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Oral history interview with Robert O. Preusser, 1991 January-October

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert O. Preusser on January-October 1991. The interview was conducted by Robert F. Brown 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.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: What was Kepes like as a teacher those two times you had him as a teacher?

ROBERT PREUSSER: Oh, he was an excellent teacher. He was much more humanistic, I would say, than Moholy-Nagy. I mean, he really expressed concern about any problem you had, emotion problem or anything like that. And I was very close to he and his wife. His wife, wonderful, as you probably know, children's book designer. And he finally had a breaking away from Moholy on some issues that they didn't agree on, and he went to a university in Texas. I don't remember which college.

MR. BROWN: Denton, I think.

MR. PREUSSER: That was the year I left and went into the Army. And the reason I went into the Army and got into camouflage, the reason was that I had received a deferment which was -- I credit Moholy for getting it for me, for doing camouflage. He managed to get them to grant me the completion of that academic year before I went. And having done the research, I decided that I would invest and get a commitment from the Army before I enlisted that they would take me in camouflage.

MR. BROWN: You were pretty lucky then that they followed --

MR. PREUSSER: Extremely, not only from that point of view, but I was extremely lucky because the 84th Engineering Unit in which camouflage was one of the sections was taking no more people in camouflage. They were full up. But because I had this experience and had this commitment from the Army, they allowed me to go into camouflage, and that was -- so --

MR. BROWN: But I guess before we get a little bit into that, some of the other teachers there, was Moholy's wife there at that time? Do you remember?

MR. PREUSSER: Sibyl Moholy, she was at several -- I guess you'd call it open house, was there. And she was quite a stern kind of person and was intolerant to a certain extent.

MR. BROWN: I'd heard that she could be very --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I can recall that she would scoff at one of the students for being a Catholic which didn't seem to me to be quite right. And in later years, she tried to take over after Moholy died. She tried to take over the -- it was then the Institute of Design. And there came a point when the police had to literally physically remove her from the building. So that explains the kind of woman she was.

Since that time, she's been here. She's been in this house a number of years ago. And then after that, she went down to the University of Houston for a little teaching stint. I guess she was in -- where was she teaching? In New York, she was a history teacher. I can't remember the art school.

MR. BROWN: With Robert Wolff --

MR. PREUSSER: Robert Wolff was a handsome --

MR. BROWN: -- considered younger than Moholy, wasn't he?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and he had very great teaching skill. He was very good, and he was an excellent painter. And I think never did quite receive the recognition that his work merited.

And it's very interesting in later years when I was at MIT, we had him come and give a lecture, and he introduced his first chapter of his introduction to lecture was discussing what it was like at the Institute of Design where they were making hardly no salary and where they talked about the janitor and also about Richard Filipowski and Robert Preusser and mentioned those early days. It was a very interesting talk that he gave.

And he died a few years ago.

MR. BROWN: There's -- I think Nathan Lerner.

MR. PREUSSER: Nathan Lerner was there and --

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible] on the lighting or photography.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, Kepes was head of the light and color workshop, and Lerner did most of the instruction or all of it really in photography, I guess, at that time. So I worked with Lerner quite a bit as well as Kepes.

MR. BROWN: Did photography ever particularly intrigue you as something you might wish to use to express --

MR. PREUSSER: I never really got into it. No, I never really -- I used it mostly as technique for recording my projects.

MR. BROWN: Sure. Well, now, your military service, you were in for over two and a half years, I think, so 1945 or so.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I was -- it was actually from '42 to '45. It was three and a half -- two and a half --

MR. BROWN: Two and a half, three --

MR. PREUSSER: No. It was two and a half years overseas. It was a half a year here. I started out at Fort Totten in the camouflage division.

MR. BROWN: Where's that?

MR. PREUSSER: Fort Totten, New York what was the military post.

MR. BROWN: Staten Island, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: And within six months, we were on LS -- what do you call those?

MR. BROWN: LSTs or whatever they --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, those. It took us a month to get over to North Africa and --

MR. BROWN: Were you put into -- put to work right away?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, we got there, and our main mission that was carried out in North Africa. We were just a platoon of about 14 people. And I was a sergeant. We got into -- the first project became that of teaching the French camouflage. That project of teaching the French was more humorous than successful, I guess, because we didn't speak French and they didn't speak English. And it was out in the desert in North Africa.

MR. BROWN: But what were you doing, erecting fake structures, showing them how --

MR. PREUSSER: Showing them how to camouflage tanks and how to make decoy objects and how to conceal armament and people and soldiers. And then that led to our invasion from there into Naples on D plus one day. And --

MR. BROWN: Does that mean you went the day after the first landing?

MR. PREUSSER: That first landing into Naples. And a humorous story about that, we set down our camp, and we were in pup tents. No, we were in a larger tent, and there was several fellows in each tent. And this one very Southern boy from Alabama, there was air raids during that time. And when the air raid signal went off, we were all undressed and had gone to bed. And he told us the story about how he heard that alarm and he jumped up and he grabbed his boots. And he put his boots as he was jumping over the fence. That's the thing I remember most about Naples.

Anyway, we soon moved on from Naples.

MR. BROWN: And was your job to, what, to --

MR. PREUSSER: Camouflage, but our main project ended up -- well, the main project in Italy was, in fact, misleading -- trying to mislead the Germans into the fact that we were getting ready for the big push. And this meant building baseball diamonds and faking all kinds of things that would make the enemy believe that we were not preparing for really a big event.

