take that step to view you then as other, as a colleague in art. Apparently they could do this, that the political conviction in that . . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yeah. They were very modern artists. They weren't any kind of. . . . They weren't illustrating a revolution or anything like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, they weren't social realists or something?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, no. They were just dealing with abstraction and all the problems that modern art was about. But, you see, this was leading up to Allende. This was the year before Allende was elected, and so you can see that was just what happened.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Boy! So it was in a way a different brand of Marxism than the canonical doctrinaire kind of the social [milieu, realism]?

LEE MULLICAN: I really don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, in regards to the arts, where the. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Was there] any kind of control over form or content or anything?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was, there were politics and art?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, no? [I think Mullican misunderstood the question Trans.]

LEE MULLICAN: But I think it really did make a difference that I was American, I really do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, it was a fairly. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: But how Stussy couldn't have sensed some of this, you see, before I was sent down there, I just. .

. . That's what I. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see your point. That gets back to the Stussy. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. What did he find down there? How did he go through all that and not be aware that this was about to happen?

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's amazing!

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Well, I never talked to him about it, so I really don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Write him a letter and say, "Hey, hey, amigo." [said tongue in cheek]

LEE MULLICAN: Well, one of our closest friends a close friend of his and an art historian. . . . His name was Jorge Ellis I think that was his name. He was from the University of Chile, and he came and talked up here, and he brought an exhibition of Chilean painting up here. And when we went down there, why we greeted him, and we became part of the family, and he introduced us to a lot of people, and so socially it was all okay. But, I should. . . . And I would probably never have been very good at it, but I did take courses in Spanish, and I can understand, and I can read, but it was difficult for me to speak in Spanish. But while I was there, curiously enough, they have this huge, like biennale, arts biennale, in Lima, in Peru, and I was invited. . . . Well, because Jorge Elliot. It wasn't Ellis. Jorge Elliot phoned one night and said, "Can you come to Lima and be on the jury of the biennale?" And I said, "Sure!" So I was invited up there, and I got to meet all the Peruvian artists. So I moved around, in some circles anyway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you spell Elliot, by the way?

LEE MULLICAN: E-double l-i-o-t.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, well, I guess I get the point that at least at that juncture the politics didn't overwhelm the arts. In other words, so there was no. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . repression of [expression]?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, there may have been some.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But not that you could have seen?

LEE MULLICAN: Or that I would give any attention, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm not even sure if that came afterwards. I don't know enough about the situation, but I wonder if. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you must have kept up with, perhaps with some of your colleagues or friends down there. Did you correspond at all after, when you came back to California?

LEE MULLICAN: No, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like with Elliot perhaps?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, he died within a few years. But of course we do know what happened, and that is that when Allende was destroyed, all the artists had to leave. They all went to Spain. Very few could stay there. They couldn't live there. My friend moved to Spain, and I happened to run into him once on a trip to Paris.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which one was this now?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, what did I say his name was?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Elliot?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Bonati?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, Bonati. And so I think he's back in. . . . I think he's back. . . . Well, a lot of the artists have

returned now. Of course the climate is more, is very different. But a lot of them had to leave. There was just no place for them under. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So ultimately it did lead to a state control or repression, or at least a climate that wasn't sympathetic.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which seems to be a pretty typical [pattern].

LEE MULLICAN: Yep, yep.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What else did you. . . . It sounds like a great experience. Are you able to single out anything that you did or saw during that time? Did it affect your work, perhaps?

LEE MULLICAN: Not really. No, I just continued my work as I would have here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, I don't think that it affected me at all, except. . . . I mean, it's like being in California. The coastline is California, and we did become very interested in Indian folk and craft arts there, and we were part of that scene, and collected a lot. But as far as my own work goes, no, I don't really think that actually being there had any great influence I mean as far as what I saw around me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the culture though your interest in the culture and the. . . . I don't know about _____ rituals.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, Chile, of course, is primarily European, totally European. They suppressed all Indian influence, all Spanish influence. Everything is overrun with Germans and a whole. . . . Well, it's a very European atmosphere. Right away we walked around Santiago the next day after we arrived and said, "This just looks like Europe!" You know, there was nothing there to say, "This is like Mexico City," or any other what you would think of as being a Spanish country, not at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so there wasn't anything in terms of indigenous culture as a folk culture.

LEE MULLICAN: There was, but it was repressed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But so it wasn't evident to you. It's not something you encountered. You yourself had to seek it out.

LEE MULLICAN: You had to seek it out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And did you do that?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes. The Aracanian Indians, we visited in that country. And it was just beginning, and there was a really great folk art museum that had just been established there, where they were proud. . . . I mean, a few people got together and said, "This is our Indian heritage, and we must preserve it." And after that then there were set up craft shops, and handicrafts and so forth from the Indians and et cetera were available. And so things were beginning to change by the time we left, but not much going on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this wasn't particularly a source of inspiration at all for you.

