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Oral history interview with Sally Michel Avery, 1967 November 3

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Transcript

Interview

Interview with Sally Michel Avery
Conducted by Dorothy Seckler
At her home in New York, NY
November 3, 1967

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sally Michel Avery on November 3, 1967. The interview took place in her home in New York, NY, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Sally Michel or Mrs. Milton Avery in New York, on November 3, 1967.

SALLY AVERY: They're both one in the same.

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: Sally, I think we'll have to begin in the beginning and find out where you were born and grew up and what kind of a family produced a phenomenon like you.

[Laughter].

SALLY AVERY: Well, I was born -- I am one of those rare creatures, an original New Yorker. I was born in Brooklyn and I grew up in Brooklyn.

MS. SECKLER: And what kind of -- were you part of a large family?

MS. AVERY: I had three brothers and one sister. And one of my brothers was interested in art, but he decided after awhile that he didn't want to starve, so he decided to be an engineer instead of an artist. But I always wanted to be an artist, you know?

MS. SECKLER: Even growing up as a child?

MS. AVERY: Well, I can - yes, I always, as far as I remember, I always drew, but I can remember very clearly when I decided to be an artist.

MS. SECKLER: Really? How was that?

MS. AVERY: I was about - I think I was in the 1st grade in school, I must have been about 6 years old, maybe 7 and our teachers showed us a drawing of Christopher Columbus and it wasn't a photograph, it was a drawing and I suddenly realized that this was - I mean this was one of the most fabulous things that ever happened to me. It was like a revelation.

And I came home and tried to draw this thing I had seen and I decided then and there that I was going to be an artist because I wanted to be able to do something like that.

MS. SECKLER: And then did you later start taking drawing lessons or did you just continue drawing on your own?

MS. AVERY: Yeah, well I did a lot by myself and I took drawing in school and I don't know, I was just always involved in drawing and you know? And then when I got out of school, I decided to do some commercial art and I went around, I made some samples by myself -

MS. SECKLER: Without going to an art school?

MS. AVERY: -- without going to an art school, yeah. And I went around and the first place I went to gave me some work to do. Which was kind of phenomenal, I think. Somebody was crazy.

[Laughter]

And that's the way it was.

MS. SECKLER: What kind of things - what did you show them?

MS. AVERY: The first drawings I tried to do were fashion drawings. I copied some things I had seen in the paper. And then I used to go to the Art Students League at night and you know, finally got to meet artists. And then once -

MS. SECKLER: While you were doing this commercial work, you were going to the League at night?

MS. AVERY: Yes, I went to the League at night. And then I began to get interested in painting. So I decided to go Gloucester [Massachusetts] for the summer and you know, live like an artist.

[Laughter]

And that's where I met Milton.

MS. SECKLER: Do you remember roughly what year that was that you went to Gloucester the first time?

MS. AVERY: I think it was 1925 because in 1926 we were married, that was the next year. Milton at that time lived in Hartford [Connecticut], but he came down to New York.

MS. SECKLER: He had grown up in New Connecticut, hadn't he?

MS. AVERY: Yes, originally he came from Upper New York State in a little town near Rome, New York, but when he was quite young his family moved to Hartford and that's where he grew up.

MS. SECKLER: Had he gone to an art school there?

MS. AVERY: No. Actually, he never really went to a real art school, but they had what they called a Connecticut League of Art Students which was a group of artists who got together and had a model and then a well-known artist used to come in and give them some criticism once in a while. They had hired this law often.

So it wasn't a conventional art school, but it was, you know, and he used to go there and drawer from the model and he had a job, a night job which he used to work at night and then he'd paint in the daytime.

MS. SECKLER: Was he at that point already in this wonderful period where he could paint a couple of paintings before lunch -

[Laughter]

MS. AVERY: Well, I don't know if he could paint before lunch because - yeah, he probably did, as a matter of fact, he - of course I didn't know him in those days, but he told me he used to go out, he'd go out and he'd come home from work about one o'clock at night and then he'd sleep for about five to six hours.

And then he'd go out in the morning and he'd paint a couple of pictures in the Connecticut meadows that were along the Connecticut River there. At that time, it was meadows, now it's sort of all grown up with great apartment houses and things.

And then in the afternoon, if painted things that were very delicate in the morning, then he'd go out again in the afternoon and he'd paint something very dark or rugged, you know? He would discipline himself that way.

And then, he'd have to rush home, get a bite to eat and go back to work. So, it was a very rigorous life he led, but that's what you have to do if you want to be an artist. You really have to work very hard.

MS. SECKLER: But he was able to manage getting the summers off so you could go to Gloucester and paint.

MS. AVERY: Yes, well, he was able to manage because he had a very good friend who let him use his studio free-of-charge and he could live in the studio. And so actually, his only expense was his food and he used to eat - I remember that - he told me he used to have a can of Campbell's soup every day. Vegetable soup. That was his main meal [laughter] and he really ate the same thing every day.

He was really was just interested in painting, so that the other things which a great many people consider necessities were - I mean, he didn't even consider, I mean he just didn't consider having a nice place to live or something elegant to eat as necessities. As long as he could get by and have time to paint. That was all that he was interested in.

And the same thing was true when we went to Gloucester. He used to go out in the morning. At that time, he did all of his painting out of doors, I mean directly from the scene.

And he would strap his easel and his canvas on his back and he'd walk out to the rocks, the rocky shore of Gloucester and paint two pictures in the morning, then he'd come home and have his lunch and after lunch, he'd do the same thing. He'd go out and paint two more. So he would usually paint, you know, three or four pictures every day.

MS. SECKLER: Invariably, at this time, he really didn't bring all the paints out -

MS. AVERY: Yes. Everything. Yes. He would do the whole thing outside. You have to be strong to do that.

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: You think of the wind blowing.

MS. AVERY: I know. Oh yes, he used to take a rope with him and he'd take - because sometimes the wind would be so strong that it would blow over the easel, so he would tie the rope on the easel and then take one of the big rocks and weigh down his easel so that the whole thing wouldn't blow away.

MS. SECKLER: It must have been quite a feat to do that. Was he doing it when you came up? He was still working that way?

MS. AVERY: He had been to Gloucester a number of years before I got there.

Yes, he was still working that way. And he said, you know, I had a studio next door to him because I didn't know him in the beginning, but he noticed me because I used to get up at half-past six in the morning and go out sketching and he said he was very interested in any girl that would do that.

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: Yes, indeed. I can see that. So were you also painting on the cliffs in the same way?

MS. AVERY: Ah yes. I used to go out. I used to go out, yeah, outdoors. Do all my things outdoors in those days. Carry my easel -

MS. SECKLER: Were you both painting in oil or were using [inaudible]

MS. AVERY: No, I was using oils. We were both using oils. Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: What did his paintings look like, I mean, I gather that he was painting the cliffs. Was there at that time his characteristic way of simplifying his [inaudible]

MS. AVERY: No, I uh um, though he always had a feeling for large simple shapes. At that time, I would say there was more detail. They weren't as simplified as they were later. There was considerably more topical things.

Though, sometimes he would do a large canvas which would look rather unfinished to most people.

I remember once he began sketching me a lot and he did this big figure, seated figure. And the man who loaned Milton his studio so he could work in it was a conservative artist and he came in and he said, "Milton! You're getting lazy. You haven't finished this picture!"

And Milton said, "But I have finished it." That's his, you know, I mean, "from my point of view it's finished."

And this older artist got very upset. He really - uh. So, he had very definite ideas about what he wanted to say, you know.

MS. SECKLER: I mean, where would you have thought this - was it a matter of, well, I mean it's hard to separate out and say what might be just one's personality or was it, was he being influenced by, well, I don't know who at that time -

MS. AVERY: You know I think actually, he had, I really would say that his greatest teacher was nature. I mean, he was a great observer and he really studied. And he had a tendency to see things in a large way. I mean, he didn't see small things. His motto was "The whole was greater than any of its parts."

MS. SECKLER: He was a Gestalt psychologist.

[Laughter]

MS. AVERY: Yes.

[Laughter]

I don't think that he was particularly interested in other people's painting. Which is a funny thing to say.

MS. SECKLER: Even people like - everyone at that time I suppose was being influenced by people like Picasso and Matisse and son on but you feel even in that case, it wasn't --

MS. AVERY: No, I don't think so. I think he was - he had a very definite vision which was like always with him. And I think each of his paintings grew out of the painting before. I mean, he was always attempting something which had nothing to do with the subject. The thing that he was painting.

His problem was always a painter's problem, which had nothing to do with actually what he was painting. He really thought in terms of shapes and spaces and colors and things like that. And the subject was just something that he used to start a move on this other journey that he was painting.

It was very noticeable if you watched him. Because he could take, I mean he could take anything and make a poem out of it. You know, it had nothing to do with what he was painting.

MS. SECKLER: He wasn't particularly and always looking for a specific kind of picturesqueness in nature -

MS. AVERY: No, never. No.

MS. SECKLER: He was bringing to it something so much [inaudible].

MS. AVERY: That's right. He was only using it as a match that started the fire. Whatever. Though he liked, you know, he liked fresh subjects all the time. And so he always went different places. But that was because they stimulated his imagination in different directions, you know?

MS. SECKLER: Would it make a difference in the kind of color he used? What kind of a day it was?

MS. AVERY: Well, it would make a difference. Yes, I would say it would make a difference because if it was a gray day he might start off with a poem that was, you know, a painting that was like monochromatic or you know, had a different kind of a feeling, that's all.

Or if it was a brilliant day, he might go in for a painting with lots of yellows and more brilliant colors.

MS. SECKLER: Was he using a relatively unmodeled kind of color at that time?

MS. AVERY: Um. He always had a tendency to - I mean, he was - to flatten his color. Though I would say it wasn't as acutely flat as it was later. There was always a tendency to think in terms of large shapes. Yes, I would say so.

MS. AVERY: He never went in much for light and shade or heavy modeling or breaking up surfaces into, you know, in too obvious of a way -

MS. SECKLER: But, I'd imagine at that time his oil was a bit thicker thatn it was [inaudible].

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's right. His pallet was darker. When he first began to paint, his pallet was very moody and dark and he sometimes he used heavier paint, but not really very - he was never, he never used a lot of paint.

MS. SECKLER: That was expensive, too

[Laughter]

MS. AVERY: That was expensive, but he always said, he could make a tube of paint last longer than anyone I ever knew.

I remember once when Lenny Bocour first went into the paint business, he used to go around selling paints to the artists and Milton used to be ashamed when he came around because he always had the all the paint he had sold him the month before. He hadn't used hardly any of it. Because he just didn't use a lot of paint. Though he painted a lot of pictures, he didn't use a lot of pain. So he sent him to another artist who lots of paint and then Bocour never bothered us again because he realized he was really wasting his time coming to us

[Laughter] [inaudible]

MS. SECKLER: Well, in your own work at that time. You haven't mentioned color at all. You were drawing a great

deal, as you know, in high school and so on. Had you become more of a colorist?

MS. AVERY: Well, when I - yes, then I was painting in oils. But when we got married, I really realized that we didn't have any money and someone had to make some money, so then I began, went back to doing commercial work and I did, I was lucky enough to get a job with the *New York Times* illustrating some articles for them. So I worked for them for a quite a while.

MS. SECKLER: Soon after you were married?

MS. AVERY: No, no. Actually, when we were first married, I used to do things for advertising agencies and I'd work for, you know, like Macy's and Altman's and doing fashion drawings for them. And, you know, it was a while later that I got the job at the *Times*.

MS. SECKLER: Well, I really shouldn't let you get too far ahead in your story. Isn't there some - we had you meeting Milton and we had you getting married a year later. I think if we can fill in a little of that year it would be kind of nice

[Laughter]

After he saw you going out at six o'clock in the morning to sketch the cliffs.

[Laughter]

MS. AVERY: Actually he followed me!

[Laughter]

MS. AVERY: Well, actually, you know, I thought it was just a summer romance. But then after I got back to New York and Milton came down to New York and stayed with this man who had lent him the studio so that he could chase me a little more, I guess, I don't know, so we finally got married.

MS. SECKLER: Wasn't your family alarmed that you were marrying this penniless artist?

MS. AVERY: Oh yes! They certainly were! The first thing my mother noticed when he came to see me was that his collar was frayed. [Laughter] And she was horrified at the idea that I would marry someone that really couldn't take care of me or anything like that. But, you know how young people are. You set your mind on something and you do it. Anyway -

MS. SECKLER: Where you able to persuade them by the time you had gotten married?

MS. AVERY: No actually, we ran off and got married and told them later.

[Laughter]

But it took them a long time to find him acceptable, but I think in the end they were rather proud of him.

MS. SECKLER: Well then this is the first summer in Gloucester. You were there all summer and then you came to New York -

MS. AVERY: Yes, yes. And then the next summer we went back to Gloucester and we spent the summer there, you know, on our honeymoon. And painted and had fun.

MS. SECKLER: Did you have a circle of friends there by this time?

MS. AVERY: Oh yes. We knew lots of people there by that time.

MS. SECKLER: Anyone that was important, you know, as a [inaudible]?

MS. AVERY: Well, no it wasn't - actually, that summer, of course we spent a lot of time with each other and it wasn't until a few summers later that we went back with, you know, [Mark]Rothko and [Adolph] Gottlieb and people like that, because at that time, we didn't know them.