MR. BROWN: Oh, so you were just sort of sitting back and --

MR. PREUSSER: It was a form of deception that we were involved in more than actually camouflaging. Well, it was camouflaging military installations, of course, but its primary function at that time was for us to keep it a secret from the enemy that we were --

MR. BROWN: -- quite interesting was this section as well as --

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes, and on a human level, it was a very interesting experience because everybody was -- except for one man -- was in some way related to the arts because if we're going to camouflage. But one of them was a Texas steeplejack who had the choice of going into the Army or going into prison, and he turned out to be the problem of our whole adventure throughout the whole time, two and a half years, because he would go AWOL, all those sort of things. And -- but he was fearless. He would do things in terms of getting the installation up in a great endangered situation.

And the thing that I recall and tell many times is a story when he had gone AWOL, and the military police had picked him up. And at that time, anyone that was AWOL went back to their original company or their original division. And he ended up in our platoon, but he was a prisoner. So we had to guard him from escaping. And during a move from one place to another in Italy on the highway in a truck, we in the back with him, and I had to guard him from escaping. And would you believe it, a big air raid came along, and we all had to jump out of the truck. And I had been told now, if he gets away, you're going to have to serve his sentence. So that was quite a threat, especially when bombs are dropping and he could easily -- so I was ready to pull the trigger. I mean, it was the only thing I could do.

MR. BROWN: Yes, so you stayed right close to him.

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes, right. But most of the people of the 14 or so in that --

MR. BROWN: How did it help in camouflage work to have been -- to have had art training? Maybe you can explain it.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, of course, the research is what helped. I mean what we did in terms of research. I might just back up and say that the research that --

MR. BROWN: -- camouflage work.

MR. PREUSSER: -- was what really got me some information and some techniques.

MR. BROWN: Much of the more important of that have been done in [Inaudible]; is that right?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right. And the research that we did with Kepes, one of the big projects is one of them, besides doing the analytical studies on how you'd camouflage things, was to propose a camouflaging of Chicago itself. And what we came up with was a series of lighting in Lake Michigan so that if the enemy came over, he would -- the enemy would think that the lake was the city. All the lights would be turned out in the city, and these lights would go on. And it would get the bombing, and that was a very -- and that was the thing that really made the headlines in the Chicago papers at that time.

But most of the -- in addition to that kind of research and that kind of a proposal and experimentation, were things about how the shadows changed during the day and what you have to do to compensate for all of that.

MR. BROWN: Well, exactly, when you would do a building or some fake structures in Italy, you had to probably know what longitude you were --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right.

MR. BROWN: -- time of year and all that. Did you have work crews to have help you, or was it just you?

MR. PREUSSER: It was just our group. Just our group that would do it, and the biggest project we did as a platoon was to build a dummy bridge that was to go over the Rhine River into Germany. And we put that, the bridge, together using oil drums and canvas, and those oil drums and canvas kept it afloat. And it was what looked like a bridge for tanks, and we experimentally put the bridge up first in the Rhine -- in the Rhone, over the Rhone River in France. And then came the time to cross the Rhine. It was put up again.

And interestingly enough, it didn't receive many enemy bombs, but at night, refugees would come across to our side walking on it. We saved maybe 500 people that way from the enemy's side.

MR. BROWN: So I gather you then pushed up through Italy and up into France and then --

MR. PREUSSER: We went all the way on up to Rome, went to Rome. We were stationed in the Rome park there, and we witnessed the big bombing on the mountain top. What was that, the name of that -- the casino?

MR. BROWN: Oh, you could see that from --

MR. PREUSSER: We witnessed that whole devastating bombing situation from the base of the mountain. And the crossing of the Arno River which received -- which the American Army received the most casualties in any one day, I think, in Italy. I was in a truck up front with the driver and headed for the river that night, and after we were there, we got orders to turn around and come back. So I missed that great danger just by an order that I don't know why it happened, but it's a pretty -- credit it to being very lucky because I didn't really see any real gun fighting situation in the whole war.

And I would have if -- again, if I had gone -- if I had not gone on leave in France for a week. Of course, that week that I was gone from my post in France was the only time my platoon was engaged in any kind of gun fight. So those two times were the only times that -- camouflage was really a fortunate thing for me. Interestingly enough, when I went to a nurse, they had made a mistake and they put me down for the infantry. And I said, "Wait a minute. That's not right."

And the sergeant looked, and he said, "You're right. It's not the infantry."

If I hadn't spoken up --

MR. BROWN: Well, did you end up in -- at the time of the surrender, you were in Germany or on the way there?

MR. PREUSSER: We were in Germany at the time, yes, and went back to England and had to wait for about a month for shipment back to the States.

MR. BROWN: But you were in this -- your military service in good spirit. I mean, I read that --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, it was --

MR. BROWN: -- at that time and --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, it wasn't too bad. I -- looking back on it, it was an important experience in my life, and especially in view of the fact that I really wasn't in great danger. Of course, there were times when it looked like we might be transferred into a different kind of thing from camouflage, and that was kind of frightening.

MR. BROWN: And you were -- I suppose it was a very small unit. You were probably --

MR. PREUSSER: Very small unit, yes, and one of the project incidentally in Germany after we'd gotten close to the Rhine River was to build a command post. It was false, not so much for the enemy on the air, but from the enemy and people that would talk to the enemy from this side, on our side so that they'd think that was a command post. So it was also deceiving people on the ground --

MR. BROWN: Possible traitors to the Allied forces.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Well, some of these things you'd have to do very quickly, wouldn't you?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, yes.

MR. BROWN: And then you'd have to spread rumors about such and such and such and such --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right, yes. It was very much of an intelligence kind of action going on.

MR. BROWN: As far as your own work in art goes, can you think of anything that that experience in the camouflage service affected in any way?

MR. PREUSSER: No, I can't really relate anything to that. I can only say that I did three drawings while I was in Italy and I still have them today.