LEE MULLICAN: Not really, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about elsewhere in Latin America during your travels there? You went to Venezuela?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, we went to Venezuela, but it was a family thing, and meeting, great parties, and welcome with Luchita's sister, et cetera. But at the same time. . . . We had the two boys with us, and so we [were] continuously doing things as a family. That was the. . . . Keep them entertained, and keep us entertained. And we were given a car, so we could go anywhere and everywhere we wanted to, and we were treated royally through the Ford Foundation. [chuckles]

So we came back, and immediately within a couple years, I had a major exhibition at the Wight Gallery. Fred Wight did that show. And so life continued here until about nineteen. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was in '69, then, I guess, the show at the Wight. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. That's when it was, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe it wasn't even called the Wight Gallery then, I guess. Who knows. Anyway the UCLA art galleries, and Fred Wight actually invited you and. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He curated?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, he curated the show and there was a catalog. So then in the early seventies. . . . Let me get this straight now. Yeah. We bought land near Taos, and began to make New Mexico home, and started. . . . We built a great adobe house there, and it was a great time. Every summer going to New Mexico, going to the dances, going to the opera, being a part of that great lively spiritual scene that Taos offers.

And then in 1980 we went to India for the first time. Luchita had old friends in the Sarabai family who lived in Amenabad, and for thirty years they had been trying to get her to come to visit them. [chuckles] So we decided, "Well, it's time to go." So we went. And that was a great. . . . A great moment. And we went with Ailes Spinden, who was Noguchi's sister.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was her name?

LEE MULLICAN: Ailes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ailes?

LEE MULLICAN: A-i-l-e-s Spinden. And we were treated royally. We were given this fantastic guest house, and we had our own car and chauffeur and guide and cooks and. . . . It was a great life. I mean, no question, we had a great time. In fact, we had such a great time that we went back a couple years later [chuckling] and went around the world, and this time we took Matt with us. And Matt by that time began to do. . . . Some of his first banners were made in India.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How old was he?

LEE MULLICAN: I don't remember.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we can figure that out, because this was probably in '82, did you say? Somewhere around '82, the second trip?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '82. What relatives were these? Relations of Luchita's?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it's a great family in India that lived in Amenabad. They were textile tycoons, and dealt in all kinds of corporations and so forth. And Gautam his name was Gautam established a school of design in Amenabad, which became very famous. Everybody from the Eames to. . . . All the great designers. [Alexander] Calder. They all went and worked there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? What was his name?

LEE MULLICAN: G-a-u-t-a-m, I guess. Gautam and his sister, Gira G-i-r-a. . . . She was an architect and a student of Frank Lloyd Wright's.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, my God, how cosmopolitan!

LEE MULLICAN: There was another sister, whose name was Geeta G-e-e-t-a who was a musician, a singer, and helped. . . . Is still helping the art of music in India. And they have established this great textile museum in Amenabad. And so it was just a great. . . . They're marvelous people and we just loved going there.

Anyway, as we were returning home, I received this telegram from Bob Gray, who was the dean of fine arts at UCLA, saying he understood I was in India, and he was very interested if I would go to the Embassy, the American Embassy, and find out about a program that had been set up between India and the U.S. State Department. But I was on my way home. [laughs] So I sent a message back. "Too late, I'm coming back." But when I got to UCLA, he was still interested in my being involved in this program. As I understand it, it was set up between the two countries as a cultural exchange, and the main offices were in New York, and they wanted me to curate an exhibition of Indian painting modern Indian painting to be brought to UCLA or to be brought to the US, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did Davison have anything to do with that? Leroy Davison?

LEE MULLICAN: No. No, because. . . . Well, maybe he did. He may have, he may have. But this was a particular exhibition of modern painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ah, okay, it wasn't the historic. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: It wasn't. . . . No. There were historic exchanges, and he may have been involved with that; I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

LEE MULLICAN: Anyway, so then I made a third trip to India to decide what kind of a show this is going to be, and of course it was all paid for by this foundation. And I got there and looked around and decided what interested me the most was what you might call modern tantric painting modern artists who are interested in the tantric abstract tradition. And so I brought all that back and presented it to the dean, and also to. . . . What's her name, who was head of the gallery then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: At UCLA?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. You know that. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Tonelli]?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, Edith.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Edith [Tonelli].

LEE MULLICAN: And so I presented it to Edith Tonelli, and we decided that this is where we would go, we would try this. So then we made another trip to India. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was a great deal!

LEE MULLICAN: It was wonderful! And this time I went with Edith, and Luchita went along, and we went all over India checking out modern art and meeting lots of artists and et cetera and et cetera, and, sure enough, by that time, through the man who was head of the museum the national museum of modern art there who later became head of the whole national museum. . . . Well, we first. . . . It was interesting, because when we first arrived. . . . On our first trip we met Dr. Morley. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

LEE MULLICAN: . . . you know, who helped us with the Dynaton show and our exhibitions in San Francisco. By that time she was head of the national museum in New Delhi, and so she was a great help and a wonderful person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was on the third trip?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, the third trip.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The one before. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Let's see, this was. . . . Yeah. No, one, two. . . . This was the fourth trip.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was the fourth one and you met Morley on the fourth trip?

LEE MULLICAN: No, the first trip, we met. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: On the first trip? Excuse me, okay.