When we got back to New York after that summer, a gallery in New York was opening up called the Opportunity Gallery. And Milton showed some things there and there we met quite a few of the artists who became our friends, you know, then through the years.

MS. SECKLER: Uh-huh. Who was actually running that Opportunity Gallery, do you remember?

MS. AVERY: Well, the woman who was - actually it was run by some sort of a foundation, but I can't remember the name of the foundation. But there was a woman named Ms. Gupford who actually ran the Gallery. She was a very attractive blond woman who all the boys were in love with. But she did a very good job.

And she organized different exhibitions each month and she'd ask a well-known artist to jury the exhibitions and actually, the same group of artists, you know, showed on almost every exhibition because, I mean, they were the most talented ones so they got by the jury. And they all got to know each other.

And among those artists were Louis Schanker and Mark Rothko and Gottlieb and Ben-Zion [Ben-Zion Weinman] and a lot of other men - and Joe [Joseph] Solmon and -

MS. SECKLER: They were the group that formed The Ten [Whitney Dissenters]-

MS. AVERY: That's right. They were the group the formed The Ten later. But Milton never joined The Ten because he just wasn't a joiner and he never joined anything. So though they always asked him to join, but those were the group who originally showed at the Opportunity Gallery and we all got to be great friends and we saw each other a great deal and we began spending summers together.

We all went to Gloucester together and once we went to Vermont. Was it Vermont? Yes, Vermont. And Adolph and Esther came up and took a house near us. But in Gloucester, Rothko came up and Gottlieb came up -

MS. SECKLER: They were younger [inaudible]?

MS. AVERY: Yes, they were about ten years younger than Milton, but they all respected him a great deal and they used to hang around, as we'd say. You know, in the City, actually, Rothko lived across the street from us and he'd be at our house almost every night. And Gottlieb would come in very often.

And, you know, they'd bring their girlfriends and finally they'd bring their wives when they had them and it was like a close-knit family really. We were very close. And they used to bring their friends to show them what Milton was doing.

And I know how Baumbag says he remembers when Adolph Gottlieb took him up to show him Milton's work. And David Smith was in that group. It was nice and we were always together a lot. We were always having a lot of parties together and things like that.

Then we all went to Gloucester, I remember and everybody would work during the daytime and the evenings would be spent looking over the work people had done that day. So sometimes it would be at one house and sometimes it would be at another. They were all very anxious to see what Milton had done.

Because Milton would do like three or four watercolors a day and you know, with three or four watercolors everyday you get a lot of ideas.

But it was nice. And we'd play beach tennis and it was really, considering that - you know, we never drank, no one ever had a beer even because we were very poor and at nighttime we'd sit around and have tea and crackers and just discuss painting. It was a really sort of dedicated time.

MS. SECKLER: That's so different from today -

MS. AVERY: It certainly is.

MS. SECKLER: --when artists get together they never talk about their paintings.

MS. AVERY: No. And the other thing is there were no galleries in those days and no one ever expected to sell a picture, so you weren't interested in making it. You were only interested in actually being a good artist.

So the climate was very, very different that it is now. And, of course, you didn't need as much money. I remember we had a little house in Gloucester. I think we paid $30.00 a month, you know. So you could live the whole summer for about $150.00. Everything was very, very different.

MS. SECKLER: When you came back to the City and you were, of course, still working there in advertising.

MS. AVERY: Yes, yes.

MS. SECKLER: So, were you able to find an apartment [inaudible]?

MS. AVERY: Oh yes, yes. You know, what we used to do, we gave up our apartments before we went away for the summer. And we came back, we'd have no trouble. We'd find another one.

We'd put our stuff in storage for the three or four months that we were away, we'd come back and in no time we'd have something else. It's not like today at all. And I remember when we moved down to the Village. We could have had ten apartments. All about the same price. $50.00 a month.

[Laughter]

So it is different because the pressures are so much heavier now. You can't exist unless you have a certain amount of money. Where in those days you could slide though with having hardly anything.

MS. SECKLER: Uh-huh. And everybody had to some other kind of job to make a living, apparently.

MS. AVERY: Yes. Most of the fellows - some of the fellows would teach or get jobs in settlement houses. That was one of the great ways of making a living. But Milton never had a job. I always had the job.

MS. SECKLER: Was it pretty rough at times?

MS. AVERY: Well, it was pretty rough, yes. But when you're young it doesn't make so much difference. You can stand it more.

MS. SECKLER: Of course, you weren't getting much chance to paint at this time.

MS. AVERY: No, that's true. I wasn't. Though I always managed, when we went away for the summer I didn't do any commercial work and so I would paint all summer steadily and I really, you know, I used to do quite a lot of work. In the winter it was much harder for me.

MS. SECKLER: At this point, you were getting into the years of the Depression. How did that affect you?

MS. AVERY: Well actually, I was really very, I mean, I had a sort of special kind of talent for commercial work. So that I wasn't - the same people that used me other times used me - maybe a little bit less.

So, actually, we weren't too much affected by it. We never had much money, you know, so we didn't notice the difference. We may have had a little less.

But I know some of our friends were very hard hit and I remember we used to have to lend them money which was rather difficult since we never had very much. But I remember there was one artist who we'd have to give $10.00 a week to because he didn't have any money. But I still -

MS. SECKLER: The artists were sort of looking out for each other at that time -

MS. AVERY: Well, I think artists are always very generous. If they have anything, they'll, you know. Actually, if you have very little, you're perfectly willing to share it. It's only when people get a lot of money that they don't want to share, I think. Poor people have a tendency to share whatever they have, I think.

I remember we used to have so-called dinner parties, but everybody had to pay 50 cents for their dinner if they ate with us because we really couldn't afford to supply meals for people. And I remember once, one of the boys who had eaten with us, he was a musician, and when I asked him for his 50 cents he was pretty insulted

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: Were some of them getting jobs on WPA projects at this time?

MS. AVERY: Oh yes. And then about this time, the WPA came along and a lot of people - most of the boys got on the WPA right away. But Milton didn't for a long time and then finally he got on for a little while, maybe about six months.

But then they wanted all the artists to sign a proposal in order to stay on the WPA and Milton said he wouldn't do that, so he was dropped and that was all - but, uh.

MS. SECKLER: I wondered if you'd like to say anything about the work you were doing when I was thinking of those drawings you did for the *Times*, you hadn't gotten yet to that job, I suppose. These drawings had a particularly beautiful character and I was just wondering how you developed it all on your own?

MS. AVERY: Actually, it was only because I was always drawing, so that drawing became for me like writing to somebody else. It was effortless.

MS. SECKLER: Did you have a model or did you pool your resources and get models [inaudible]?

MS. AVERY: Well, I used to use anybody that was around for models. And I used, by this time, my daughter was

about -

MS. SECKLER: When was March born?

MS. AVERY: She was born in the '30's and that's when I got this job.

MS. SECKLER: You used her?

MS. AVERY: Yes, I used her from the time she was like 3 years old. She would be posing for me.

MS. SECKLER: The illustrations were for articles about children for the most part, weren't they?

MS. AVERY: Yes. It was a feature article that the *Times* ran every week in their magazine section. And I just recently met one of the art directors I used to work for who is now out in California and he said, "You know, those drawings you did for the *Times*," well, he thought they were marvelous. He said they've become collector's items, but I actually I don't have many myself.

But I did them for a long time, I mean, I did them from the time the article was started until really just recently when Milton got so sick that I had to give it up and I could go back anytime I wanted to right now but I'm not interested in doing that anymore. But, they said they've never been able to find a substitute.

Anyway, I enjoyed doing them and I used to do them very quickly and I'd say with a minimum amount --

[Laughter]

- and they were really very nice to me and I remember in the early '40's we decided to take a trip across the country and so I went to the editor and I told him I wanted to go away but I didn't want to lose the job and would he hold it for me? You know, get a substitute and let me come back in the fall and he said okay. So I went.

MS. SECKLER: What year was that?

MS. AVERY: That was '41. In 1941. We drove across and that was really a great experience. We went to the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone and we stayed out in Laguna Beach for a month on the coast and went to the Indian Country, Carlsbad Caverns. It was really very lovely.

MS. SECKLER: Did any of this find its way into either your work or Milton's work?

MS. AVERY: Oh yes. Milton did a whole series of landscapes, rocky mountain landscapes, and we both did a lot of watercolors when we were on the coast that month. We did a series of watercolors for that month. And then the next year went to Mexico - no, not the next year. That was a few years later. We drove down to Mexico.

MS. SECKLER: And this would again be in the '40's?

MS. AVERY: That was in the '40's too, yes.

MS. SECKLER: Before we get too far, we may have a few gaps in this thing [laughter].

MS. AVERY: Oh yes, that's right. I forgot to tell you, we went to Gaspec Peninsula. That was in 1938 and that was a really tremendous experience because we were there for three months.

We lived in a little overnight cabin for three months and no one spoke any English and we didn't speak any French, so all we did was paint. I mean, we used to go out every day and we did watercolors that summer and I remember, I mean, we didn't seem to miss the fact that we didn't know anybody or anything.

MS. SECKLER: Was March there with you?

MS. AVERY: Yes, March was there. She was just a little girl and she played with the French children up there. But the place was so beautiful and we took all these little side trips and everything that, I mean, nature sort of took the place of friends that particular year and I remember the day we left, we were packing up and Milton found we had four sheets of Whatman's watercolor paper left, so while I was packing he did four watercolors that afternoon, because he didn't want to take home any paper that hadn't been worked on.

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: That is phenomenal! [Inaudible.] Have you ever thought of how it was possible for him to work with that kind of speed and concentration? I mean, it's so unusual really - not to have watched him do it, I have no idea how he did it and I suppose there's no reason why you should have been able to see -

MS. AVERY: Well, I think, I think - that he himself had such a clear image of what he wanted to say and the other thing is, he had marvelous control. He really was - he worked so much that he was at ease in whatever medium he worked in.

Like, he handled watercolor in the most fabulous way and you can only do that if you've done a thousand watercolors. It takes just a lot of - you know, his motto was do a lot of them. Whatever you are doing do a lot of because this is the way you develop the ability to say exactly what you want to say with ease because, I mean, it's also besides being an art, painting is also a craft and you have to be able to handle your medium with - without any trouble, you know?

MS. SECKLER: Of course -

MS. AVERY: It can't get in your way. Otherwise, it can get in your way. But he was -

MS. SECKLER: I'm thinking to some extent of what he excluded, what he wasn't attracted to? For instance, everyone in that period or a great many people in this period, of course, would have been involved with - either that or reacting against the things that were really in the public eye.

MS. AVERY: You mean like Cubism?

MS. SECKLER: Well, no. I mean, this was, well in the late '20's and in the '30's it would have been like Regional painting and art, I mean, [Thomas Hart] Benton and that sort of thing with Milton, it seems not to have been involved in that.

MS. AVERY: Not at all. And we used to go around the galleries and Milton's idea of painting was so entirely different than these Regional and Social scene painters that he said - I remember him saying to me, he said, you know, "I don't know. Either I'm crazy or everyone else is. Because my idea of what painting is is so different than what I see all around me."

He was just was never attracted to any of that type of painting. Just the way he excluded Cubism from his life too. He just knew exactly what he wanted to say.

MS. SECKLER: At what stage did you become aware of - well, let's say excluding Cubism or taking a position of that, you know, at the same time that there was all this Regionalism and so on, has gotten even more - and of course everybody was seeing the magazines coming from Europe with the things of Matisse and Picasso and so on. Now when Milton saw those things, was he to some extent drawn to them or -

MS. AVERY: I think he liked Matisse but I think people have overestimated any influence Matisse may have had on him because actually, Milton's basic philosophy is so different than Matisse's. I mean, Milton is a real, Yankee, with a dry aesthetic quality when Matisse is a hedonist. I mean, his thing has this gay -

MS. SECKLER: Sensuous--

MS. AVERY: --decorative quality that has no part in anything Milton has to say, any relationship is on a much more superficial level than people seem to understand.

I mean, I think Matisse is a great artist, but I just think he is so different than Milton that people who keep saying that Milton is like Matisse just show their own ignorance. That's all.

MS. SECKLER: And in this period do you feel - well, he was not yet working in the chromatic scale that he did later, was he? [Inaudible]

MS. AVERY: No. Actually, he began to heighten his palette considerably in the early '40's. And from the early '40's until like '46 or '7, it seemed to go straight, straight up.

And then it began to take on a different - after his - he had a heart attack in '49 - and after he came out of that heart attack, his painting took on a somewhat different quality. They became much more universal and much less topical. That's the only way I can describe it.

If he painted the sea, say, it wasn't the sea of a particular place, but it was like all seas, you know? And this gave his later work a tremendous breadth.

MS. SECKLER: It's so hard to pinpoint the thing that makes that true. You know, that more universal quality. To some extent, I suppose the suppression of Mateo and topical references is involved. But there's also a kind of breadth in the scale that he seemed to get in many things. A sense of the relationships -

MS. AVERY: Yes, I think he had a tremendous sense of order in his work. So that this order that he got, it was an

order both of color and of space and I think this makes even a small painting seem to be very large and the concept is large even if the painting is small.

And then I think he had a - he himself was such a pure person and this comes through in his painting and this is another element that you find very rare - well it's very rare in people. It's also very rare in painting, you know. It's very rare in art.