MR. BROWN: Well, what about the fact you had to probably improvise constantly or a great deal of the time --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, that was -- oh, the other thing, when we went doing camouflage, we were assigned signs for the Army telling where the city -- directions to the city, big signs, Brenner Pass and that sort of thing. So I did a lot of lettering. That's something we did.

MR. BROWN: But another thing that sort of affected some current or later art was the temporary nature of what you were doing. Did that bother you at all or -- did that in any measure affect your --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I don't really think it affected --

MR. BROWN: -- the [Inaudible] layer.

MR. PREUSSER: I don't think it really affected anything in particular in terms of what I did when I came back and started painting again. I just picked where I left off.

MR. BROWN: You were mustered out in '45.

MR. PREUSSER: '45, uh-huh.

MR. BROWN: And then the next year, you went to yet another art school.

MR. PREUSSER: Art Center in --

MR. BROWN: Los Angeles.

MR. PREUSSER: -- Los Angeles.

MR. BROWN: How did you know about that?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, that was another school that was quite well known. I had heard about it before, and I decided that I would like to try something that was not quite like the Bauhaus to get another kind of experience and way to studying. So I spent the academic year of '47, I believe it was, in Hollywood is where it was.

MR. BROWN: Was that a good school?

MR. PREUSSER: That was an excellent school, oh, yes. It was one of the best. It still is probably, the Art Center School.

MR. BROWN: Who were some of the teachers there?

MR. PREUSSER: Kaminski was one of the men I studied drawing with. I can't really recall any of the other names, but it was not like the Bauhaus in that it was integrating science with art or general education. It was all art.

MR. BROWN: Oh, it was drawing --

MR. PREUSSER: Painting and design and that sort of thing, yes. And I would have continued there for another year had it not been that the Museum of Fine Arts invited me to come teach in Houston so that's what brought me back then.

MR. BROWN: So you returned then to Houston in '47 or '48.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and I taught there at the Museum of Fine Arts until 1945 -- '54, and a little later after that, joined the faculty at the University of Houston art department.

MR. BROWN: And the -- does the Museum of Fine Arts have a school for some time?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, it was quite a going thing.

MR. BROWN: Like when you left Mrs. Davidson, you didn't want to go on to that school but rather wanted something else. Is that why you --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, she wasn't teaching anymore after that period.

MR. BROWN: Well, I mean in the late '30s, did this school exist at that time, the Museum of Fine Arts?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes, they always had an art school.

MR. BROWN: But you wanted to get -- you wanted to go to this Institute of Design in Chicago.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, well, I'd been with her since 1930 to 1939.

MR. BROWN: Quite a long time.

MR. PREUSSER: It was a long time, yes.

MR. BROWN: And so you thought I'll get out of Houston for a bit, is that --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, you mean when I came back from --

MR. BROWN: The reason, say, you didn't go to your own hometown Museum of Fine Arts school --

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, no, I --

MR. BROWN: -- instead went to Chicago, why did you do that?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, I wouldn't have even given it a thought. I didn't even give a thought of staying anywhere else until I saw the article in “Time” magazine.

MR. BROWN: I see, and that changed your mind. You weren't --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes, that made me want to go there. So when I got back from Art Center in Los Angeles because I'd been called back and offered this job, teaching job, as I say, soon after that also joined the faculty at the University of Houston. And I taught painting there.

MR. BROWN: Each place you taught fundamentals and design as well --

MR. PREUSSER: Painting, I taught painting primarily.

MR. BROWN: In Houston?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, painting primarily in Houston, the museum and university.

MR. BROWN: Could you compare the two schools, the museum school and the university?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I was associate curator of education part of that time so I had other functions as well as teaching at the Museum of Fine Arts, but it was a different set of people. They were probably predominated in Houston museum by older people and women as well whereas the University of Houston, they were all young college students. So there was a difference in there.

And then I got involved with Lowell College, and I became art director for the “Texas Cancer Bulletin,” which is a monthly publication and is very large. And we did that for a number of years as well. So that was three jobs at once right there.

MR. BROWN: Was Mr. Chillman still director at the Houston museum at that time?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, he still was there. I think by the time I left in '54, someone else had taken over. You know, Sweeney eventually took over, but I think so --

MR. BROWN: Andrew [sic] Johnson Sweeney.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I think he took over a few years after I left. I don't remember.

MR. BROWN: So could you characterize the kind of student you had at the museum school were amateurs or people --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: -- interested in --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, not to get altogether amateurs, some of them went on. I mean, they became worse, I mean.

MR. BROWN: Whereas at the university, were these young students more apt to part serious about --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, they were serious. They were art students, yes.

MR. BROWN: You also taught in these same years in several other places. In fact, you -- at the Houston Jewish Community Center, that was --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, that was an evening class, and it was primarily adults. Probably more for recreation than anything.

MR. BROWN: Sure. It strikes that in this area before you came here to Massachusetts, one of the more important things you were also involved with was the Contemporary Arts Association in Houston.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, that --

MR. BROWN: Weren't you some kind of a founder of that in 1948, or you were in --

MR. PREUSSER: That's right. I can recall the man by the name of Alvin Romansky who was studying with me at the Museum of Fine Arts. He and I started discussing the fact that there was not enough opportunity for regional and particularly Houston artists to have shows, but more importantly, there wasn't enough modern art being shown. So he in turn contacted Bob and Carol Straus who were one of the really big collectors of American art and Dr. Richard Gonzalez and his wife, who was a treasurer of an oil company, and a number of other patrons. And we got together one evening and discussed the possibility of founding a contemporary art association. And that was the beginning of what is now the Contemporary Arts Museum.