LEE MULLICAN: On the very first trip. She was also a friend of Sarabais. So it was very easy, and we had introductions, and quite wonderful. Anyway, the man who had. . . . Let's see, I should be able to tell you. I should have made a list of these names and then it would be easier. Anyway, he [Dr. Sihare LM] had just curated an exhibition to go to Germany, of modern tantric painting, and so we decided that we should team up with him it would be easier for our exhibition and so Edith and I agreed that that's the route we should take. And we met as many artists as we could who were involved in this abstract tradition. And eventually the exhibition [Neo-Tantra LM] came to UCLA.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that? Do you remember?

LEE MULLICAN: No, I don't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Probably 'eighty. . . . [1985 LM]

LEE MULLICAN: Let me see. Turn it off a minute.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

Tape 8, side A [session 4, tape 2]

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . continuing interview with Lee Mullican. This is the fourth session, the beginning of tape number two and, Lee, you were talking about the tantric abstract exhibition.

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, and so the exhibition came to the Wight Galleries and it was beautifully installed. Three of the artists came, were invited to come. So then after that we had to decide what we would do in exchange, because now it was time to take American art to New Delhi. And of course I was to follow up with curating this exhibition, and Edith Tonelli said. . . . We worked very closely with her and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was it to go in New Delhi?

LEE MULLICAN: It was to go to the National Museum of Modern Art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now is that where Morley was?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no. She was head of the whole national museum. All the museums.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, the whole thing, okay.

LEE MULLICAN: All the museums. So I decided that I wanted to do an exhibition of artists who were involved with what I was involved with. And so it was called Visions of Inner Space. And I selected the artists along with. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, so Merle Shipper and I jointly curated this exhibition, and we visited a lot of the artists such as Pousette-Dart and Onslow Ford and Dick Bowman. And Lita Albuquerque was in the show, [Emerson] Woelffer, Ynez Johnston, Ed Moses. It was a marvelous exhibition. And so it opened at the Wight Galleries, and we did a great catalog, which was printed in India. After the exhibition closed here, we took it to New Delhi, and we all went well, Merle and Luchita and I, and we invited two artists. Lita Albuquerque and Max Cole. And it opened to great fanfare at the museum in New Delhi, and we were sponsored by the USIS [United States Information Service], and put on Voice of America, et cetera, et cetera. And of course it was the first time that modern American painting had been shown in India in like fifteen years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the response?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it was really very good, of course. I mean the critics, I mean things in the newspaper were good. Lots of coverage. And we met a lot of artists, and it was very social. We all had a great time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that. . . . I wonder if Joan Brown was [and, from] [there] was yet doing her Indian things. Just curious.

LEE MULLICAN: No. Yeah. No, no, she wouldn't have been included.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I just wondered if she. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. I mean, Graves and Tobey were included. Jimmy Ernst. Tobey and Ernst, of course, were dead, but we felt they had to be a part of this. And so that was my one big effort for. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: As curator?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. And to be able to curate that thing that I knew was a part of me and what I believed in. And then it was. . . . This was just like one year after, I think, [Maurice] Tuchman's abstraction and spiritual show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So do you feel that that stands as a kind of statement of yours?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, absolutely. Oh, yeah. It's just a catalog now, but it's a marvelous catalog, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'll have to see that; I'll have to find it.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Well, I'll have to get. . . . I have. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Certainly one will be in your papers? [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes! Of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So Lita Albuquerque, Moses. . . . We don't have to catalog all of them, but it's interesting to know the kinds of artists that were [included].

LEE MULLICAN: Well, we included practically everyone who we felt was into this inner world of inner vision, and. . . . Got some devastating reviews, terrible reviews.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LEE MULLICAN: Particularly in [ArtWeek].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, well.

LEE MULLICAN: About the dumbest, most disgusting, shitty review I think I've ever read. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who wrote it?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I had better not even mention her name, if I could think of it. I've tried to forget it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You can't even think of her name? Otherwise, you can say whatever you want.

LEE MULLICAN: I know, I know. I don't care.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's not the. . . . We'll have a. . . . It probably wasn't. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: But there'll be a copy of it in my papers, don't worry. And my response, which I wrote but was never. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You wrote and sent it, but it was never. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Never. I never did send it in. It was so embarrassing. Calling Morris Graves a cartoonist, now really. [laughs] Can you imagine?

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's terrible.

LEE MULLICAN: And people like Woelffer and Sam Francis and Ed Moses as being splatterers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, God!

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, you can't believe it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Art Week, frankly, has never been known for the very highest level of criticism.