But he comes through - I think he comes through very strongly that way and I think this is one of the qualities in his painting which has such a tremendous appeal for other painters and for other people too because once you become an Avery fan, it's like, you know, an incurable disease.

MS. SECKLER: People have tried to define and spell out what they mean by this kind of, ah, purity or sometimes use the word to innocence - it's as if he shares something of the same quality we enjoy and we know and we kind of - a painting by a child, we sometimes see that it has a sort of sense of something very revealing and yet, he was not a childish, he was a more sophisticated person than perhaps we even knew in some ways.

MS. AVERY: Yes, I think he was a very sophisticated painter. But he did retain that innocent purity of a child somehow or other with all the sophistication of a very mature man.

MS. SECKLER: This is the combination that is always so difficult to understand. How one can keep that kind of vision -

MS. AVERY: Well, that's one of the miracles of life. That someone can keep it. Not many people do.

MS. SECKLER: Would there be other ways in his daily life and watching him and other things besides painting that would reveal a similar quality of his outlook of things and feelings?

MS. AVERY: Well, I think he was a man without any, you know, guile or ego. He was just a -

MS. SECKLER: That word "ego." Do you really mean that?

MS. AVERY: I mean it. Because he never thought about himself as you know. I mean, he just - I mean, most painters are pretty egotistical, as you know.

MS. SECKLER: Oh I know. You told me that he was always talking about Jeff Gottlieb. He thought it was absolutely essential for a painter at a certain critical point in his development when he is young to develop a big ego, strong ego.

MS. AVERY: Well, maybe it was essential for him, but I don't think it was for Milton. In fact - I remember his doctor saying, "You should be more egotistical about yourself." He just never thought of himself. He was always - when people spoke about painting he'd say oh, it was a fascinating pastime. He was very understated in every way.

But he had a marvelous sense of humor and he could never look at himself pompously and you could see he did a great many self-portraits and they are so witty and so - I mean, when he looks at himself, it's done with, you know, like a twinkle in your eye. It's just terrific.

MS. SECKLER: There's always that sort of surprising -

MS. AVERY: Yes, there was always an element, that's another thing.

MS. SECKLER: Almost an impudent quality the way he portrayed himself.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's true. He never, you know, you think of the way well, a lot of people paint themselves, I mean, he didn't care whether he was pretty.

He happened to be very good-looking, but, it never occurred to him to paint that way, as if I am a handsome man. He would always find something amusing like sometimes he would make beautiful red lips or -

MS. SECKLER: Part of that delightful, childlike quality.

MS. AVERY: Yes, it is. It's really marvelous.

MS. SECKLER: We sometimes see in - when you see a really inspired thing by a child that they've taken a single aspect of something, like a face [inaudible] and done something really very concentrated elaborate on that one thing that gives a whole distinction -

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's true. And I think Milton did that a great deal. I mean, he always said that you can't, you don't have to show everything you know in one picture. You don't exhibit your knowledge all at once and he thought that a painting was like a piece of music. It had to have a theme.

And you would limit - you know, just the way you wouldn't play a million notes in one, one piece of music, so you didn't use every color you knew. Just because you knew there were a thousand colors, you didn't have to put them all in one picture. That was one of the things he was quite definite on.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. And that's where I suppose makes his painting so fascinating. You look at a landscape through his eyes and you see some aspect of it that is really truly there but it takes over the painting in a way. That gives it a different quality [inaudible].

MS. AVERY: Yes. I remember [John] Canaday saying that now when you looked at the dunes you didn't see the dunes anymore. You saw an Avery painting. Because, he had actually changed, with these paintings he had done of the dunes, he had changed our way of looking at the dunes.

Just the way the French Impressionists changed your way of looking at the French countryside.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. That's fascinating. Sally, we were just saying that there's this enormous body of work and you've mentioned so many, for instance, watercolors that are unknown even to many collectors.

MS. AVERY: Yes. Actually, Milton did - you see, we used to go away every summer, he would devote to doing watercolors. He would paint in oils all winter and then we would go away for the summer and he was devoted to doing watercolors. I mean, he would usually do about 200 watercolors a summer, at least.

And so, over the years, this built up to a large body of work and his watercolors are actually technically, outside of any other consideration, they are technically so fascinating because he had such a tremendous command of the medium. And if you know anything about watercolors, you know that you have to do them very directly. You cannot work over them.

And he found that this also helped him doing the oils in the winter because he had to make so many decisions immediately when you do a watercolor that you learn to clear your mind of a lot quavering. You can't say, well maybe I'll make it this color or maybe I'll make it that color and since you can't change it, you must put down what you really think the first time. And I think that really was a big factor in the clarity of his oils.

MS. SECKLER: I take it that these, of course, were done in the studio from sketches, rather than on-the-spot.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's true. We would go out sketching every day. Every afternoon.

And in the morning he would get up before breakfast and he would usually do a couple of watercolors. And after breakfast he would do a couple more and we'd spend the rest of the day on the beach.

MS. SECKLER: How large were these watercolors that he would do?

MS. AVERY: About 22 by 30.

MS. SECKLER: Did he work in any particular way? I mean, did he work, for instance wet with a wet surface, very wet or [inaudible]?

MS. AVERY: No. Actually, once in a while he would wet the entire surface just for fun because, you know, he'd like to. But usually, he would just put up the paper and work directly on a dry surface.

MS. SECKLER: He did?

MS. AVERY: Mmm-hmm. Once-in-a-while.

MS. SECKLER: This was not a matter of outlining shapes. It was always the field of color, he would put down directly -

MS. AVERY: Directly, yes. Well, he would usually have his little sketch. And he might make a very rough sketch in charcoal on the paper. Not a detailed sketch. Just sort of guidelines and then go right ahead and do the watercolor.

MS. SECKLER: Would he destroy a good many or did he -

MS. AVERY: He would destroy some, yes. But as time went on, he destroyed less and less. In the beginning he destroyed quite a lot but as time went on...

As a matter of fact, I think some of the ones he destroyed were probably pretty good, because I know, I know, even now sometimes I come across a watercolor which has been painted on both sides and the one will be marked with a cross meaning that is the side he had destroyed and when you look at now, you know, you wish that cross wasn't on there.

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: Had he in the '30's also began to work less out of doors in oil painting and working in the studio from sketches?

MS. AVERY: Yes, well, after we were married, he worked mostly from - as far as I know - I don't remember him going out and working directly from nature. Though once in a while he would - I would pose for him in the studio and he would work directly from a figure.

MS. SECKLER: I believe, Sally, we were talking about the - Milton's way of handling watercolor and his technical facility in both mediums and saying as you had, of course, that he had done so very much that he had great command over the medium in either one.

Is there anything you'd like to say, before we leave the '30's, I mean during this period if you can think back - to, well, let's say the kinds of paintings that he showing at this Opportunity Gallery.

MS. AVERY: Well, I remember - actually, I think that was the first place he showed in New York and at that time, well, let's see. There was an art magazine called *Creative Arts* and I can't remember the reviewer but they reproduced a still like Milton showed in the Opportunity Gallery and that was like a tremendous thrill because he was new in New York.

One of the jurors that they had in the Opportunity Gallery, this time. You know, as I said before, they used to ask a prominent artist to jury the show and one of the jurors was Max Weber. And, when he was looking over the paintings submitted and when he came to Milton's he said - this was reported to us later - he said, "Well, I think this man is going to go far. This man is a considerable talent."

And it wasn't like too many years later that Milton was in the same gallery as Max Weber, the Paul Rosenberg Gallery, which I think is like the "American Dream."

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: So, how many shows did he have at the Opportunity Gallery?

MS. AVERY: Well, actually. He showed about five or six or maybe more times there in different shows. They had a different show each month. But then they also gave him a one-man show as I remember. One one-man show.

And then he showed in quite a few of the group shows. And it was really the first place he attracted some attention in New York and it was the place where we first became acquainted with other painters in New York and Milton made a little place for himself.

MS. SECKLER: Was there any reaction in terms of critical reviews and so on?

MS. AVERY: Well, there were a few critical - of course, I think the only reaction that I can think of is that the Opportunity Gallery ran an auction to help the gallery and they sold a couple of Milton's paintings which we donated, being very generous. They sold them for $35.00 apiece --

[Laughter]

- and I think recently one of those pictures came up at Park Benet. I can't remember though what it brought, but I think it brought a little more than $35.00

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: That's for sure!

And after that, what gallery did he go to?

MS. AVERY: Then after the Opportunity Gallery, he thought he really should try to find a New York gallery and with fear and trembling one day he took some of his watercolors and he went down and showed them to the Rehn Gallery. And Mr. Rehn, who was alive at that time, said that he liked them very much.

Of course, he said he didn't think he could sell any but he would like to give Milton a little show.

MS. SECKLER: Why didn't he think he could sell any? What I'm trying to find out here is -

MS. AVERY: Nobody sold anything in those days, so you know, I don't think so, yeah.

MS. SECKLER: I wondering if they were considered by the people then as being quite radical or whether they simply [inaudible].

MS. AVERY: Well, I don't know. They were certainly, let's say, different than most of the watercolors that he showed.

But they were so beautiful that he recognized the quality and then he also showed some of Milton's oils and I remember at that time, the Rehn Gallery was THE gallery in New York. The leading gallery. And he showed one of Milton's oils in a group show and I remember Canaday gave this group show a big review.

MS. SECKLER: Canaday? Jewell?

MS. AVERY: Not Canaday. Jewell. Alden Jewell. Edward Alden Jewell was the critic of the *Times* at that time. And he reviewed the show at length and when he came to Milton he said, "Milton Avery looks best in a dimmish light." And that has been a joke of ours for a great many years.

[Laughter].

MS. SECKLER: The teal review-

[Laughter]

MS. AVERY: We were so thrilled that he even noticed him that we didn't care. "Milton Avery looks best in a dimmish light." I think that's pretty funny. So, you're saying, we've come along, what?

And then afterwards, of course, Rehn, though he liked Milton's work, he handled men like [Eugene E.] Speicher and [Charles Ephraim] Burchfield and he really had no room for Milton and so Milton at that time, his show would be showing around some little galleries and then McBride noticed his work. Henry McBride.

And, I think, he spoke to the Valentine Gallery. To Valentine Dudensing. Because Mr. Dudensing sent word to us that he would like to handle Milton's work so Milton went with the Valentine Gallery and he was with him for a number of years and had a number of shows there and then from there he went to Paul Rosenberg.

MS. SECKLER: What years were the Valentine -

MS. AVERY: Valentine - I think it started in like - his first show at the Valentine Gallery it was in 1936 as I remember. And he had a show in '36, '37, '38. He had four or five shows at the Valentine Gallery.

And Mr. Valentine Densing bought a number of paintings of Milton's for the gallery. The first batch he bought 50 paintings for which we got $30.00 a piece. And then the next batch he bought 20 paintings and we got $50.00 a piece. That was a big advance.

Recently, one of those paintings that Milton sold for $30.00 to the Valentine Gallery came up at Park Benet and brought $6,700.00 I was at the auction. Isn't that funny? I just happened to be there and saw this painting come up and I remember we had gotten $30.00 for it. So -

MS. SECKLER: Was that a usual price range at that time?

MS. AVERY: Well, I don't know. You see, well. The whole thing was unusual because in those days dealers very seldom bought any paintings from artists and we didn't think $30.00 a painting was very much because some of the pictures were like 30 [by] 40 or 50, you know, 32 by 48 and things like that.

But we were so happy that he even wanted to buy them and then, of course, when you think of it as $1,500.00 and that is $30.00 a picture. $1,500.00 seemed like a lot of money.

And then we also thought if he bought them he would certainly be interested in trying to push to work, which he did.

But, no. I don't think it was what was done in those days. Because actually, he was acting more like the French dealers. French dealers at that time were buying groups of paintings by their artists. But I don't think any American dealers did that. So he was working rather in the French tradition.

MS. SECKLER: He wasn't at that point though on WPA?

MS. AVERY: Not at that time. No. He was on the WPA for six months, but this was before Valentine bought those paintings from him.

MS. SECKLER: And how about your own painting at this time? Did you have any chance to [inaudible]?

MS. AVERY: In all those years, the only time I had a chance to do anything was in the summer when we went away for three or four months. We went to Vermont for three or four months one summer and I painted that whole summer.

But, you see, in the winter, I really had to - I was doing freelance work which was very taxing, I mean, you have to run around and try to get jobs, so, and there was no security. You might get a job one week and then not for two weeks, so those two weeks you didn't a job you had to run around trying to get something.

Your mind wasn't at ease and you couldn't really sit down and start painting because it was a question of survival, you know?

And I really thought that Milton's work was really so much more important than mine. And I really wanted him to devote himself completely to painting without having those pressures, you see. So, we just couldn't both do it at the same time.

MS. SECKLER: And at this time, of course, March was coming along to be a part of, well, you know. She was what [inaudible].

MS. AVERY: Well, she was a continual source of inspiration. I mean she was always there. Milton was always painting her and as a matter of fact, I think it was 1948, the Durand-Ruel Gallery put on an exhibition of Milton's entitled, "My Daughter, March."

And it was - remember that? And it was paintings that Milton had done of March from the time she was a baby until she was around 14 or 15 years old.

I remember when she was a baby, like when she was just a week old that Milton started painting her and I remember her doctor, her pediatrician, coming in and looking at that painting and saying, "How can you do that to such a beautiful baby?"