Now, eventually just before -- a year before, I guess, before I left Houston, I was co-director with Frank Dolejska. I had moved from the board of directors, and I had to get off of that because I got a paid job as co-director of the museum, Contemporary Arts Museum. So that was a very nice kind of -- so it makes a fourth job I was doing then and --

MR. BROWN: You apparently shared the feeling there was a real need in Houston for a contemporary arts museum.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, we felt as though the Museum of Fine Arts was not really -- it was doing Houston, but it wasn't really doing contemporary art. It really wasn't fulfilling the need that we wanted to fulfill.

Now, interestingly enough, the museum drifted into other direction -- the Contemporary Arts Museum drifted into other conditions when other directors took over. But in the beginning, that was what it was all about, and it was very successful. And it was done on a membership basis, paid membership basis. The first exhibition was before we had our own building, which was eventually built by as a gift, as a contribution, by Kamrath --

MR. BROWN: Kamrath --

MR. PREUSSER: -- Karl Kamrath. We had our first two exhibitions in the Museum of Fine Arts, so we were on speaking terms with the Museum of Fine Arts and --

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible] ruffles or --

MR. PREUSSER: That's right. And the first exhibition was called "This is Contemporary Art." And Frank Dolejska and I put it together, and we had everything from jewelry to furniture to Calder's mobiles to paintings, just everything and said this is contemporary art, announcing the fact that it's not limited just to painting and sculpture, but it included everything, extremely successful and innovative exhibition.

MR. BROWN: This must have rather astounded the people who had not seen -- who were used to, quote, fine arts.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes, it was the first time anything like that had ever happened in the museum.

MR. BROWN: How did you make -- like you went deeply into design and design and objects. How did you -- how were you guided --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, we did a lot of research in that we know out what the Museum of Modern Art displayed in the way of industrial design and all of those things, and we actually wrote letters. We didn't travel for it. We wrote letters and asked for contributions. And there was one very good modern furnishings store in Houston who appreciated art. In fact, they acquired a number of my paintings. And we borrowed material from him, Michael Noguchi stool, Eames chair, that sort of thing. So we borrowed a lot of stuff that was on the market and had not been on the market for long at that point.

I have an Eames chair up there on the second floor. I have two of them that's now worth about $1500. Just a little wooden chair, it's amazing how these things -- and we have a Noguchi table in our -- brought from Houston in our kitchen in there.

MR. BROWN: But at that time when you were showing these things, you were following through with what you imbibed at the Institute of Design, right, that art and production are --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, the Museum of Modern Art had done a number of things in the way of recognizing contemporary design and --

MR. BROWN: Did you feel missionary quality about --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, we did because we felt like we were not only changing -- hoping to change the attitude and widen the scope of one's understanding of design, but that we were also doing something that had never been seen before and certainly not as a whole and composed in such a way. It was a very well organized show, and we even had models of contemporary buildings in it. And it was a big show.

The second exhibition was also at the Museum of Fine Arts, and it was a Moholy-Nagy memorial which Frank and I got together from various sources. And we did a rather interesting thing on that. The ceiling was rather ugly at that point in the museum, and we hung gauze all across the top lower level which kind of went with the Moholy --

MR. BROWN: At random acute angles or anything --

MR. PREUSSER: No. It was just covered completely, and it kind of sagged a little bit. But those two shows were the first two shows we did before we had our building. Then when we got the building, we did other things.

MR. BROWN: Now, who is the -- perhaps you can give the background of your colleague, Frank --

MR. PREUSSER: Frank Dolejska was what I think of as being one of the few geniuses that I've known in my lifetime. He was a very disturbed individual in certain ways, but he was a genius. And he and I shared a studio for a number of years. And he died a couple of years ago and we think it was the results of the fact that he had been mugged and he had a very terrible stroke.

MR. BROWN: But he continued living in Houston?

MR. PREUSSER: He continued living in Houston, and he got disenchanted with art. As a matter of fact, I guess it's hard to tell this. The woman he was to marry backed out, and he got so upset that he burned all his paintings so none of his paintings exist today. And he was an illegitimate child, and this was his great burden he carried with him at that time. He was an illegitimate child. He ended up taking shock treatments while I knew him well and all of those things, but we were very close. And he was a very good and a great painter. But the thing is after all these negative experiences, he decided, I guess, that it was too much for him to handle, you know, this serious stuff.

So he went into more of a decorative kind of thing which included wall plaques, metal stuff which was purely decorative and so unlike his profound watercolors that he had been doing and was very successful at that. I mean, commercially, he was successful at it.

MR. BROWN: And he trained with you at the --

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes, he had trained with me. Oh, yes, I forgot to mention, he was one of the McNeill Davidson group, too. And he was from Reagan as well. He was --

MR. BROWN: Same high school?

MR. PREUSSER: Same high school and graduated at the same time, so we knew each other for a long time, and we spent a lot of time together as companions. He was, as I say, one that was a very serious and meditative kind of person, and in the later years, he turned out to be someone that had a real sense of humor when he started doing the decorative things and got away from the profound intentions.

MR. BROWN: And how did you two share the work at the Contemporary Arts --

MR. PREUSSER: The Contemporary Art, he did primarily the exhibition layouts. I did most of the organizing and the selection.

MR. BROWN: The combination in that exhibition we've been discussing, the fine art with design and objects, was quite unusual, wasn't it, at least by that --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes. Incidentally, I ought to mention that the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art and the Walker Art Institute were the models that we had when we founded.

MR. BROWN: Oh, really?

MR. PREUSSER: Founded the Contemporary Art Association. Those were the two things that -- two existing institutions that influenced this group that founded the Contemporary Arts Association.