LEE MULLICAN: And this is supposed to be a well-known critic who used to. . . . Maybe she still writes for the LA Times, I don't know. Anyway. So that was India.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, in terms of your work and your career, what stands out about India and these trips? Was it finally the opportunity to [picture]. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, that was part of it, that was part of it. You know, that I was able to do this as UCLA faculty and as an artist who was able to present what I really believed in, et cetera. But as far as India itself. . . . I mean, it's there, it'll always be there, and it is the greatest experience for an artist. To satisfy, you know, with all the senses of sound and smell and light and sight, and it's just overwhelming. I mean, more than one can comprehend within a half an hour. As they say, if you take your camera, no matter where you turn, and push the button, you've got a fantastic photograph. So that's the way it is being there. It's one of the richest experiences and certainly one of the richest spiritual experiences, I think. And I think most artists feel that when they do go. I don't see how they could not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean specifically by a spiritual, rich spiritual experience?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, their respect for life, their respect for religion, their respect for nature. And of course it isn't all perfect. I mean, you know, it is the largest democratic country in the world, and obviously it's fighting all the time. But. . . . And consequently you've got a continuous. . . . You talk to people about India, and they say, "Well, how could you stand. . . ." Not only do they, you know, can't understand that modern plumbing, that you can get by without it. But what they don't understand is, they say, "All that poverty, the poverty of India." And my

answer has always been, "Well, what about the poverty of spirit in America?" Just walk down Fifth Avenue. Walk through Beverly Hills, and look at these faces. Talk about poverty of spirit, it's there. While in India there is. . . . People may be camped on the streets, but with joy in whatever they have and whatever they do. Well, it's a problem which I don't have to face. I mean I've faced it with myself, and it's devastating of course but I'm really longing to go back.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Excuse me [for interrupting Ed.].

LEE MULLICAN: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was just going to. . . . See, I'm intrigued by this, because there seems to be a paradox here and you're certainly not the only one. I have not been to India, and what I think about it doesn't matter, but by the same token what is striking and interesting to me is that so many people have this [epiphanal] experience in India which, if you haven't been there and experienced yourself, you really can't understand it is absolutely true that what we read increasingly is horrifying, and yet it seems. . . . And I'm certainly not even going to comment on that. I'm not interested of course in debating this; I'm interested in trying to get a better picture of what it is that is so overwhelming and extraordinary for visitors. But, for instance, the whole issue of women this is becoming more and more common and. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Terrible, terrible.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . the cheapness of life, and you talk about. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Terrible, of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . life-enhancing on one hand, but then it is one of the at least in that issue, in human rights areas it's one of the worst democracies in the world.

LEE MULLICAN: It's terrible.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, given that and I don't know, that's a whole 'nother subject but it is very interesting that you're not the only one that has this really, well, almost transformative response to the experience of India. And it's like the two. . . . It's paradox, but nonetheless there it is.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Well, of course I see it all, maybe even stupidly, I could say. I see it all on an art level, on an artistic level. That's what I see and sense. Certainly religious wars, no matter whether they're there or Yugoslavia or wherever, are terrible and hard to understand how this can be. And yet there it exists. But you just find. . . . You find your place within it, that's all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does it have to do for you. . . . What really matters, of course, is you and your personal response to it. How other people respond is interesting but peripheral to what we're talking about. Does it have to do with this incredible tradition involving mysticism. The mystical side of. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, I think so, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where it seems that this is poverty and all that aside that there is, no matter what the reality of the social circumstances of the individuals, how they live that they're connected to something I guess through art, and through religion, and a belief system, which I guess keeps them in their place, but, so what; its a belief system. Is this. . . . I don't want to put words in your mouth, but is this the kind of thing that you're talking about that is appealing? A world where there seems to be seems to be much more. . . . It's much more bound with the spiritual and the mystical than material.

LEE MULLICAN: Yes. Well, it's there. It really is. And you see it, and you feel it, and you sense it in the music fantastic music in the history, such as the Mahabarata, and. . . . You just get glimpses of all of this, and you can't try to understand it. I don't want to understand it. I want to observe it, and maybe absorb what I can. But life there is very cheap, of course, and yet what and I was a freak, which is fun.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why? Because you're. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Being so tall [6 feet 4 inches LM]. I'd get out of a car on a crowded street and within a minute fifty people, mostly young kids, all standing around looking at me and talking, and yelling and smiling. So after a while this. . . . I mean this disturbed me, and I used to not get out. I'd stay in the car. But then I found out, you know, well, why not. So I'd get out and I would entertain them. I'd jump up and down, or make some kind of, do some kind of calisthenics, or something, and that made them all the more. . . . [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Did they clap? A clown?]

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yeah, that was it. I was always a great hit, no question. And so you just have to go with it, live with it. And there are devastating experiences. I mean, the beggars that you see, and of course you give them money, and within a minute there are twenty-five others right there, and so you just don't quite know how to handle yourself. But in spite of it all, I mean, all these trips, and I'd like to go back next year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, obviously, this was in some way formative for you and your thinking and work, and what I'd like to try and pin down is what if any specific forms this may have taken.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, one thing that I learned. . . . In the tantric painting, there is a spot in the center of the canvas that's called a bindu b-i-n-d-u and I felt that with that bindu I had. . . . I was just given a name for it. Before I would have called it a focal point or something in the center of the canvas of which around compositionally everything can revolve, evolve. But there it was, and it actually exists, and so that intrigued me, and I still use that bindu in a lot of paintings compositionally, although I do it in a very subtle way as you probably wouldn't be aware of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But of course, you look at that, just as using that as an example, as a compositional device. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . which is a pretty Western way of thinking of it.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does it have, I don't know, - the iconography of. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I'm not sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does it have a meaning?

LEE MULLICAN: I'm not sure either, but it must be, it must have a meaning, you know, that this is the spot around which the world revolves. The mandala turns.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that doesn't necessarily interest you most, is this what I'm hearing?