[Laughter]

That awful thing. You know, he was a good doctor but he wasn't an art connoisseur.

MS. SECKLER: Did she oblige by sitting still at any point?

MS. AVERY: Well actually, most people think that she spent her childhood posing for Milton but really what happened was that he used to do little pencil notes and he never once asked her to sit still.

But she herself from the time she was very, very small, was always interested in painting and I remember once, she couldn't have been more than a year-and-a-half old and she was in her little go-cart in the park and she turned around and said to her father, "Draw something, Daddy."

And there was a man sitting next to Milton and he said, "You mean to say that child knows the difference between writing and drawing?" And, of course, she did.

[Laughter]

But she herself was always painting and drawing too.

MS. SECKLER: It must have been a marvelous thing.

MS. AVERY: It was. You know, I think back now and I think every day was like Christmas because there was always so much excitement, so many surprises. It was just - we didn't have any money but we always had lots of fun.

MS. SECKLER: When did you start going to Provincetown [Massachusetts]?

MS. AVERY: Well actually, that was quite late. The first time we went to Provincetown I think was in 1956.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, we're getting too far ahead in our story. We're still in the '40's at this point and of course, the War years I suppose had some impact on you [inaudible]?

MS. AVERY: Well actually, I don't think - I think Milton was so removed from it. He was like Beethoven. He just

kept on painting.

I mean, you know, it was something that happened but it really wasn't related to him. I mean, he was really like a single-track man. The only thing that he was really interested in was his painting.

And, you know, the outside world didn't - as a matter of fact, he never voted in his life. He wasn't politically oriented at all. He couldn't care less who was President.

He just was interested in one thing. It was his life. And he wasn't easily diverted. I mean, if he was working on a painting, like, 20 people could come in the room and he wouldn't even notice it. He just went on painting. He didn't let himself be distracted.

MS. SECKLER: That's interesting. Did that often happen? I mean, could he go right on [inaudible]?

MS. AVERY: Yeah. Yeah. It didn't make any difference.

And usually, if we were sitting around in the evening while people were talking, he would get out his sketch book and use people around him and then maybe the next day he'd use it for a painting.

I remember once when we were in California on our trip across the country, we had a friend in Los Angeles who gave a party for us and invited the critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and the next Sunday, he wrote an article about the party, which was for Milton, and he said, "Milton Avery sat there smoking his pipe, not saying a word, probably painting his next picture in his head" which is probably just what he was doing!

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: Milton, I take, was not involved very much with literary interests.

MS. AVERY: No actually, he wasn't. He liked to read detective stories as relaxation. And that was, you know.

MS. SECKLER: How did you enter into the talk of the artists, whether it was in Gloucester or other places, where you all got together - I don't recall, you know I've known Milton for quite a few years, too, but I don't recall him saying much when [inaudible].

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's true. He never said much.

But he could say one little thing which would cut through all the pomposity but he wasn't a talker. Not at all.

But he would say wonderful things like, once, when he had just began to attract a great deal of attention, one of his friends said to him, "Milton, how are you going to stand all this publicity you're getting and all of this attention you're getting?" And he said, "Well, I think I can take it, but I don't know if my friends can."

And it was said so quietly that the person who he said it to didn't realize at first exactly what he said. But he would always say things like that. He didn't say much, but when he did say something, it was really something you could listen to, you know?

MS. SECKLER: And he wasn't developing theories except in paint.

MS. AVERY: That's right. And the thing is, in paint, he did all these very daring things in a quiet way. His painting. It has so much innovation and so much daring and so many new ideas but it's all done so quietly that sometimes it takes people a long time to see exactly what's there.

And I think that's why the painters are his greatest audience because they can see this long before the general public can. It's interesting that now in England where understatement and subtlety are so much appreciated, he is having such a tremendous following.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, I suppose [inaudible]. He wasn't, of course, involved in any trips to Europe during these years?

MS. AVERY: No. No. The first time he went to Europe was in 1952. That was his first European trip. Though before that, we did travel a lot around the United States. He loved to drive so we went to Mexico and the Canadian Northwest and out to California and up to-

MS. SECKLER: What was his reaction to Primitive art at that time? I mean I suppose he saw some things in Mexico and some things among [inaudible]-

MS. AVERY: I think he liked it, but sort of in a cool way. I mean, I don't think he thought it had any - it didn't

enter into his world. I know he didn't care for primitive painters like Hirschfield or Grandma Moses. He didn't feel that they had any relationship to what he was trying to say. It just didn't really interest him.

MS. SECKLER: When I said Primitive I was really thinking more of Tribals and [inaudible] and that sort of thing which was beginning to have some effect and apparently more in the '40's, I think, on some of the artists-

MS. AVERY: I don't think, I mean, you know, totem poles we saw out there and things like that? I think he kind of liked pre-Columbian art, but not in any passionate way, you know. He was totally uninterested in collecting art. He wasn't a collector.

MS. SECKLER: Really?

And I think, you know, collecting and creating are like sort of two opposite ends of the pole. Though some artists collect. In fact, he never really wanted to have anything. He wasn't an owner, you know? He never wanted to own a house. He was totally disinterested in having possessions.

MS. SECKLER: He didn't collect things from nature either? Like shells and stones and bark and stuff?

MS. AVERY: No, never.

MS. SECKLER: What pictures besides his own would he have had around the house at all or in reproduction or whatever?

MS. AVERY: He never collected reproductions either. He never did.

MS. SECKLER: Did you go to exhibitions together?

MS. AVERY: Yes. We always went to all the exhibitions. And that was one thing. Every week, on Saturday, that we were like bus men on a holiday. We went around the exhibitions. So that we saw everything that was going on.

And he always tried to go to all the openings of his friends. So that we were real gallery-goers.

MS. SECKLER: Do you remember any show that seems to have made an impression at that time? Of course, we had the van Gogh show and the Picasso show, some wer at the Museum of Modern Art.

MS. AVERY: I think that he liked, he think he liked Bonar, I mean I would say that would be [pause]. He wasn't a great Cezanne lover or a great Renoir lover. These two--I think he liked things that had more poetry rather than more fact, you know? He liked Paul Klee.

But he wasn't really involved with other painters. It was very funny. And he just - he was really involved in creating something out of something he felt. That was his main pre-occupation.

MS. SECKLER: In the '40's, at some point, some of the artists in your circle became involved with ideas of Zen and so on. Did he?

MS. AVERY: No. I remember them asking him to join them in some of these experiments they were doing. But he said, "No, it's not for me." He wasn't a joiner and he never wanted to do things in groups. He really was a loner.

MS. SECKLER: Was he an only child by any chance?

MS. AVERY: No. He had a sister, but where painting was concerned he wasn't - in the first place, he didn't see how any - he thought painting was really an activity which one person had to pursue through to the end rather than a group of people giving advice to each other. That the essence of a painter was like the essence of the person and that could only come through in one way by a person being able to say, delve into his own conscious or subconscious or whatever. To find really his own roots.

And that this personal quality was a man's contribution. I mean, he didn't make a picture. The picture had to be something like a miracle that happened. And you can't think it. Of course, there's a lot of thinking that goes into make a picture, but you can't think, you can't just think out a good picture.

There has to be something else that's very, that's an intangible quality that you can't pin down. And I think that's the best part of the picture. If you can analyze a picture perfectly, you know, everything that made it the way it is, it isn't a great painting.

MS. SECKLER: I assume on the other hand that he was not involved with Freudian theories -

MS. AVERY: Not at all.

MS. SECKLER: Some of the painters were doing all of that [inaudible].

MS. AVERY: Yes, I know. I know. Actually, he wasn't an intellectual. Not at all. He was very intelligent and he thought deeply on the subject that he was thinking about. But he didn't think about other subjects, you know?

In order to organize a painting the way Milton did, you have to think - but there are other kinds of thinking. There are lots of different ways to think deeply. And he thought in his own way. Which isn't the regulation way we think of.

MS. SECKLER: He didn't, I gather, discuss with you oh, let's say, I made a painting and I feel that the composition is [talking over one another].

MS. AVERY: Well, he didn't think that you could make a painting better by changing a little thing really. I mean, there's a big concept in a painting.

And he didn't think if you moved something a half-inch this way or a half-inch that way or color a little lighter or a little darker, that that was going to make it a better picture.

And he thought really, a picture, a picture was done. You did the painting. And all these little changes didn't really change it. The basic thing was there. Like you can't go back and change yesterday and it's the same way with painting. Once you've got this concept and you've put it on canvas, thos minor changes don't make it better, they just make it stodgier.

MS. SECKLER: But I mean, would you assume that he had a clear concept of what he was going to do before he began painting?

MS. AVERY: Yes. Yes. He often said that to me. He said the painting is nothing. I've already painted it in my head.

MS. SECKLER: Really?

MS. AVERY: Yeah. He said that the actual putting it on canvas was nothing. He said you could paint any size picture in a couple of hours if you know exactly what you're doing. He said the trouble is most people don't know what they're doing, so they keep changing. But that doesn't necessarily mean that it's better or worse, you know? And they can make the workman-like picture, but you can't make a great picture that way. You have to have a great concept.

MS. SECKLER: He was actually able to hold that image in him mind somewhere -

MS. AVERY: Yeah. Yeah. He did.

MS. SECKLER: He would not tend then to be surprised by what happened in the manipulation of the painting.

MS. AVERY: No. But he was always, he was a cool painter. He was always aware of what was happening. He never got frenzied or emotionally involved. As someone said, he was really the first of the cool painters.

Now, it's very fashionable to be a cool painter. But Milton was always a cool painter. He always judged everything he did while he was doing it. Even though he had this pretty strong image in his head, while he was painting he was aware of everything he was doing.

And if he saw something that happened that he liked, he could use it, you know?

Because he wasn't that close. He was already removed. And as he painted, though he painted rapidly - in the end it was rapid - in between, he would put a color on, then he would sit down and look at it. And he would think before he put the next color on so he'd be sure that the next color was just what he'd wanted.

MS. SECKLER: He appeared to really study the painting. But he'd move away from it in order to see it?

MS. AVERY: Yes, he always did. He never sat down when he worked. He always stood. Because, he said painting wasn't to be smelled and you always had to get back from a painting in order to see it.

And he was always - I would say that when he was painting a picture, most of the time painting that picture was sitting in a chair and looking at it and thinking.

MS. SECKLER: Fascinating.

MS. AVERY: But he was never dramatic. He didn't agonize and tear his hair. And if it wasn't good, he'd ditch it and do another one. Instead of trying to fix it up, he would just go ahead and do another one, hoping he had learned something on that one.

MS. SECKLER: That makes sense.

MS. AVERY: I'll tell you, it makes sense, but it's very hard to do. You have to have a tremendous amount of discipline to do it that way. It isn't easy. I know 'cause I've tried.

MS. SECKLER: It must not be. Because certainly some very intelligent painters have tried - even tried to be influenced by Milton -

MS. AVERY: Oh, I know.

[Laughter]

Someone said, "Who hasn't been influenced by Milton?"

I went to see, whose show was it the other day, um, Retroy Moyers, he just did a new show. And he said, "You know, I've very much influenced by Milton" and I was going to say, "But, not enough."

[Laughter]

I mean, he is in a way a little bit, but it's so far from- it just influence on one tiny little segment. So I think it's a good, not a bad, influence.

MS. SECKLER: Of course, I suppose various people have compared Milton's paintings to Japanese influence.

MS. AVERY: Yes, I know. Isn't that funny? But Milton said he must have had a Japanese ancestor someplace. But actually, I asked him once and he said he hadn't seen many Japanese prints.

MS. SECKLER: He didn't make a point of going to look at them when they were around.

MS. AVERY: No. Not at all.

MS. SECKLER: You often did feel that he had somewhat the same sensibilities.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's true. You're quite conscious of it. In spite of his work being so "New England" there is also that related feeling like a pure shape in form that the Japanese have. It's interesting to think that he practically never used light and shade, which the Japanese never use either. And how did he come about it? I don't know.

MS. SECKLER: To come out of Hartford -

MS. AVERY: I know. Coming out of Hartford where there certainly wasn't much to influence him.

MS. SECKLER: It's very strange. And we haven't really talked about his childhood -

MS. AVERY: He hadn't been corrupted by teachers, I think.

MS. SECKLER: And that was one good thing, I think, that he didn't study. He didn't get -

MS. AVERY: No. And, you know. He grew up in this tiny little town. I think he only went to school until he was 12 years old or something. He didn't even have much schooling.

MS. SECKLER: When he left school, what did he do then? Did he get some kind of a job?

MS. AVERY: He probably got a job working - oh, he got a job in a grocery store delivering groceries and he said he got fired after the second day.

[Laughter]

No, I don't know what he did. He probably hung around the house or something. His mother said he was kind of an odd boy.

MS. SECKLER: Did they accept his career choice?

MS. AVERY: His mother was very permissive. Anything he did was all right with her because he was her only boy and so, you know, it was great. And she just thought the sun rose and set by him. It didn't make any difference

what he did [inaudible].

MS. SECKLER: And his father [inaudible]?

MS. AVERY: I never met his father. His father was killed in an accident long before I met Milton, so I didn't know him at all.