MR. BROWN: In what way did each of them --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, the Contemporary in Boston influenced us because of the kind of thing we did was what they were doing in that time.

MR. BROWN: They were doing art and industry, quite a few shows --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, like that. And the artists that they were showing, the American artists in particular, and so that was an influence there. And Walker, I guess, at that time was a larger institution, but it was doing a lot of innovative things that no other museum was doing. So we followed closely on their heels.

MR. BROWN: And you've also mentioned Museum of Modern Art in some measure.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, that was only in terms of references to particularly the things that we exhibited in industrial design and furniture and that sort of thing.

MR. BROWN: Like they had a department of that.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right.

MR. BROWN: They had a --

MR. PREUSSER: Philip Johnson would come down and lecture to our group. I mean, we had that kind of contact. He at that time was the head of the architecture department at the Museum of Modern Art.

It's interesting to mention here, I guess, that I met a number of rather famous people in my early days. Philip Johnson was one of them. Max Ernst was another . Alexander Calder, both of the two latter ones came out to my studio in Houston, and this was done through the John and Dominique de Menil who had came in and become very powerful influences, a lot of money. And she now has this very large museum in Houston, and she's great in terms of a historian. She's quite grand. But they would bring visiting people to Houston, and they would bring them out individually out to my house and studio.

One of the interesting things about Calder is that when I took him back to my studio and he noticed that I was using plastic paint that it made to be applied to Plexiglas, when he saw that, he turned around and wouldn't come in my studio. He said, "That's a health hazard."

Now, that was back in 1952, '53. And he spent his time out looking at the fauna and the greenery in our three-quarters of an acre there in Spring Branch. But he wouldn’t go in because he said, "That's a -- you're exposing yourself to a health hazard, and I’m not going to do it."

And I subsequently since that time in my early days at MIT, we had Stuart Davis come and give a contribution to one of the summer sessions that I was teaching. And he was discussing at that time. That was in '54 or '55 how terrible most of the art materials being used were in terms of health hazards.

MR. BROWN: That's a little known aspect of that generation of artists.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right.

MR. BROWN: Was Calder otherwise -- what was he like?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, he was a wonderful, jolly guy. Everybody loved him. And when we had him here for an exhibition at MIT, it was around the Christmas season. I think it was in -- yes, and he was driving down Madison Avenue and he got drunk and he ran into the Christmas tree. It was a tree or a poster, something. He really had an accident, but he was a wonderful person, yes.

MR. BROWN: Well, did -- the Menils weren't in on founding of this Contemporary Arts but they --

MR. PREUSSER: They weren't on the founding but --

MR. BROWN: -- came in pretty soon.

MR. PREUSSER: -- they came in pretty soon, and they really had ambitions of making it a Museum of Modern Art in Houston. And they had the obvious French orientation and connections, so they proceeded to influence the board to change from regional, local, not that we were against national but -- and start bringing big shows of French and -- the biggest one was the Van Gogh show. And it was at that time that I just couldn't quite see myself continuing as a co-director because their influence, very important. They became so dominating at the Contemporary Art Museum where I was involved that I just couldn't go along with it, so I resigned at that point.

Since then, they had gone on and tried the same thing at the Museum of Fine Arts and contributed quite a bit

there, and then they went from there to Rice University. And then they went -- no, they went to St. -- where the Rothko paintings are.

MR. BROWN: St. Thomas University.

MR. PREUSSER: St. Thomas and then from there, they went to Rice, and from Rice, by then he had died, John had died. And she set up the big block long, wonderful museum in Houston. I think they've done a collection which is still a block long but not big enough to hold everything they own. Their collection is profoundly important, and she, I respect a great deal because of her knowledge about art of all periods.

MR. BROWN: But they did tend to bulldoze their way --

MR. PREUSSER: That was the point that they wanted -- and I think the major thing my problem was that I didn't want -- didn't see -- first of all, I didn't see how we could ever become a Museum of Modern Art in Houston, and second, I didn't see why we should.

MR. BROWN: Why each of those -- you thought that Houston wasn't a big enough place, didn't have enough of an audience?

MR. PREUSSER: I didn't think it was big enough, and it could -- I mean, even despite de Menil's resources, I didn't see how it could be done, but more importantly, I didn't think it was the thing to do. Now, they never said that, but I'm just saying that that's what I deducted from what their influence was becoming. And eventually, they were -- they left. It didn't work with them.

MR. BROWN: You had married in 1950.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, 1950.

MR. BROWN: Was she an artist?

MR. PREUSSER: No. Mary Ellen was born in Galveston and worked for an optician in Houston, and we met when Frank Dolesjka and I were designing stage sets for a modern adaptation of "Twelfth Night," Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night." And we called it, "This is Illyria." And it was done by a man by the name of Van Grona [phonetic] who was a protégé of the great director in Germany. And I can't think of his name right now.

MR. BROWN: A stage director?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, production --

MR. BROWN: Reinhardt?

MR. PREUSSER: Not Reinhardt, no. I can't think of his name. But he was doing some very innovative things in the theater, and he called on Frank and I to do the sets. And we ended up doing it with a 3-1/4-by-4 slide projections for each change of scene, and we made the slides with layers of glass and different kinds of textures and colors that fit the theme of whatever the scene was. And that's where Mary Ellen was a production assistant there and understudy for the main actress, and that's where I met her.

And Grona was unusual and particularly for being in Houston at that time, you know, and he had what was called the Texas stage. And he had quite a bit of influence in terms -- I think he was probably after -- I can't think of the woman's name. Anyway, there had been some real activity going on, but he came in with --

MR. BROWN: In the theater?

MR. PREUSSER: In the theater, yes.