LEE MULLICAN: No. Yeah, no, no. I'm still. . . . That's just something that I came across, and I just found that interesting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you evidently were not concerned with the iconographical content of or significance of some of these works, per se?

LEE MULLICAN: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or was it the case that you. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . were you searching for something, some secrets, something spiritual or mystical perhaps?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, no. It was just an excitement of being a tourist, of traveling, going to all these famous shrines and temples.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you visit a lot of them?

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Kajaraho and places like that?

LEE MULLICAN: That's right. We went to them all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the sculpture?

LEE MULLICAN: Where, at Kajaraho?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, or elsewhere.

LEE MULLICAN: Fantastic, of course! Oh yeah, no, very important, and I love Indian sculpture and seek it out. And

our friends, the Sarabais, have a great collection, and they have great textiles and great tapestries and. . . . It was just amazing. And all of that you respond! What the heck! Here in Santa Monica, what do you see?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I don't know. [chuckles]

LEE MULLICAN: Well, you see nature.

PAUL KARLSTROM: _____ palm tree, ocean. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, you see a palm tree and the ocean. But what is the famous building here that you are going to go and look at every day, or a church that you're going to walk through or walk around?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not a lot.

LEE MULLICAN: You know, there's just nothing after you've been exposed to the wonders of this world, of India. I mean, the eighth wonder of Europe, the great cathedrals of Europe! I mean, that's where I'd really want to be. Architecturally, things of the past excite me. So there you go.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There it is.

LEE MULLICAN: There's the reason to get out in the world, but then when you want to work or paint, draw, you withdraw within yourself, of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As we talk, and as we have been talking, it's becoming increasingly clear to me that you really do separate the worlds the outside world, the world of travel, the world of experience from the world of studio and your activity of making art. And that you resist, I think, attempts by interviewers and historians to try to force that connection.

LEE MULLICAN: No, that's right, you see, and when I traveled, in the past. . . . And I have, you know, carousel tray after carousel tray of great slides, and photographs, that document where I've been and so forth. But that has nothing to do with my painting. I mean, I don't illustrate what I've photographed, or I don't even maybe not even remember. It may be something very far removed from a great temple that may have nothing to do with the canvas I'm painting on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, at the very least, would you acknowledge perhaps that these experiences would reinforce your inherent sense of the importance of spirituality? In other words, that kind of experience that affirms for you. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, yes, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As you were saying, oh, okay, here [locally Ed.] what do you see of the things that apparently are valuable. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, the very spirituality for me comes from nature, of course. And the great religious monuments the cathedrals and the temples, and pyramids, and so forth that's of a different world.

[Interruption in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . apparent to me that whatever effect India may or may not have had on your work, it certainly was an important life experience for you, and so in some way it has had its impact, and obviously you want to go back. But it certainly brings to mind [in, that] another area that's obviously been very important to you in fact, way back, I think, to the thirties maybe you did I'm not sure about that but maybe even before the war did you visit Santa Fe on one occasion?

LEE MULLICAN: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, so you've had a connection with New Mexico. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . for many, many years, and inevitably we have to talk about that, because you've made certain choices, very important ones. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and that is, as you mentioned, you actually built a place in. . . . Oh, I forget exactly.

LEE MULLICAN: In Taos, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In Taos, but I do believe in the sixties. In the early sixties?

LEE MULLICAN: Early seventies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Early seventies, okay. And obviously. . . . Well, let me back up a minute. Most people would look at your work or some phases of your work and make connections between non-Western cultures, imagery, tribal art, ritual shamanism, or something like that.

LEE MULLICAN: Right, right, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, I don't want to insist on that, but what I'd like to do is just in conversation try to see how that might fit or might work or more to the point, how you feel about it. But what I would like to do, if I may, in starting this out is to read. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . from the back of your 1980 catalog. You had a retrospective one-man show at Barnsdall. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . _____ Municipal Art Gallery. That was in fall of 1980. And on the back, there's a photo I guess of you leaning up against [Ranchos] de Taos. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Church.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I presume that you chose this statement here, or at least agreed that this statement on the back of the catalog was meaningful.

LEE MULLICAN: It was meaningful in the sense of all the drawings that I was doing at that time. I was doing. . . . I decided that I wanted to really illustrate this whole Pueblo experience in a much more revealing way than I ever had before. Which means that I was actually beginning to illustrate and invent at the same time Pueblo rituals and costumes and kachinas and all of that, architecture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: If I may, let me read this, and I'm doing it. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: So this was meant to accompany those drawings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let me read it for the benefit of this interview, because, as a matter of fact, it may not be readily available to somebody who's listening to the tape, and I for one find. . . . May find, it may be revealing, certainly interesting.