MS. SECKLER: Well, this sounds like an unusual history of the '30's when everyone else was getting swept up in the political positions of all kinds and he was managing just to stay out of all this and of course, even as you say, during the War years that followed, he wasn't particularly involved

MS. AVERY: No, he wasn't involved -

MS. SECKLER: The world didn't depress him -

MS. AVERY: No, it didn't. I know he had friends who used to say to Milton, "How can you keep painting? We have to sit and listen to the radio." And he'd say, "Well, what good does that do?"

At least he felt he was doing something constructive. He was painting. Since he certainly couldn't fight. I just feel that this man -- in the first place he was certinaly a phenomenon -- but he had this intense dedication to an idea and it never wavered in all the time I knew him. He just, he just could not conceive of anything in life being more important to him that when he was doing.

Though I must admit he was plenty discouraged at times. He would say, "I don't know what I'm doing all these paintings for, certainly no one is buying them or looking at them" because it was many years before he sold a picture.

MS. SECKLER: When did they begin to sell?

MS. AVERY: Well, actually, of course the first sales -- things were when Valentine bought that group of paintings. That was the first sale.

MS. SECKLER: Roughly when would that have been?

MS. AVERY: That was about 1939 or '40 or something around there. And then when he went with the Rosenberg Gallery, Mr. Rosenberg bought batches of paintings from us, 25 paintings at a time. Sometimes he bought 50 a year or something like that. So that we had - for the first time in our life we had a steady income.

But then, even after that, there were times in the '50's when nothing was sold. A year would go by and nothing would be sold.

MS. SECKLER: One time I remember somebody remarking that Milton had shows in something like three top galleries in New York all at once. When was that?

MS. AVERY: Oh. I think that was around 1945. That was when Milton was at Rosenberg's, Durand-Ruel expressed an interest in his work and they asked Rosenberg if he would mind if they handled it also. And Rosenberg, who I think was a very smart dealer, said, "Not at all. I'd be delighted."

So, then Durand-Ruel came into the picture and they decided to hold - Rosenberg and Durand-Ruel - decided to hold simultaneous showings. And they use to vie with each other to see who would sell more. Sort of like a game. Because after all, they were both very important galleries and the main sources of income came from selling French pictures.

And Milton was really like, you know, just sort of an amusement for them. But of course they liked his work, but he wasn't actually supporting those galleries.

And then, Durand-Ruel sold some of Milton's paintings to Knoedler's so that they had some of Milton's paintings too. So these three galleries which were, at that time, the three top galleries in New York, were all handling Avery's.

Those were the great days.

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: This must have made quite an impression on the art world itself.

MS. AVERY: It did. But, actually, the paintings were very inexpensive at that time. These good-sized paintings

were selling for about $300 or $350.

So that even though we were getting a lot of publicity, we really weren't making much money because we had sold the paintings to the dealers at much less, so it was really more fame than fortune. But we enjoyed it, I must admit.

MS. SECKLER: So during the '40's then this was pretty much - and after this time when they were in all three galleries, which gallery did he remain with?

MS. AVERY: Well, then, in 1950 or so, Durand-Ruel closed the gallery. There was some litigation. One of the owners had died, one of the elder Durand-Ruel's had died and one of the people who inherited the gallery didn't want to go on with the gallery, so they had to close the gallery in New York.

And then Rosenberg at that time was very concerned with the possibility of an atomic attack or something and decided to move to Venezuela, so he decided he was going to close the gallery.

And we at that time were in Florida and heard he was closing the gallery. Another dealer approached Milton and said would he go with them. So since we thought Rosenberg was closing, Milton said he would go with him.

Then after a year or so, Rosenberg changed his mind and stayed in business, but by that time, Milton had already made a commitment with this other dealer and so he didn't go back to Rosenberg.

MS. SECKLER: What dealer did he go with?

MS. AVERY: He went with Grace Borgenicht, at that time, whom he's still with. But now, of course, she is just one of our dealers. We have a London dealer and Toronto dealer.

Milton is having a show right now in Toronto, too. And a Detroit dealer and a Florida dealer and a Philadelphia dealer. And on and on and on and on. So that we really have a lot of representation all over this country. And in Europe.

MS. SECKLER: And of course you have the HCE Gallery once you came to Provincetown.

MS. AVERY: Oh yes, yes. And they were very good because Milton would do a series of paintings in Provincetown and then at the end of the season they would put on a big show of Milton's and they were sort of like historic occasions. Great, great paintings.

I remember Clem [Clement] Greenberg saying that these paintings, this particular group of paintings that Milton did in Provincetown, that's when he first became so interested in Milton, would attract attention anyplace in the whole world they were so terrific.

MS. SECKLER: Well, he proved to be right. But that was a pretty wonderful thing to be able to see those paintings in a place like Provincetown.

MS. AVERY: I know. And to think they had been created there.

MS. SECKLER: Right there. And as you said, you all began to see Avery's not only on the [inaudible] dunes but in other places as well.

MS. AVERY: I know. I also remember. You know, the place where Milton painted these was a floor in a house on the bay and we had to hoist the paintings down out the window and then we would carry them through the streets because they were fairly large paintings, to the gallery. You know, with the wind blowing, back and forth. It was really something.

That was also, the first time Milton had sold one of the large paintings was in Provincetown to this psychiatrist from Montreal and I remember how thrilled we were because we got, what was considered then, a record price so we went out and bought a bottle of champagne and we took the dealer to dinner. Celebrating.

[Laughter]

Now it seems like a little measly sum. But in those days we thought it was absolutely incredible.

MS. SECKLER: That was a fascinating period. Now, of course, in Provincetown, you, I suppose, [Hans] Hofmann was there and Hofmann's school [Hans Hofmann School of Fine Arts] and all the discussion about abstract expressionism and when you come into the late '40's and early '50's, I'm sure that Milton was not affected by, but do you remember any kind of response at all -

MS. AVERY: On Milton's part? Well, I remember Hoffman was much more interested in Milton's work, I think, than Milton was interested in Hoffman's. Hoffman used to tell his students to look at Milton's work. But Milton was never interested in this kind of frenzied painting.

MS. SECKLER: He was never an action painter.

MS. AVERY. He was never an action painter. And he always had a tremendous sense of order. And he liked - though his paintings looked very free and everything, they're really tight as a drum. They are tremendously organized. And the thinking is thought out to the last minute.

Like I remember, this picture, which is hanging here of the sailboat, you know? Which is one of the simplest things. I remember he finished the picture and then he took a cloth and he wiped out these little stripes which give the impression of the sea.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. AVERY: And I was thinking, it's this kind of thinking where you push something beyond the point where most people would push it. When a picture was finished, then Milton would do something else to it which would raise it to an entirely different level. And this was, you know, the miracle of his kind of thinking. That he could think deeper.

MS. SECKLER. Yes, that's a very interesting example, this painting behind you. The stripes and bands that are being wiped out are barely perceptible and yet without it, it [inaudible].

MS. AVERY: You're right. Because this gives a different kind of quality, you know? So there's another tension introduced.

MS. SECKLER: I think it's wonderful to be sitting here doing this surrounded by these paintings and I wondered if you have any thoughts about some of the others. Let's take this figure one here -

MS. AVERY: This white nude?

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MS. AVERY: That was one of the last nudes Milton did. And I think [pause] it's a marvelous shape, though, you know, it isn't exactly what you'd say a pretty nude.

But all the shapes are very sort of repetitious. Like the breasts? They're all square. The square motif is repeated over and over again. And I think one of the beauties in this picture particularly is the quality of the color that ultramarine glow in the background and then this very pale sort of bluish white on the figure.

But the relationship between those two are absolutely fantastic.

MS. SECKLER: There is something so luminous about the way the white or off-white figure. It occupies so much space and it's such an expanse against the blue--it seems to expand as you look at it.

MS. AVERY: It is. It's like a living thing. It has a - and yet, you see now, it's not sitting on anything really.

MS. SECKLER: But you don't see it.

MS. AVERY: And you believe it is, isn't that true?

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. You know, would he have done that from a sketch?

MS. AVERY: Yes, he did that from a sketch. You know, that was another thing. We always used to go to sketch class once a week for years as long as I can remember until he really got, you know, quite sick.

We would go and spend one evening a week at sketch class and sketch for three hours and a lot of these drawings he used later for paintings. And this was one of them. And the drawings themselves are so beautiful that we now sell the drawings too.

MS. SECKLER: What medium did he work in for the drawings?

MS. AVERY: Well, for the drawings he used to work in ink with a felt pen and then sometimes he would also do oil crayons, use oil crayons. Very seldom he would use washes. Though he did some, but they're very scarce. Sometimes he'd use just a fountain pen and do just thin line drawing.

But a lot of them were done with color and some of them were done with a heavy felt pen and there are some

very striking drawings.

But then, as I say, then later he would also use them for painting. So some of his very best paintings were done from these drawings.

MS. SECKLER: A group of artists would get together and do these drawings?

MS. AVERY: Yes, a group of artists would get together, we'd meet at someone's studio and then we'd divide the cost of the model. If it was $10 and there were 10 people we'd each pay a $1.00. Or if it was $10 and there were 6 people, we'd each pay a dollar and a half.

And for awhile actually, when March was little, we used to have the sketch class in our own house once a week. But then, we didn't have such a big place. So someone else with a better place offered to take it over. So we did that. But we did it for, gee, ever since I can remember.

When we were first married, actually, before March was born, we used to do the Arts Student League. Sometimes we'd go three or four nights and week and just sketch. We were always better in sketches. We were always sketching. Nudes, landscapes, figures.

Everybody that came to the house was a model and Milton, we all did - even March when she got old enough would sketch everybody. Because when we sat around at night we just didn't sit around and talk. We always sat around and sketched. It was a real life with a viewpoint. The viewpoint was painting.

MS. SECKLER: Would Milton ever discuss your drawings, your paintings with you? Or give you criticism?

MS. AVERY: Well I wouldn't say he would discuss it, but if you'd ask him -- I'd even ask him about my commercial drawings once in a while. But then after a while I didn't bother him because it wasn't that important. And I got so proficient at doing them I could do them with my eyes shut.

But, in painting, I always asked his advice and he would, he had a great eye and he would say, "Well, maybe you could eliminate that" or "Maybe that's too dark. Why don't you look at it some more?" I mean, he wouldn't tell you too much. He really wanted you to think for yourself.

And sometimes the other artists would ask him too. And sometimes he would make the mistake of saying, "I really don't think it can be saved." And that, you know, might sometimes create a great storm. After awhile, he learned to be more diplomatic and he always found something fairly nice to say about a painting. Even if it was only about a corner.

[Laughter]

Because most people really don't want you to - most people aren't - I wouldn't say most people -- a good many people aren't really capable of taking real criticism. They're too emotionally involved. I remember once a very good friend of ours asked him about one of his paintings and Milton said something about it, you know, and this man picked up a knife. He was going to stab him!

So, you know, after a while he'd get a little more cautious about really, really saying what you really think.

MS. SECKLER: And these years at the end of the '40's and the beginning of the '50's, men like Rothko were of course venturing into complete abstraction and did he ever say anything about it?

MS. AVERY: No. Well, I remember once, I think it was Rothko who said, "You know, Milton, I don't think we should show so many different kinds of things. The way to make an impression is to show one painting and do it over and over again, I mean, one kind of a painting. You know, limit your range. And that is the way to entice an audience."

And Milton said, "I'm not interested in enticing an audience. I'm interested in making a painting."

I think this is one of the differences. He was totally uninterested in impressing anybody. Or making a name or anything like that. His main idea in life was to make a good painting. And after he made a good painting, he wanted to go on and make another one. And that was it.

He wasn't interested in politics or the politics of the art world or "making it." But he liked some of the things the boys were doing. The only thing he thought was that most of them were limiting themselves to too narrow a range and he just thought it was sort of boring. I mean, why would anybody want to do the same thing over and over again 150 times? He just couldn't understand it. He couldn't understand an artist wanting to live that way.

Because, I suppose, with him, art was an adventure. He hoped he would do something - he would find a new way

each day. Like he'd get up in the morning and say, "Gee I really don't know how to paint." So he'd find out each day how to paint.

MS. SECKLER: He never developed into one of the artists who had their work sent out to a factory and had it executed for them there.

MS. AVERY: I know. That really is a horror, I think.

MS. SECKLER: In his case it's an option you'd never imagine -

MS. AVERY: But you think, they're losing all the fun. They're just becoming businessmen. I mean half the fun of being an artist is puttering around with paint, you know. It's like he said, a fascinating pastime. So why would you want to send it out to a factory or have somebody else do it for you.

MS. SECKLER: It's like having somebody else eat your meals for you.

MS. AVERY: Horrors!

[Much laughter]

MS. SECKLER: Have your love affairs for you instead.

MS. AVERY: Can you imagine? Delegating all the greatest pleasures in life to someone else or to a machine. That's really worse than *1984*.

MS. SECKLER: Was his color changing at this period?

MS. AVERY: Yes, I think in the '50's, his color got a little more somber again. There was a new quality. Let me say it this way: During the '40's, he was building up like to a crescendo, as brilliant color as he could get, almost. And then, as I say, after his heart attack, something happened. He just suddenly looked at the world differently.

MS. SECKLER: When did his heart attack, the first one, come?

MS. AVERY: In 1949. And he was very ill for quite awhile. But he made a good recovery and went on to do his, I would say, his most meaningful work after his heart attack. I mean, to my way of thinking; though I think in his early things he did some beautiful painting, but the quality and the philosophy in these later things are so profound that maybe it never would have happened if it hadn't been for that heart attack. It was as if he suddenly realized what was really important in life and living. And all these little things were dropped by the wayside.