MR. BROWN: And the theater in Dallas is well known. The Alley Theatre, is that --

MR. PREUSSER: No. That was Houston.

MR. BROWN: That was Houston, right. But Dallas, I mean, excuse me, that was the -- so it was Margo Jones we're thinking of.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and you just mentioned another person that we did sets for. We did sets for "The Importance of Being Earnest" that Margo Jones conducted in Houston.

MR. BROWN: In Houston?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: But Houston then had a fairly large core of people interested in serious culture.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, by the 1950s, there had developed quite a bit.

MR. BROWN: Seems like a place where you could thrive and a career, didn't it?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I could in terms of teaching. In terms of commercial, selling, I didn't have a gallery any time until -- in Houston until after I came up here.

MR. BROWN: There wasn't too much by way of commercial outlets.

MR. PREUSSER: No, there wasn't much in the way of purchasing. But there was a liberal group in Houston, and, you know, among the patrons, there was Nina Cullinan who gave the Mies van der Rohe addition to her father's Museum of Fine Arts, which was a great contribution.

MR. BROWN: And was she -- she was very open and liberal?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, very liberal, very liberal, both politically and in terms of art. She owned a number of my things. She was one of the really great influences in the Contemporary Art Museum, too. She was on our board there.

And in the other area, Ima Hogg was not involved in the Contemporary Art Museum, but Ima Hogg was a very strong influence in culture during those days.

MR. BROWN: Was she? By the example of her collecting American --

MR. PREUSSER: Early American stuff which her home and her furniture became part of Rice Institute. It's now owned by Rice Institute, or it might be the museum, one or the other.

The other one was Cleveland Sewell who I taught privately, and she had a house that's not much different from the Gardner Museum here. And she gave that to -- one was meant to Rice, and one was to the museum.

MR. BROWN: And then she had -- and it was affiliated with a collection of European and --

MR. PREUSSER: No. Mostly my stuff and Robert Joy, the portrait painter, and some of her stuff. She was a painter.

MR. BROWN: It was arranged around a great courtyard.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, but it wasn't a collection. I mean, the house itself was built the same way with stuff being imported from Europe, materials and all that stuff, beautiful mansion-type place in River Oaks.

MR. BROWN: The -- now, what about the building itself, the Contemporary Arts Museum? That's 1949 or so.

MR. PREUSSER: '49.

MR. BROWN: It's built for almost nothing.

MR. PREUSSER: Because Karl Kamrath managed to get -- first of all, get his services for free and also managing to get at cost or for free materials. So it was done for practically nothing is right.

MR. BROWN: That must have been astounding --

MR. PREUSSER: Very innovative building, yes.

MR. BROWN: -- it's sort of a prismatic in section and outline reminding one of certainly more radical European --

MR. PREUSSER: And presented some very --

MR. BROWN: -- things from the 20s.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and presented some very interesting situations in terms of what kind of exhibitions went in and how they were displayed.

MR. BROWN: It had this great slanting roof.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: That must have caused problems from time to time, or did they not?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, that provided some storage space on the edges and an office back in there. And we had big exhibitions there. We had in architecture which was art in architecture, paintings. It was a collection that we got from somebody else. But we had a show called "Contempora in Cotton." We had --

MR. BROWN: In cotton?

MR. PREUSSER: Cotton, it was all fabrics.

MR. BROWN: Fabrics, oh, okay.

MR. PREUSSER: And these exhibitions incidentally, except for those first two that Frank and I did, were done by members of the association. Someone would take on an exhibition, organize it and bring it to us, and we'd display it. But they would get it together so that different members had responsibilities for different shows.

MR. BROWN: So you and Frank did simply the two major shows.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and then from then on, we did the display and all of the --

MR. BROWN: Now, some of the other members, you mentioned patrons or people like the Strauses and some other --

MR. PREUSSER: Robert Strauses were very big patrons and Percy and Marge Selden whose former name was Straus but they changed it to Selden. And she's still living today. And Carol is alive today. Both of their husbands died. He is -- Percy, incidentally, died in a balloon one Christmas. Went up with his daughter and hit a high voltage line.

MR. BROWN: Wow.

MR. PREUSSER: It was quite a disaster.

MR. BROWN: Yes, what a way to go.

MR. PREUSSER: But Richard and Loraine Gonzalez were two very important people in organizing the museum, and I did a show. I did do something besides the first two. I did show with her called "Nature in Art" or "Art in Nature."

MR. BROWN: So they actively --

MR. PREUSSER: And then my wife and I did an exhibition called "What is Contemporary Art" which included original modern American paintings and reproductions of Old Masters side by side showing similarities between the Old Masters and contemporary art.

MR. BROWN: You also did one together, I believe, called "Ways and Means."

MR. PREUSSER: That's the one I'm referring to. What did I call it?

MR. BROWN: "What is Contemporary Art."

MR. PREUSSER: No. It's "Ways and Means," that's right. And I was showing -- we were showing how the ways and the means were similar in the past and the future and the present. So you see, I was really organized minded in terms of art.

MR. BROWN: You were. And in organizing, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: -- second taped interview with Robert Preusser with Robert Brown, the interviewer. And we're -- why don't we talk now about your leaving Houston. I guess perhaps at first temporarily, I believe you said. And you come up here to -- I think you first came to Harvard or was it MIT about the same time you came to do some teaching.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right. I came at the invitation of MIT. Gyorgy Kepes and I had kept a correspondence during my Army days and had written a number of times that he'd like to see me in the future sometime where I might join him on the faculty but probably temporarily but sometime come up to MIT and assist. And the first offer, I think I decided not to take, and then the second offer, I did take. And that was in 1954, and it was part-time. And it was to relieve Gyorgy of some teaching time so he and Kevin Lynch can do the "Perceptual Form of

the City" grant.