LEE MULLICAN: Okay, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so I'm now quoting from Lee Mullican himself. On tour I walked, stopped, visited at Ninhekah, Anadarko, Pawnee, Shawnee before the yellow mesas appear, where colors ran together as mountains ran together. I met the corn fathers: blue corn people, yellow corn people, corn of all colors people. I carried a slat of wood and a meal bag, a crooked stick and straight quills, while she carried a cake in her hand. I looked and saw that as a child I carried a string of paper bread. I was naked. Carried mud. I was smeared with mud. I was throwing mud. I was smeared with corn, smut, and ashes. I was wearing, as I think you can see, red horse hair, elk horns, a calico shirt with conical tinklers. Crow feathers and woven grasses. I think you can see the chin is black and there is a long snout, slightly curved downward with an appended piece of leather colored red, representing the tongue. Shout for those summer people and winter's newborn fathers that appear as guardians.End quote. Now to me that's poetic. This is not just a caption to some illustrations.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I would like your thoughts or reflections on your relationship to the subjects.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it comes across from places. . . . I mean, like the first few names are all in Oklahoma where I grew up. And it has to do with Pueblo rituals, which we see every summer, and Pueblo artifacts, which we've collected, and which I've seen in museums. And it's invented at the same time. I mean, within the drawings I've presented rituals which just do not exist except in my mind although they may be based upon some kind of kiva vision that I really just have to imagine. So that's what it's about, and of course I love to write all of that, and that's just a small part of. . . . That's like one paragraph of about ten or twelve pages where I make this tour, a kind of stream of consciousness tour of the Southwest.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we need to turn the tape over, but when we start again maybe we can talk about, among other things, the guardians.

Tape 8, side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Lee Mullican, continuing side B. We were talking a little bit about your experience in the Southwest, and I guess what I'm probing for is some understanding of your relationship to that part of the world and the people, the landscape, and the customs. And I should say this, that no matter what you intended, it certainly seems to be the case that many people would look at your work and make these connections very directly, in fact sometimes perhaps view your work as a pretty direct representation, even though it's abstracted, of somebody's idea of Southwest culture and American Indian activities. I'm wondering how you would respond to that, and what your feeling about the nature of the relationship is.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think its there, of course, and a lot of it does have to do with nature, and a lot of it has to do with just an atmosphere that exists there and particularly I'm speaking of Taos and something you just have to experience. I think partially it's because it's a way of living with, for one thing, something as simple as open skies. So that all during the day you have this great open three-hundred-and-sixty-degree sky, within which color and light and cloud and rainbow and rain and et cetera, all of that is. . . . You're living with this, and that cannot help but be a spiritual influence. And the Indians, of course, [live, lived] within all of that also. And I think it. . . . It's difficult to speak about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you wouldn't, I gather, describe yourself as an interpreter or a painter of Southwest themes.

LEE MULLICAN: Only in the sense of those Pueblo drawings. But there again, they are very surreal. They are very crazy. They are very mixed up. They are things you would never see in any other way except through these drawings. And maybe in some of the ceramics, there might be some. I think maybe the strongest influence on painting has been the textiles, and particularly Navaho rugs and blankets. Because I realized early on that my technique is very much like a threaded surface. And so that has intrigued me, and I have probably drawn on that. In fact, I did a whole series of canvases based upon Saltillo blanket influences, where the striations of paint are all vertical and they change into abstract patterns. That's the closest, I think, that I come to that. In the beginning, I worked these canvases out. They were fairly abstract, and they had. . . . They were. . . . I mean, I did speak of that, of the striations all being vertical and a kind of refinement that I wanted to get there, with refinement of stroke and et cetera. So, as I did these, I decided that I would make a kind of chapel, curiously enough. I mean, I designed these to all hang in one space, like a chapel. [When, And] they were all abstract and they were all in patterns, and I did them at UCLA and in Taos. In my studio at UCLA. And I showed them once to Maurice Tuchman, and he said, "Oh, yes, we'd like to make an exhibition of those sometime." Of course he forgot about it and it was never done. Anyway, from there, from those, I moved into the Guardian series where I actually had, for all these strokes, began to evolve, not in a. . . . In an abstract sense, but even more so into a sense of being a personage a personage a head and a body with arms and et cetera, and facial features, et cetera. And that was the beginning of that Guardian series. [pronounced first "personage" as per-son-ahjz, second as per-son-age]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had a number of those works hanging around your studio one time some months ago. I guess it was when I showed up there with Gerald [Buck PK]. Is that right?

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said that they had been put up together. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . for a very long time. They were shown. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: That's right. Well, the studio has a lot. . . . I have these great long walls. I was able to put up ten of them at a time, and then of course they are a couple in the Dynaton show, and I have. . . . I've enjoyed working with them, although for the moment that's kind of ended, which doesn't mean that I won't go back to it sometime. It's a kind of iconic thing, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They're mainly what, 1978 to '80?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you. . . . Well, I mean, it's evident that these personages emerge out of an abstract matric of strokes.