MS. SECKLER: Did he speak in any way, you know, of this being a conviction or -

MS. AVERY: No. I don't even know if he knew it himself. He didn't speak. Actually what he said, he said with his painting. I understood him so well and I think I understand his paintings pretty well that I could read what he was thinking in his painting.

But I would never say that he discussed it because he didn't. He wasn't a verbal man at all. His means of communication was his painting.

MS. SECKLER: And in this period following the operation -

MS. AVERY: It wasn't an operation - it was a heart attack -

MS. SECKLER: I mean heart attack. He was hospitalized I assume [inaudible].

MS. AVERY: Yes, he was hospitalized for quite awhile. And then that summer one of our friends lent us a house in Millbrook and we stayed there for five months.

MS. SECKLER: Where is that?

MS. AVERY: Millbrook, New York. And he recuperated there and at first he was in bed a lot.

Then he began - this house was filled with the most fascinating old furniture, like Victorian furniture and Victorian glass and lampshades all with marvelous shapes and then he began making little sketches. And then he did a series of all these wonderful dishes and glassware.

He did a series of still-lifes up there while he was recovering and he did a great many. Small paintings. But they're lovely things.

And this sort of started him back on the road to painting.

The next summer we went to Woodstock and he did some really terrific things there, even though he wasn't well. He had to lie in a hammock a lot. But in between lying in the hammock, he did a series of really great paintings. And good-sized paintings.

MS. SECKLER: Landscapes?

MS. AVERY: Landscapes and figure things and well with me and March around he had models all the time. He would do anyone that was around, it wasn't just because it was me or March, but if you were around you would have your picture painted too. Anybody that was around ended up in a painting. That's the way it was.

Even that summer when he wasn't well, he did about 40 big paintings. And innumerable monotypes and sketches. I don't know what-

MS. SECKLER: Was the scale large now? Was he painting larger pictures than everyone was else was?

MS. AVERY: Well, actually he didn't start doing six foot - you know, it's funny. When we were first married he did about half-dozen six foot canvases and then he didn't do anymore big pictures. Big pictures - I mean, he did 40 x 50's or 50 by - yeah, 40 x 50 was about the largest he'd do.

But then when we were in Provincetown in '57, I think it was, there was an art store right next to our house. So I said, "How about having them stretch some big canvases as long as you're right here, and then you could paint them?" So, that's how he started doing these six foot canvases and that summer he did a dozen six foot canvases.

And then every summer when we were there he did at least a dozen. He would spend the beginning of the summer doing the watercolors and then like the last three weeks he would take the best of the watercolors and transfer them into a painting.

MS. SECKLER: Not mechanically transfer -

MS. AVERY: No. They were never exact. And he would, let's put it this way rather: He would use the watercolors as a basis for the painting. And sometimes it would be fairly close and sometimes it wouldn't. Actually, it could never be like it because watercolors are a different medium. But the idea, the essence would there.

MS. SECKLER: So after this first heart attack, his health was gradually recovered and he was able to work a normal schedule.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's right. But after the second heart attack he was never well again.

MS. SECKLER: And when did that come?

MS. AVERY: That was in 1960, the second heart attack. He actually never felt well after that. But, in spite of the fact that he didn't fell well, he did a great body of work from 1960 to 1965 when he died. He did some very fabulous work.

MS. SECKLER: I probably rushed you ahead into the '50's, going too fast. I wondered if there were other things you'd like to say to what was happening to your own work or to March or to your friends -

MS. AVERY: Well, in the '50's, well, we went to Europe. That was one of the big things. And although Milton didn't paint that summer when we went to Europe he had some little sketch pads, you know, little French sketch pads, very tiny ones, and made a lot of notes while we were traveling around. We went from England to the South of France.

And one of his really memorable paintings, I think, was one he made when we came back. We had gone to visit the Tate Gallery, March and I, and he'd said he'd had enough of the galleries. So he sat on the steps of the Tate and made some sketches and when he came back he painted "Excursion on the Thames" which is one of his really noted paintings that he had made while sitting at the Tate Gallery, watching the little excursion boats go down the Thames. So he got more out of the Tate than we did.

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: So then when you came back - did you live in the same place always?

MS. AVERY: Well, all these years we were living down in the Village, but after we came back from Europe, we began to realize that the place was getting a little small. Milton was painting so much and we were gradually

being crowded out by the paintings, so I began looking for a new place. The place we had in the Village you had to walk up two flights, and I realized this was a health hazard.

So I finally found a place up on Central Park West where I now live. And that was a marvelous place. It was 16 flights up and had a terrace and it looked over Central Park and the Hudson River and Milton really loved it and he had a marvelous place to work and I'm always happy that he did enjoy it for a few years before he died.

MS. SECKLER: It must have been nice to have that space after being so cramped. I loved that apartment -

MS. AVERY: It is a charming - but my daughter now lives there. I turned over the property to her.

But you know, the amazing thing was, we moved from this small apartment to a really quite a large one and when we unpacked all the paintings and stored them in racks in this new apartment we found it almost impossible to believe that we had gotten all this work in that small apartment.

I still don't know how we did it. It's just absolutely incredible. I remember the man who packed us to move. He packed groups of paintings and watercolors and drawings. This went on and on for days. And he said, "Do you mean to say that one man did all these things?"

He just found it impossible to believe.

MS. SECKLER: Well that made it a more comfortable environment for you. March, of course, is by this time -

MS. AVERY: Married, yes, she was married.

MS. SECKLER: What year would that have been, roughly?

MS. AVERY: She was married in '54,

MS. SECKLER: Oh, as long ago as that?

MS. AVERY: I think, or '56, I can't remember, one of those years. Yes, she's been married about 10 years.

MS. SECKLER: And of course it wasn't until fairly late that you gave up your work at the *Times*.

MS. AVERY: Well, yes, I gave up my work at the *Times* in 1960 when I realized that Milton was really quite sick and we were spending so little time in New York we had to go South for the Winter and then North and then we'd go to Provincetown for four months.

So we were in the South four months and Provincetown four months and just the two months in the Spring and two months in the fall wasn't fair to the *Times* to ask them to get substitutes all the time for me so I told them I could no longer do the work for them.

And I'd been painting and I realized that I was clearly getting less interested in doing the work for the *Times*. We were away so much and I was painting so much that I felt that I was really so much more interested in painting.

The *Times* job had gotten too easy for me really. It wasn't a challenge for me anymore. And so I'm happy that I gave it up. Though it was amusing and fun to do and it was nice. I had a big audience, sort of all over the world.

MS. SECKLER: People always said they were looking through the pages for that drawing.

MS. AVERY: Yes, lots of people said the minute they got the *Times* they would open the Magazine section to see what I had done that week. And that made me feel good. But I don't regret that I left. Anyway.

MS. SECKLER: When did you first show your paintings?

MS. AVERY: I first showed them during the Depression. When there was the Opportunity Gallery started in New York. The Ten Dollar Gallery, I mean. That was a little gallery that was run by Mrs. Zimbalist, where everything was sold for $10.00.

And Milton showed there and Adolph Dehn and [Louis Michel] Eilshemius and she showed some of my things and sold some of them.

And then I showed at the Contemporaries a few times. And lately I've had a few shows in Provincetown [Massachusetts] and in Coral Gables, Florida. A couple of different places.

MS. SECKLER: Provincetown - I think they always enjoy -

MS. AVERY: -- Oh yes, that's really so fun -

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: They look forward to them and enjoy them very much.

MS. AVERY: Well, it's very nice of you to say that.

MS. SECKLER: And of course, March is also-

MS. AVERY: Yes, March is exhibiting and she's doing very well. She'd going to have a show this April at the Wakefield Gallery [New York, New York].

Oh, I've also had a show - we had a family show in Atlantic City [New Jersey]. Did you get that announcement? We didn't get down to see it, but they said it was very nice. And actually Leslie Weintraub [Waddington?] is planning to do [tape ends and response cut off].

MS. AVERY: Do you want to ask me a question?

MS. SECKLER: Yes, just tell me what you - you said it had quite an effect on Milton-

MS. AVERY: Well, in the first place it was a long drive and Milton loves to drive and that was fun. He was a very quiet man but he loved to drive.

MS. SECKLER: He did?

MS. AVERY: Which seems sort of strange. I remember once when we were out West I said, "Oh, at nighttime not over 85."

[Laughter]

And then we all had to laugh because it was all so absolutely ridiculous.

Anyway, Milton was very impressed with the beauty of Mexico because it is such a dramatic and beautiful country. And we went down there with no particular itinerary. But on the way down, we met a couple and they were going to San Miguel de Allende. So they said, "Why don't you come along, it's this lovely little colonial town."

So we went intending to stay overnight and we stayed six weeks. And so we met a lot of people there and made a lot of new friends and went sketching every day. Milton did a whole series of watercolors while he was down in Mexico.

He said, though, that Mexico was so picturesque in itself that it was very difficult to make a painting. It was so pictorial.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MS. AVERY: But even so. When we got back to New York he did a series of paintings from these watercolors, some of which I think were very stunning.

I remember one day we were sitting out in the field and sketching and suddenly the earth began to rock and we thought it was sort of funny, but when we got back to the hotel, we found out that there had been an earthquake and we were sitting right on the earthquake.

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: Without even knowing it -

MS. AVERY: Without even knowing it, but then earthquakes are quite common in Mexico.

MS. SECKLER: Did they seem to ever produce really major catastrophe?

MS. AVERY: Well, I guess a big one. But they have lots of very minor earthquakes, you know. Which people don't even notice. But they do have some very big ones. I don't know that they've had one lately where buildings have toppled and so forth and so on. But not, fortunately, while we were there.

MS. SECKLER: So you liked San Miguel ?

MS. AVERY: Yes, we loved San Miguel and we left San Miguel and went down to Guadalajara which was on this great lake where they find a lot of the pre-Columbian idols because people used to throw the idols into the lake there to appease the gods.

And actually, one of the nicest paintings - one of Milton's minor masterpieces I think - was "Mexican Seaside" which was just shown in London and that was done from a sketch he made by Lake Chapala.

MS. SECKLER: I'd like to see that. I've never seen that.

MS. AVERY: Well, the review in the *London Times*, the critic said that this was undoubtedly a masterpiece.

And the interesting thing was it was done in '46, but it's very much like the late things he did in Provincetown in 1960. Amazing. I mean it was like, in terms of colors and shapes it was like a forerunner. It had that same type of quality.

Unfortunately, I don't have a photograph to show you, but when it comes back I'll be glad to show you.

MS. SECKLER: I suppose that have a complete file of photographs of Milton's work -

MS. AVERY: Well, actually. No, there's not a complete file. We never took a lot of photographs, you know. Actually -

MS. SECKLER: But didn't his galleries?

MS. AVERY: Well, unfortunately, the Boyer Gallery never took photographs. Not even of paintings they sold or anything.

But Leslie Wyndant has photographed everything that went into his gallery, so we have those. And I think the Durand-Ruel gallery photographed everything that they had, so I suppose it's possible in some way to trace those.

I remember once they were up on auction on Park Benet, the photographs, but I wasn't able to buy them. Someone kept outbidding me all the time so I finally gave up.

MS. SECKLER: Which batch of photographs was that?

MS. AVERY: Well, they were photographs of all the things that they had handled and they had made them into books and they had an Avery book of photographs. But someone - I don't know who it was. Just outbidding me all the time so I finally got discouraged.

And then after the auction I got the name of the person and called them up and asked them if they would sell them and they said, no, they weren't interested. I don't know whay.

MS. SECKLER: There must be so many lost track of during the years.

MS. AVERY: Oh yes. Actually just today in the mail I got five photographs from a man who owns five paintings and I hadn't remembered - I mean of course when I saw them I remembered them and they were all beautiful paintings and I had completely forgotten them. So I was very happy to have the photographs.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. You know, of course, the Archives [Archives of American Art] would love to have--what we do with it is make a microfilm record of course -

MS. AVERY: Well, I'd be happy to let you take them if you'd give them back.

MS. SECKLER: Oh yes.

MS. AVERY: Oh sure. And I have books and books of clippings of criticism.

MS. SECKLER: That would be helpful not only of the criticism but in terms of the mention of specific works and where they were. I know Milton - I gather that he would not have been the type to keep a journal -

MS. AVERY: Oh no.

MS. SECKLER: -- Since he didn't bother much words and so on and I guess he didn't have any letters or so -

MS. AVERY: No unfortunately there aren't - records like that would be very hard to come by. The only things that we can hope for is people remembering things that he said or anecdotes of his friends or people that knew him or the things I remember.

MS. SECKLER: Can you think of anyone that we could contact who might have - well, with so many artists we do get batches of letters and pictures -

MS. AVERY: Well, you couldn't get letters of Milton because in the first place, if people wrote to him and asked him to answer, I always wrote the letters. Even though I signed his name, they're not authentic.

MS. SECKLER: Your papers are valuable too.

MS. AVERY: Well --

[Laughter]

And all these statements that were made for magazines and when they asked for credos, I just wrote up something, because he would never be bothered.

But I was very amused the other day. Someone said they had been going through one of those catalogs from the University of Illinois when the ask artists to write something. And they'd gone through this whole thing. The only thing they liked was the thing that Milton had written and I went into hysterics. [Laughter] But actually, I was saying what I knew he thought.