MR. BROWN: What was that for, a publication or --

MR. PREUSSER: Publication and it was research on the perceptual form of the city.

MR. BROWN: And Kevin Lynch was a prominent architectural --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes. And the two of them, it was a collaborative grant, and he needed to get out of teaching half-time. So I came for that purpose, and it was for one academic year.

MR. BROWN: Did you find it quite different from anything you'd been at before or --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I was really impressed compared with the students at the University of Houston both in the terms of their orientation and their intellectual capacities. The teaching I jumped into was primarily design, car design. And I assisted Kepes in his most important subject of light and color at that time for graduate students of architecture. I subsequently -- when Kepes left the teaching and went entirely to his Center for Advanced Visual Studies, I took over his light and color courses. That was back in the late 60s or something.

The thing at Harvard developed about that time when I came. Sert invited me to come and teach. Josep Lluis Sert at Harvard invited me to come and teach light or drawing course which I did for about a year, year and a half. And Simo Slide [phonetic] who was at the Fogg Museum was in charge of having art activities to go along in the different houses asked me to teach an evening class at one of the Baker -- not Baker --

MR. BROWN: Dunster House.

MR. PREUSSER: Dunster House.

MR. BROWN: One of the dormitories --

MR. PREUSSER: Dormitories so I did that at night, too, so I was doing those three things for a while. But the thing that really is important in terms of how this all came about that I remained at MIT is that Barlett Hayes along with some other prestigious people who -- including James Johnson Sweeney, a number of people were called in 1952 by John Burchard who was then dean of humanities at MIT to make a study and to suggest whether or not we should have art at MIT. Ten year prior to that, the music had been implemented as an option. And Burchard wanted to see what they had to say about how about the visual arts as another option.

The report was -- it took from 1952 to '54, a number of meetings, to bring about the report that was completed in '54, but it wasn't published until 1957. When that publication came out, Bush-Brown -- what's his first name? I can't --

MR. BROWN: Albert.

MR. PREUSSER: Albert Bush-Brown and I got together and proposed a combined course options, including history and studio courses --

MR. BROWN: Bush-Brown was on the faculty as well at that time?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, he was on our faculty, historian. Was architectural historian, I guess he was, yes. And he and I put together a proposal to make an option in art by combining history and theory with actual practice. And we said what we'd like to do is to have a program that you have to take three courses in order to concentrate. Anyone that took a humanities area, they had the degree as a concentration, was required of all undergraduates. We suggested that we have them either take two history and theory or one study, or if they wanted to reverse that, vice versa.

And in '57, we took it before the entire MIT faculty, and it was debated quite extensively during a long meeting. And Bush-Brown and I presented our case, and fortunately, they approved it. So with that approval, I really had my own domain and not just working with Kepes in one separate course, but I had my own domain as well. Was the studio course.

MR. BROWN: What was Kepes -- what was his domain at that time?

MR. PREUSSER: Graduate students.

MR. BROWN: Oh, graduate level. You --

MR. PREUSSER: Architecture students, he didn't get involved except I had him give some lectures.

MR. BROWN: Was your domain with undergraduates primarily?

MR. PREUSSER: My domain was undergraduate and institute at large. Kepes was just graduate architecture.

MR. BROWN: And the department of architecture.

MR. PREUSSER: Department of architecture. And, of course, Kepes was involved in my program to the extent that I would have him occasionally give a lecture or presentation or something, but I was the one that organized it. And interestingly enough, I first conceived of it as a painting course like I had one in University of Houston. After the first six months, I realized that's not what you do at MIT.

MR. BROWN: Why is that?

MR. PREUSSER: [Inaudible] engineer [Inaudible] paint. First of all, if they took one semester in particular, how can you get anywhere, you know, into it? So that led me to the notion of combining their disciplines, various disciplines, with art and saying look, what we're going to do is in each of your disciplines, you use whatever it is your expertise either in technique or knowledge and produce visual designs. And so that's what within the second academic -- and within the second academic -- well, the second phase of the first academic year, it was turned into that, and then we were off to the races in that kind of thing. Now, that was referred to as art and technology.

MR. BROWN: And this was, what, as early as 1954 or so?

MR. PREUSSER: '57.

MR. BROWN: '57. Okay.

MR. PREUSSER: And this was -- I guess you realize, that was before art and technology was a phrase, but we didn't call it that at that time. But eventually, that's what it was known as.

MR. BROWN: And you were by then known as the professor of visual and design?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, that was my title throughout the whole time. But even before I was a lecturer and that is what really convinced me that I wanted to stay at MIT, and also, I guess convinced them that I should be promoted to full professor and should have tenure. So that's what brought about my permanent position and 31 years at MIT.

MR. BROWN: Now, what kind of course did you develop? You told me about -- you just said -- mentioned working to the strengths of the fields in which the students were specializing, for example, in the infinite size of computers or various aspects of engineering or --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, take, for example, metallurgy. Metallurgy students used metallurgy techniques, pouring out aluminum, molten aluminum, in a mold or something. Electrical engineers used electric circuit board which is used for electric circuit boards and printed photographs on them. And the [Inaudible] plastic that's behind the layer of copper is translucent so that you can illuminate a panel from behind and in front. Chemical engineer-- I mean chemistry students used chemicals, crystal growth, for example. What are the other -- let's see. Other engineers used kinetic -- developed kinetic forms using motors and that sort of thing. Computer-oriented students learned ways to use the computer.

And that incidentally, was an interesting -- has an interesting story because two of my students, one a mathematician, the other an engineer, did a lot of experimenting with the computer, and the art director of "Fortune" magazine learned about and came to me. And he says, "Look, I'd like to use your students to do our special annual 500 issue."