LEE MULLICAN: That's where they come from.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do they mean anything in particular to you? I mean, I think you did talk about that at one point.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I don't know whether I should try and explain that or not. I mean, they're just there. And I had to give titles, so I. . . . I mean, as you say, very poetic in the sense that I had to give them some. . . . I didn't want just to say "Guardian," so it had to be a "Guardian" that came from the East or one from the West, or, you know, "Guardian" from whatever invented place. And so I just turned them out. I did. It was a great experience, and they're all kind of extraterrestrial. They're not meant to be any kind of a particular saint, or [a] being. They're just there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why the term "Guardian"? I mean, that's just evocative. That carries meaning.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, that's right. No, that does; it does. It may have been a mistake, I don't know. [laughs] But anyway that's. . . . I guess it's because I felt a special affinity to that imagery, and hopefully that others might also feel some affinity. And like in the sense of an icon, that perhaps they could be guarding us, or might guard us, or once at one time guarded us, or whatever. [laughs] In a sense of [there, their] being some kind of supreme image. I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in that sense do you feel that well, I won't say your work but that these images. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . possibly invoke a past, or some kind of a continuity, some connection to. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: To the past?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, not in an archaeological sense-----

LEE MULLICAN: No. No, no. Not to the past, not to the future, not to. . . . I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, you talk about a universe. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: They just appeared. They just appeared the day I painted them. That's all [I'm going to, I can] say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so your own. . . . It's interesting as you then think about them, you see possibilities that you don't disallow. For instance, an emerging "guardian," whatever that may mean. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you're the one that said that perhaps that these could be guarding us. You're talking about an affinity that you feel for the image. But then I guess we're trying to understand, or trying to explain why.

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I think that was true in the beginning. That's how it all started.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ah, I see.

LEE MULLICAN: But, after that, I don't know. It may be that, through all of my art, I've enjoyed trying to create some kind of imagery like that, whether that comes out of the surrealist idea of the personage, or. . . . Paalen did these great paintings called "The Great Transparents," which I understand came from, actually came from someone else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, well, that's okay.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let me ask a related question. I don't want to shortchange the Guardians or any phase of your work as it's developed, particularly since Dynaton, which, of course, has been talked about so much. But related to this is a question that I have in fact, I think that it's an important question, or it is to me in connection with your work but in question with. . . . I mean, in connection with art and the creators of art. And that is to what extent does the work itself, the activity, represent a personal journey, a personal quest, a private activity, and then the imagery come what may. To what extent that? Or on the other hand is there a broader social goal? And I don't mean political and that. I mean just an unawareness of others, of community, and a self-conception operating in a way that perhaps provides insight, illumination, or something for viewers. For you, how do you

feel about your work in that respect?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I guess I feel that I obviously have to continuously try and understand who I am, and where I came from, and where am I going, and why am I here, and I think it probably comes down to a very limited idea that I want to leave a record of my being here, and I want that record to be of now. I mean, I'm a child of the twentieth century, and obviously my record is going to be of my life here at this time in this last half of the twentieth century. And so I think that's what I'm at. I mean, that's where I'm going. That's why time in my studio is very important. Because things can change from one day to the next, from one canvas to the next. And these changes do take place, and that's a part of my record. And the only other thing that is just as important, and I think that's my record of being here as a member of my family.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you mean that in a limited sense? Your immediate family. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yes, no. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . .or the broader. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, the family that begins with my parents, where they came from, and the family that I have made my sons, my wife, our life together, our understanding, our discoveries of things. That's all hand in hand. And all of that will certainly continue, and as will all my thousands of paintings and drawings et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I mean, if I'm going to leave a record, I hope it's a good one. That's the problem. But I'm satisfied that it will be. [laughs] And I'm satisfied that with each work that I do, that it's an important work. In other words, I just don't slough off copies of copies of copies of my work. I think that every. . . . Hopefully, everything that I do is a definitive action of who I am and what happened in my studio. So. . . . After all, I mean, there are lots of questions and what are the answers and et cetera. So this probably doesn't, gonna add up to very much. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, it does, it does. And it seems to me that you've described an ethical position for an artist or at least your personal ethical position.

LEE MULLICAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is how you conduct yourself quotes "responsibly," "seriously" in the world, in this life. So, for you, if I understand what you said correctly, this is what the art is about. You talk about a record, is that, am I to understand. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: No, that's right, and it's difficult to say that. I mean, it's difficult to think that you have to boil it all down to that, but I guess maybe you do, I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's not bad. [chuckling]

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, I guess not. No, I guess not. But it does, as I grow older, it does come down to probably very simple statements like that. And that's where I want to be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what are your expectations. . . . No, I don't want to say expectations. Are there expectations or hopes for this record somehow connecting with other people, with a broader family? You've talked about you know what I mean an audience. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, well, I'm just beginning that, you see. And what I hope will happen is that before too long I can have a really large studio space, which I can set up kind of like an archive, if only for my own sake, so that I can take everything that I've done out of storage, and can look at it, and can spread it out, and think about it, and see where it's going. It's always difficult for me to destroy things. I don't destroy very many works although I have. I would like, probably, to rework a lot of things. But I have to have the space, and hopefully I'll have the time and energy to pull all this together. And then just what I will do with it, I don't know. Probably give it all away. [laughs] I mean, I hate to unload all of this on my family, you see, that's a. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Gee, well, if I'm around. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: [laughs hard]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You say that in Taos, you spend, well, almost half the year, don't you, in Taos?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, five months.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. But you say you don't have a studio. There you have _____.

LEE MULLICAN: No, I just have this house, and it's one area that I can work in. And I work outside a lot. I set up

my table out under the sky, throw the paint around out there. And then on occasion I have rented spaces during the summer, where I can leave the house and go and work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So most of your larger scale work gets done here in Santa Monica?