MS. SECKLER: He never disagreed? In any case?

MS. AVERY: He just didn't care. He was interested in that. He was interested in painting a picture and all those things really didn't mean anything to him. I mean honestly. Some people say it doesn't mean anything. But it really didn't. He wouldn't have sat down and thought out something to write. It just wasn't important.

MS. SECKLER: Because he had a Sally to do it.

MS. AVERY: He could have gotten along with it, I guess. No, he needed me, I think.

MS. SECKLER: I can't imagine him without you. Sally, we haven't come yet - we haven't talked about the really difficult years. I know it came between 1960 and 1965 and I know how painful even it must be to think about them in some ways and yet even during that time, I remember that I visited you at Woodstock [New York] when Milton was very, very ill and yet he was managing to go into a room. It was like a shed or garage there -

MS. AVERY: It was a garage without a floor.

MS. SECKLER: Well it was late summer or September perhaps and he would turn a couple of paintings a day.

MS. AVERY: That's right. I know.

MS. SECKLER: In spite of everything.

MS. AVERY: I know. He was so remarkable.

MS. SECKLER: He managed to paint even when it was hardly possible to function as a person.

MS. AVERY: As a person. It's true. I think, he had so much drive to create that he probably wouldn't have lived as long as he did if he wasn't working, actually. He would have just fallen apart. He still had so much in his head to say that it just kept him going.

MS. SECKLER: I would think so.

Did you see a change in the paintings at all during this time?

MS. AVERY: Well, actually that summer when you were in there, he did that series of black and whites on oils on paper and that was an absolutely stunning series. I still don't know how he did it.

But I think towards the end, like the last year, he did have difficulty covering the canvas and though in my bedroom right now I have the last landscape he painted just before he went to the hospital. And it's a fabulous picture.

So he would get back his power and he could lose it a little bit. There were times when he didn't have the clarity of vision that he had before. Because he didn't have all his faculties. Because sometimes he was really very sick.

MS. SECKLER: And that was at the time that he was really not getting to sleep at night and of course you weren't either, I remember.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's true. I don't think I slept through one night for about four years.

And then, of course, he was frightened and worried naturally and probably a victim of a series of small strokes which are always debilitating.

But in spite of that, I remember one day a dealer came to pick out some paintings and we were in storeroom looking at them and he was feeling very bad. But we were in the storeroom about an hour and when we came out he had painted a picture while we were in there. A self-portrait of "Avery Feeling Old" or something like that.

It was fascinating. It was a small painting but absolutely fascinating. And he had all the sort of terror and despair in this face. Though it had nothing realistic about it. It was just a terrific picture. And then he sat down again and he was sick. He was really very sick.

I remember one day, one afternoon, he felt very, very bad. So badly that he asked me to call the doctor. I call the doctor. The doctor came and as he came he looked into the studio and he saw this big painting on the easel - it was a 30 x 40 and he said, "God that's beautiful. When did Milton do that?" And I said, "He did that this morning." And it was true, he had done that that same morning. So that's the way he was.

MS. SECKLER: Did his color change. I know he did a lot of black and whites.

MS. AVERY: No that was just that one series. He had decided that summer to not use any color. That was a deliberate thing on his part. And he did a series of black and whites. The Waddington Gallery [London, England] is going to put a show of them next December. He thinks they are actually marvelous.

No, I don't think it changed particularly. It was just that I felt in some of the things he had lost control a little bit.

There's a little painting in there, one of the last small things he did. That's absolutely as beautiful as anything he ever did.

So it was like a back and forth thing. When he felt better, he was his old self again. It was rather rough, let's put it that way. And it was very difficult to watch.

MS. SECKLER: I'm sure.

MS. AVERY: [Pause] But I always feel grateful that I could be part of the whole scene with him. And I was privileged to help him a little bit.

MS. SECKLER: Everyone in the world was lucky that you had the strength to be there [pause] and even of course in that last period. We were just talking before that that [inaudible] had made a movie there of him sitting in that chair looking very pale.

But still we like to include things like this. Even though they record a sad part of his life, it's still pretty wonderful that he went on as long as he did.

MS. AVERY: I think so, too. I don't feel sad about him at all. I feel that he was a cause to rejoice that a man like that could exist and could leave the world richer when he left it. And that is given to so few people in this world. To be able to do that. To say that in a certain way changed the vision of the world and left it a richer place.

I always feel that I'm going to be happy in Heaven as long as there are Avery's hanging around. I am so accustomed to having these great beautiful pictures with me.

MS. SECKLER: It's a wonderful experience to walk in this apartment and see them hanging all around.

MS. AVERY: I feel that way. Whenever I go on a trip when I come back it's always like a revelation. It's really so beautiful. Just being here makes me happy. It makes up for a great many things I don't have.

MS. SECKLER: I guess we haven't put into the record yet the reaction abroad, although you did tell me about it. But I think it would be interesting - that there is this terrific interest at the moment -

MS. AVERY: Yes, well it's very interesting. We were approached in 1962 by a London dealer who wanted to put on an exhibition of Milton's. And the first exhibition met with such a storm of approval. All the newspapers in London ran rave reviews. *The Herald Tribune* in Paris picked it up. And a great many pictures were sold.

And one of the things the critics said, "What is wrong with America that they don't realize what a treasure they have here? We are so accustomed to an Americans who will shout and scream and here is an American who is so subtle and understated and speaks softly but with such a powerful voice because he has something to say." And we don't understand why it took him so long to come over there.

Actually in the show right now I just got an article from London which was titled, "The First of the Americans" which was saying that Milton was really the first American painter and not Pollock or de Kooning, who were still sort of European. But Milton speaks with the real voice of America. And he is the bridge between the old and the new. I'll show it to you sometime. It's quite an interesting article.

Also, BBC did a big broadcast on him and it carried as a feature article in the *BBC Listener*, which goes all over the world.

MS. SECKLER: Didn't they have you in it?

MS. AVERY: No. We didn't even know about it. The only reason I finally found out about it one of my friends gets the *Listener* and the BBC broadcast was reprinted in the *Listener*.

So, I'm really very pleased that his recognition in London has been so instantaneous and has actually been instrumental in helping people in this country understand him, because so many Americans go to Europe and somehow or another are much more impressed when they find out that Europeans have succumbed to Avery. Begin to treat him -

I think one of the things that was wrong with America is that they treated Milton on the wrong level. They didn't realize that he was a man who was so inventive and so forward-looking. He was actually the first of the "cool painters." And "cool painting" is very fashionable.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MS. AVERY: But the fact that he did it with so little fanfare was the reason people didn't understand him, you know?

MS. SECKLER: Well, with an audience that's of course they are somewhat insecure in their approach to something like painting. It was more of a tendency to rely on big manifestos and pronouncements, scoop everybody into one school and saying, "This is way you understand this."

And with Milton, you just have to look at the painting. And there's no program to go with it.

MS. AVERY: That's right. I know.

I remember one critic saying he was an, "Island of tranquility in a sea of chaos."

MS. SECKLER: That's true. I think it's one of the qualities that we reach out to now in this very hectic but very stimulating scene of bewildering priorities of all kind and confusion and false claims and so on. And to find something pure gold and so direct and honest and capable of any kind of pretense.

MS. AVERY: I think that's it. This is one of the basic things people reach out to. There is absolutely no pretense in anything Milton does. It is so pure and so honest. And this quality is getting rarer and rarer and rarer.

MS. SECKLER: It is indeed. And I guess that's why I kept trying to find out and I'm not sure if there's any way of finding out, but how he managed to insulate himself from all the hysteria and the environment and all of the things.

MS. AVERY: I think he was just happy in his home. That provided him sufficient fodder so that he could exist. He didn't need to go outside.

We had a dog and a daughter. And me.

He was very attached to his dog. And he patiently taught our dog - whose name was Picasso - he taught him to do a dozen tricks. And this took a lot of patience.

But it was an indication of-this was the way he amused himself. And he found that relaxing. To teach a dog to do a head-on somersault.

[Laughter]

It takes enormous patience. And yet he did it. Among other things.

MS. SECKLER: What kind of dog was it?

MS. AVERY: It was a cocker spaniel. Beautiful dog. He was a lovely dog with a marvelous disposition.

MS. SECKLER: Did he die?

MS. AVERY: Yes, he died. We had him for 16 years and that's quite old for a dog.

But I think we are very lucky with our animals. I remember the vet saying, "This dog is the best adjusted dog he'd ever treated."

And now I have a cat who's so well-adjusted.

MS. SECKLER: That probably proves your point of what they say that animals reflect their owners.

MS. AVERY: They do say that, don't they?

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MS. AVERY: Maybe it's true. I don't know.

MS. SECKLER: So, he taught your dog to do somersaults?

MS. AVERY: Yes, he could do somersaults, he knew the alphabet. Of course he could say his prayers, but that's sort of a standard thing. But he would shoot him and he would play dead and he could catch something from across the room. I forget what else he could do.

MS. SECKLER: Milton had a very close feeling for nature.

MS. AVERY: Yes, very close. His idea of something great to do was to take a 10 mile walk through the mountains. I mean that was like perfection.

And I remember when we spent a few summers in Vermont and many mornings we'd just get up and take these long walks. And another thing he liked to do would be climb a mountain.

Where other men would like to go to a nightclub, those were the things that he would like to do.

MS. SECKLER: Was there anything in his background that would account for that attachment to nature?

MS. AVERY: Well, I don't know. He said he just grew up in this little town. I'm sure his mother did bother with him too much. He was probably just roaming around the town by himself.

He really had an enormous love for nature and he saw things and actually I think all his actions were motivated by love.

If he looked at a table as it related to a rug, he would see the beauty in those relationships. He wasn't an angry man and there was never anger in his work.

Of course, I was just thinking in nature there are some very angry things. But even if he saw a rushing stream which might look tortured to someone else, by the time he translated it into in a painting it would be a thing of beauty.

[Pause] I think everything he did really was motivated by love. He had a real Christian ethic. It was a very natural rhythm.

MS. SECKLER: Do you feel there was a sort of empathy in the way he handled a landscape? I mean, there's this detachment thing as if you could feel into it, but at the same time it isn't like Expressionism-

MS. AVERY: That's right. I think you're absolutely right. It wasn't like Expressionism. He was able to get the particular quality of a place but he wasn't, how shall I put it? He was involved but not frenetic or emotional about it.

He did it in a cool and detached way. And he was that way about painting, too.

You know the way some artists get all - rush up to a canvas and throw the paint on and rush back. He was never like that. He painted very quietly. He mixed his colors. Everything was done in a very quiet and unemotional way.

Though there was a lot of real emotion in it. It wasn't the obvious kind of hysterics that some people connect with the artistic temperament. In fact, he was probably the most untemperamental artist I ever met. Completely.

Whatever went on inside - this doctor once said he was probably a raging inferno inside - but outside always cool, you know?

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: Was he involved with any other arts to any extent? For instance poetry or music or song?

MS. AVERY: No, he liked to listen to music but he was never involved in it. He used to read me poetry a lot but I think he liked the sound of his voice rather than what he was reading.

He loved to read aloud and I remember one summer March and he would fight over who would read aloud. But he really liked to read aloud.

MS. SECKLER: What sort of things would he read aloud?

MS. AVERY: Well, once he read me *Swan's Way* aloud.

MS. SECKLER: He did?

MS. AVERY: Yes, that whole thing. That was only because I wanted to hear it.

MS. SECKLER: What was his reaction to the book?

MS. AVERY: I don't really remember. That's when we were first married. He read aloud a great deal.

I remember once he read *Don Quixote* aloud. *Swan's Way*. That took a long time, of course.

MS. SECKLER: That's a lot of reading.

MS. AVERY: Oh you know. One thing I forgot to mention was that he did a series of etchings and wood cuts and that came about sort of by accident.

MS. SECKLER: And when did he do that?

MS. AVERY: Well, they were done over a period of years. I think the first one is about 1935 and the last etching was done in I think around 1947. The wood cuts, I think the first one was done around 1951 and the last one around 1954.

But the etchings came about because my sister worked for a magazine. She was a production manager and she used to get pieces of copper from the printer. She had all these odd pieces of copper lying around on her desk one day so I asked her for them and then Milton got a burr and began scratching at it.

That's the way he first started doing these etchings.

MS. SECKLER: No wax or -

MS. AVERY: Just with a burr. Just a dry point. Very directly.

Then I remember [Elmer] Stanley Hayter printed a - someone put out a portfolio of 5 Milton Avery etchings - and Stanley Hayter printed them. And when he was printing them he said to me, "You know, it took me 20 years to learn some of these things that Milton has done with these things and he's just done them naturally."

MS. SECKLER: The technique -

MS. AVERY: Just with this dry point he had scratched around in different ways. And he had done it just naturally. Because he had drawn so much he probably tried things that he had done in drawing.

But it turned out - the thing that Hayter had worked on for 20 years to try to do - the techniques that he had developed over 20 years. But Milton had never been interested in etching at all.

And I used to try to get him more etching but he said after awhile "I'm not an etcher, I'm a painter." He really wasn't interested in doing etching. He only did these because the copper was lying around.

MS. SECKLER: And how about the wood cut series?

MS. AVERY: Well the wood cut series started in a very funny way. Mrs. [Emily A.] Francis who ran the Contemporary Arts gallery had a club called the Art Collectors Club [Collectors of American Art] where everybody paid $5.00 a year and at the end of the year they got a work of art.