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah. Yes. Well, up to a few years ago, a lot of it was done at UCLA. If I wanted to work really large, I would go into a teaching studio during breaks, like Christmas break, when I could seal off that studio and I could go in there and do work as large as I wanted to, and I did that. So I don't really feel that space is all that important as far as doing the work, but I would like to be able to have it accessible. I mean, that's just a very personal, a personal notation.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you see your work changing, your interests shifting well, currently or recently or do you see these concerns staying pretty much the same from your point of view?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I really don't know. I think if I had to predict and I don't like to that things will become much simpler, more, you might say, minimal. And just what scale they will take, I don't know. I just don't have the energy any more to do really huge paintings with very elaborate [tight] techniques. As one gets older, one gets more expressionistic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, that sounds like the opposite of _____ [going] minimal.

LEE MULLICAN: It is, it is, it is. But that's why I'm not interested in doing that so much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why minimal? I mean, why do you see that as a possible direction?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, just to core things down, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, it's not or maybe it is a formalist interest?

LEE MULLICAN: Partially. It might be, it might be. I mean, for years I could imagine that I would probably end up with very small canvases, just one stroke on it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Umm. Is that Zen?

LEE MULLICAN: That's very Zen, yes. Very minimal, very Zen, very spiritual. I've attempted this at times on paper, but I haven't done it on a canvas, and every time I do, I say, "Well, I'm not ready for that yet." You know, its like, not ready for that. So I keep putting it off, and I may never do it. It may be that I'll do one canvas like that and say, ["Ugh," "Oock,"] you know. "That's not your metier. You've got the. . . . You are too responsible to elaboration and pattern and color and exchanges of shape and all of that, you see."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I would find it surprising. I find it very interesting that you entertain this as one possible direction for you, because I think of your work. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: Well, it's taking a canvas and taking everything off except one stroke, and I mean. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Pretty straightforward.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's certainly counter to what I think you're best known for.

LEE MULLICAN: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your best-known works, I mean. I mean, _____ [flipflop].

LEE MULLICAN: No, that's right, that's right. It would be a. . . . And once you flip out, flip over like that, I mean, you can't go back.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, very quickly, what about, in terms of this kind of approach simplification, removal of almost everything that's extraneous what about John McLaughlin's work? I don't know if I asked you about him.

LEE MULLICAN: No, I like his work. I think it's very good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you have some sort of affinity?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I do, I do. And I don't know whether it was in this interview or it was another one, that I spoke of this exhibition I saw at the National Gallery of "The Stations of the Cross," done by. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, by Barney Newman.

[Interruption in taping]

LEE MULLICAN: . . . now this. It's the wrong afternoon for me to come up with. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah. I know it.

LEE MULLICAN: . . . come up with names. But anyway it was an impressive show. It was a very impressive, impressive. . . . Everybody will know who that is. I don't have to call his name [_____]. But. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ad Reinhardt?

LEE MULLICAN: No, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I can see them [the paintings]. We'll stick it in later.

LEE MULLICAN: Yeah, okay. Yeah, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that appealed to you?

LEE MULLICAN: Well, I loved the exhibition. I could never have painted like that, but I loved the exhibition, and I liked McLaughlin, and of course I [like, liked] Mondrian. . . . And the masters. You know, there are those masters that have done that.

[Interruption in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Lee, I think its interesting then that you see, as viable options, very different approaches if you want to say, vocabularies or languages in painting and that there's something more fundamental that I guess you respond to in John McLaughlin, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, perhaps Rothko, I don't know. But anyway that these are, that there is this shared impulse perhaps, and that you feel you could move into minimalism, again as a viable option, but then you're not promising anything.

LEE MULLICAN:: No, but what my other thought was, that it isn't enough that it just be one stroke, or it might be. . . . I've even thought that ideally the strokes. . . . Say they are six strokes on a canvas, and that ideally should be put there accidentally. In other words, I might throw some objects on it, and wherever each one falls that's where I would put a stroke. But if it is reduced down to just one, the thing is that it's my stroke. It's not just a vertical mark. It is a stroke of paint, you see, because in my strokes, I pick the paint up on the end of the knife, and so there is an actual surface of that stroke. It just isn't a part of the canvas. It stands out, and right now that's meaningful to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It stands on top of this. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: It stands on top of the surface.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so there remain two different things the one. . . .

LEE MULLICAN: One is the surface and the other is the stroke. But you know it's a stroke. It isn't integrated with that surface. It stands out on the surface. It reflects the light, if it may come from the side. And that one stroke can be one inch long, or it could be one foot long, I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, finally, you are concerned about the idea of the mark, and really that this mark is yours and yours alone.

LEE MULLICAN: That's right, because that's all my canvases are. They are those marks. And I've used the mark. I've said this before, too. That mark is like a cell, a molecule, an atom, or whatever my world is built upon. And all this patterning is made up from that one little stroke, and that's why the world is kind of complete as it is. And it just happens to be that way. It could have. . . . I mean, Gordon is very good with his dots and so forth, but I like the idea of the stroke, and I like the idea of it being paint.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, I think this is a good spot to end.

LEE MULLICAN: Okay. Yeah, I think so, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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