And so, she would ask artists to either give her a painting for which she paid about $25.00 or do a print for her. And so she asked Milton if he would do a woodcut for her. And he said, "but I haven't done any woodcuts."

And so Steve Pace happened to be there and he said he would tell him how to do a woodcut. We had a piece of wood. And I guess Steve had one of those wood cutters and he did a demonstration and then Milton did a woodcut.

The first one turned out marvelously so he gave it to Ms. Francis for this distribution and they printed 100 copies and that's how he started to do woodcuts. Otherwise, he probably never would have done them.

And he sort of liked doing woodcuts. But in the end he had to stop because actually it was too difficult physically for him to cut into the wood. He just couldn't do it. I think the last one he did was in '54, as I remember.

MS. SECKLER: Sally, we haven't said much about his large, important exhibitions in the late years and of course there is the outstandingly Whitney [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York] show and we ought to put the dates and so on.

MS. AVERY: I think the Whitney show was in 1960-

MS. SECKLER: I don't believe we have it on the record but of course that was also the time when he had his second heart attack -

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's true. It was after that.

No, the Whitney show - yes, it was in 1960. We were in Florida when the Whitney show was on. So we never did see that show. Of course, it traveled in different places but we never did see it.

But Milton also had a big museum show. In 1952 the Baltimore Museum [Baltimore Museum of Art] put on a big retrospective.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, there's a good catalog on that.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's a very nice catalog. It has all color reproductions and a very interesting essay. I think one of the nicest things that has been written on Milton was done by Frederick S. White who did that essay.

And then in 1965, the Modern Museum [Museum of Modern Art, New York] traveled an Avery show which went around for two years. I think it started in '64 - no it started in '65. It just got back recently.

And that was a show of about 35 paintings that went all over the country.

MS. SECKLER: And that will be here, too?

MS. AVERY: No, but the Smithsonian is planning a large Avery show in either the end of '68 or beginning of '69, depending on when the building is finished.

And instead of traveling around this country, they're going to try to travel that show around Europe which I think is a much better idea, because there have been quite a few Avery shows traveled around this country.

MS. SECKLER: He hasn't been seen in a show in France?

MS. AVERY: Oh, yes. The Modern Museum has sent him over in group shows. He's never had a one-man show in France.

But of course, as Mr. Waddington pointed out to me, everybody now comes to London, so if you have a show in London, it's just as good as or better than any other place on the continent.

Mr. Waddington said that one of the Swiss dealers was very interested in putting on a show. So we may have a show in Switzerland.

But I would be very happy if the Smithsonian traveled the show in Europe.

Right now, we've loaned paintings to some of the American ambassadors to hang in the embassy. There's one right now in Germany and in Moscow and in Cairo and Portugal and a few other countries all have Avery's hanging in the embassies. So, that's maybe doing a little bit. I don't know.

MS. SECKLER: It must take a good bit of your time to arrange these things -

MS. AVERY: Well, actually, the thing that takes the most time is just keeping records because I'm not so in love with keeping records. It's rather a chore.

But I manage somehow. I know pretty well where everything is. But maybe someday soon I'll have to have help.

Because actually all the painting should be cataloged and they're not. Of course, once they're out they are cataloged but as long as they're in here, they're not. So I really should have a real card index. Now that everything is getting so valuable.

MS. SECKLER: Now, the Smithsonian also has some documents relating to Milton's work, I believe.

MS. AVERY: I haven't given them anything yet. No, I haven't given anybody anything yet. I thought I'd wait awhile and see where I wanted to give them.

So I actually haven't given away anything away yet. Of course, eventually I suppose I'll have to.

MS. SECKLER: Well, we're interested in whatever happens to them - maybe a microfilm --

MS. AVERY: Yes, I'd be very happy to have them microfilmed. I don't expect to decide right away where I am going to give them, but I'd be delighted to let you microfilm.

MS. SECKLER: Sally, to come back to you in recent years, I know in the midst of all this and make records and follow shows around and of course some of it is very nice.

[Laughter]

MS. AVERY: Yes, I must admit -

MS. SECKLER: There's also been some travels which were really for pleasure. And I was able to accompany you on one last year.

MS. AVERY: Oh yes, that was great fun.

MS. SECKLER: And I know you've painted a good bit. Virtually every day when we were gone. And I wondered - I'd like to come back to your own work and how you feel about your own painting.

I saw some of the things that you had done a few months ago.

MS. AVERY: Well, I've always been interested in painting. As I told you, I decided to be an artist when I was 6 years old. It's really been my main interest all my life.

I think my work right now is naturally influenced by Milton. I couldn't help it having lived with him so long.

I hope it's more feminine because I'm a female. And I think my [inaudible] sense is rather different than his.

MS. SECKLER: How do you distinguish the difference? I agree with you that it is but I'm trying to think is some way how to characterize it.

MS. AVERY: Well, of course, I certainly don't have his tremendous sense of simplicity. I mean I wish I did but I just don't.

MS. SECKLER: But you certainly have a very admirable directness that comes close to it.

MS. AVERY: Not close enough. I don't know.

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: It seems to be very often that you are able to drop away the non-essential and get at that-

MS. AVERY: Well, actually, even in my commercial work, I always simplified. It was natural for me to simplify.

So maybe we both had the same feeling about things, I think.

MS. SECKLER: Do you think your work is a bit more linear than his?

MS. AVERY: Yes, I think it is. I really do. Because I drew so much for so many years that I am very conscious of line rather than volume and space, you know?

But I really feel that the only way for me to develop is just to keep working. I honestly don't think that you can say-I mean I really think that painting has to grow out of painting and not out of talk about painting. At least for me, I get most of my ideas about painting from the painting I'm doing. While I'm doing it it gives me the ideas.

I remember Milton used to say sometimes he didn't feel like painting, but just the starting is like the momentum

and when you put down one color you automatically know what the next color is going to be.

MS. SECKLER: I gather in general you don't paint directly from things or scenes we are seeing you mostly make sketches.

MS. AVERY: Well, but one in a while - yes, I mostly make sketches - but once in awhile, I really like to just set up something - a person or flowers or something - and just for fun try to do something directly.

I mean not so it would look realistic or anything but just so that I can interpret directly while I'm painting. And I really love to draw from the nude. I feel like it's doing my exercises. It keeps your mind sort of limber.

MS. SECKLER: Do you go to classes every once in a while?

MS. AVERY: Well, I'm hoping to go this year again. I haven't been going for a couple of years, but I'm hoping this year I will. As a matter of fact, I was even thinking that maybe we'd even have a little sketch class here one night.

Because now there's getting to be quite a few artists in this neighborhood. So we could just hire a model and have a few people come up and sketch. Which is really all you need.

MS. SECKLER: Is your pallette different markedly in any way? Has it changed in recent years.

MS. AVERY: [pause] Well, I will set myself a problem. Say, I will do everything sort of pure color.

I think I have a tendency to use paler colors so sometimes say that I will do everything without using white. And then go on from there.

MS. SECKLER: You're not apt to leave large unpainted areas in a canvas.

MS. AVERY: No, not the way Milton would. I think that takes a lot of courage. I haven't had that yet. You have to be very sure of yourself to do something like that.

MS. SECKLER: Do you think you are less concerned with light than he was?

MS. AVERY: I think that I have a tendency to stick closer to my sketch where Milton would use his sketch more freely. I have a tendency - which I don't think is good and I hope I'll overcome it - to stick to my original idea and not to let myself see what's happening and use what has happened. I let my preconceived idea to be a little too rigid. I would say that. I think I have that tendency.

Sometimes, in order to forgo that, I don't draw on my canvas at all. I just go ahead and paint directly.

MS. SECKLER: Is that successful?

MS. AVERY: Well, not always. And sometimes when I sketch instead of doing it with a pen I'll take crayons and not try to draw it but just try to block it in without. Because I do have that tendency to be linear. Anyway, it's all fun.

MS. SECKLER: You did paintings of your cat. Were they made while looking at him?

MS. AVERY: I've done hundreds of sketches of him. I just take one of the sketches I like and do it. Did you the see that big one I did? I think you showed that this summer. Did you see that? My big cat? It was a great big one.

MS. SECKLER: I don't think I've seen that one.

MS. AVERY: Oh, it's out on exhibition now so I don't have it here. But I sort of like that one. I made him like twice over life sized.

MS. SECKLER: We went all the down to Kessler [Paul Kessler Gallery, Princeton, Massachusetts] at one point and couldn't get in.

MS. AVERY: Oh, that's too bad.

But I did him in pinks and lavenders. Just for fun, you know?

[Laughter]

MS. SECKLER: He lends himself to that.

MS. AVERY: He does. He's marvelous to do. I think actually when you've done one thing, like my cat, over and over again then you begin to get playful with him. You don't have to him the way he is.

You can fool around and use any color. Distort his shape. I think a great familiarity with a subject allows you to play with it. You become relaxed with it. It doesn't matter whether it's just like the cat. In fact, you don't care at all.

And I think Milton had this all along. It would be the starting point. Whatever he looked at or decided to use was just the starting point so he could go off on this voyage of discovery.

MS. SECKLER: And yet, like Picasso, the starting point had to be there-

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's right. He always had to start from something. That's true. He always started from something.

MS. SECKLER: Certainly it must have some importance because I mean a man like Picasso so often you look at first and thinks it abstract and then you see -

MS. AVERY: And Picasso too. He always begins with something.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, always. And I think it was true with Matisse too.

MS. AVERY: Yes, Matisse certainly did. I mean something stirred them. Something that made them feel and it was just - they didn't just get something from their insides and stir it up. Something happened to them and made them begin.

Where they went was another story, but something has to move you.

MS. SECKLER: Do you recognize once you're into a painting, do you find your way to a sense of kind of total feeling for the whole thing pretty easily.

MS. AVERY: Well, actually, I can do three-quarters so I get that total feeling. It's the last - it's the final thing that is the most difficult. Like the last color, the last area you do.

Say if you're doing a landscape, to put in the right sky. I mean, I find that very difficult.

Or if you're doing a figure to do the background so that it relates to everything else in the picture. So that it's a painting. I find that the most difficult.

MS. SECKLER: For instance, if you were doing a figure, would you fill in a whole area or several large areas of the figure and then the background or do you keep it all going at the same time?

MS. AVERY: No, I will fill in several areas and then do the background. Well sometimes I would the background first and then do it.

MS. SECKLER: Well, either way.

MS. AVERY: Yes, either way. But I really feel like it's the last thing you do that makes it either a good picture or nothing.

MS. SECKLER: A millimeter [inaudible].

[Laughter]

MS. AVERY: And it's true. Milton always said that. "There's only a millimeter of difference between a great picture and just an ordinary picture." And I think that's very true. Because I know.

MS. SECKLER: Is there only a moment of this kind of inspiration? Something you never thought of would work and sudenly-

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's true. Sometimes I would go for a walk and then when I'd come back I'd know what to do. I don't know why, but that's the way it is.

MS. SECKLER: You wouldn't then tend to work over a painting over weeks and weeks?

MS. AVERY: Oh no, I think it just ruins it. I have worked on paintings like that for a long time but I usually throw them away in the end. I mean all the life and all the joy goes out of them. And I really think that the painting that looks like it's been worked on already has 25 strikes against it.

I think a painting should look as if it just happened. It should be a miracle. I mean maybe you did put a lot of work into it, but no one should know it when they look at it.

And if it looks tired and worked over, it just can't be a good painting, I don't think.

Though I've done it. I've done it. But I know it's wrong.

But sometimes it helps with the next painting. You can throw that one out and then do the next one. Well, you've learned something.

Though you learn something every time you do a painting. Sometimes it doesn't help you and sometimes it does.

MS. SECKLER: Like Milton, you don't owe much to other influences, but were there others that you remember?

MS. AVERY: Other painters?

MS. SECKLER: I mean I suppose the answer would be no because we don't know how much we take in when we see things.

MS. AVERY: No. Well, I know when I go out to galleries, if I see something that's a great painting, I always want to rush home and start painting.

And if I see a dull ordinary painting I think what's the use of this business?

So I suppose it is true that when I see something very stern even if I see a great Matisse or great Picasso or Degas, maybe when I come home something of it lingers in my head.

I remember once I saw a van Gogh, a flower thing. I thought it was absolutely terrific. I went home and set up this thing of flowers. I didn't try to do a van Gogh, but I wanted to capture something of the beauty the way he had captured it. It's stimulating.

MS. SECKLER: Of course it is! Well, it seems you've been successful in keeping that feeling very often. What a wonderful thing it is that you are able to do it and work at it consistently and still keep producing.

MS. AVERY: Well, I find it's fun. I really feel sorry for people that can't paint because it's so much fun to paint and it makes every day an adventure.

And if you paint a picture that you like, you just feel like flying. It's much better than LSD, I think.

[Laughter]

I really do.

MS. SECKLER: I've often thought so myself. I suppose that we mustn't condemn the rest of the world too much that haven't this great experience.

MS. AVERY: Well, anyway, it doesn't leave holes in your brain - what are they called? - cheese holes in your brain.

[Laughter]

I hope.

MS. SECKLER: Well, I think we've worked you pretty hard tonight Sally. And I'm very pleased with all the beautiful recollection that went into it.

MS. AVERY: Well -

[tape ends]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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