And I said, "Great."

And I got him together with the students, the two students, and they said yes, we'll do it. And so they devised a program that created a lot of arrows going up, pointing up. And Mr. Allner, who was the art director, assumed that he would have to have an overprint of the 500. Incidentally, the year before, they had turned the lights on in Time Life magazine [sic] so that it read 500. So he was always after something innovative for the cover of "Fortune" magazine.

So these two students got together and said look, we'll do the whole thing. We'll do the 500. We'll program that into it and all, and so in 1965 issue of "Fortune 500" had the cover of these two students' work. And interestingly enough, they couldn't use the computers at MIT because you can't use them for profit. So they had to go off and use other facilities other than MIT to do it. But Mr. Allner claims that it was the first time any magazine cover was designed as the results of the application of the computer, and it was written and publicized

as such. And that's a very interesting part of that. So that covers another area of the kind of thing that --

MR. BROWN: Well, your aim in all of this was to introduce aesthetics and design --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, my aim was first of all, to show that paintbrush is not the only way to produce art, and second, to sensitize students through art, just like music was to sensitize them through music. And it gave them a different experience than they could get any other -- that they got in their technological or scientific thing.

After a number of years of that, a history section started beginning to offer more and more courses in history and theory in this option, and I got a little disturbed about this. And I went to Dean Belluschi and I said, "Look, we've got to get more studio work going." And I said, "I think the next thing we should do is open up photography as an option."

And he went for it. I mean, he got the approval from the administration. And we had brought photography in, and Minor White was the selection.

MR. BROWN: How did you happen to choose Minor White?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I personally wanted to have Fritz Goro who was oriented towards the Bauhaus and who was teaching at Yale at the time, part-time, and also was on "Life" magazine staff doing photographs -- medical photographs of people's interiors, which was a highly technical thing. And I said, "Well, this sounds to me like the kind of guy that could communicate and could work with MIT students."

But I think it was Stratton, President Stratton, who knew personally -- I can't think of his name now. He did Polaroid, work for Polaroid.

MR. BROWN: And President Stratton knew Ansel Adams.

MR. PREUSSER: Ansel Adams, and he wanted Adams rather than Goro, Fritz Goro. And so he went to Adams how about coming to MIT, and Adams said no, he couldn't leave the Big Sur in California. But he says, "I'll recommend somebody."

And Minor White was the recommendation, and that turned photography into a different orientation than I had conceived of because of the nature of his philosophy and his theories and his techniques and so forth, which were more conventional in terms of techniques. I had imagined somebody coming in and using all kinds of other things, strobe lighting and all that sort of thing, photography.

But Minor White was selected, and at the time, I was very distressed because it was opposite of what I had conceived of. But in retrospect, I believe it was the best that could have happened because it was in the ‘60s when students were revolting and on drugs and into meta --

MR. BROWN: Meditation?

MR. PREUSSER: Meditation and all of that stuff and Minor White was just the guy that could communicate with them. So in retrospect, it wasn't a bad idea.

MR. BROWN: Did you get to know him a bit?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes, oh, yes. Very nice gentle man, very persistent in believing that he was right about everything, but in a very -- and a very sensitive photographer, a great photographer, as a matter of fact. I had a great deal of respect for him even though I didn't think it was the right thing for MIT at the time.

MR. BROWN: Do you feel therefore that the students at MIT really profited less than they might have --

MR. PREUSSER: No. I think -- well, I think they would have profited in terms of the kind of thing I did in my class with relating science and technology --

MR. BROWN: If they had had a more Bauhaus trained --

MR. PREUSSER: -- if they would have had someone oriented that way. But because of the period and social conditions of that time, I think he probably did as much or more in that realm than he could have -- than someone could have done in the other. Not maybe more but did something equally important.

MR. BROWN: And he did have a very close circle of almost a community of apprentices --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, he did and people that really respected and revered him greatly. Yes.

MR. BROWN: When did Belluschi become your dean?

MR. PREUSSER: Belluschi was the dean when I arrived.

MR. BROWN: Oh, he was.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes. And Anderson was the chairman.

MR. BROWN: Lawrence Anderson. How was Belluschi, did you get to know him quite a bit?

MR. PREUSSER: I got to know him pretty well. He was a very -- I think one of the great talented architects. In fact, even despite his old age, I understand he's still practicing out in California. He was probably not as into being a dean as a lot of people have been since then, but he was very accepting and very generous and very cooperative and all of those things which made it a very pleasant thing. One of the best situations we ever had I think at MIT in the department of architecture was when he was dean and Lawrence Anderson was chairman. And Joey and I always in retrospect think back about how we -- even in the latter years how we wished it was like it was then, you know, because the politics changed and all that sort of thing.

MR. BROWN: They were both pretty broad minded and liberal?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, yes. But that was a very interesting period. You know, I'm beginning to now compare that early days at MIT to my early days in Chicago, which was a very important period, the beginning of the Bauhaus influence in this country, and the unique experience that provided which could never -- those things don't last. You know, the first few years are great, and then they kind of fall apart or become something else, and that's what happened at MIT, considering the time I arrived to the later years.

MR. BROWN: Yes, yes. I know Kepes, in fact, pulled out of that when he founded the Center for --

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, yes.

MR. BROWN: -- Studies but you remained within the department and --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, Kepes did, too, as does Otto Piene who is now director. Half of their time is spent teaching, was and is now -- Piene's teaching and was the director. The -- you have a question?

MR. BROWN: Yes, you were saying that the early days with Belluschi and Anderson, you and Kepes in retrospect were great times --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: -- of experimentation and, I guess, rather simple curriculum and all.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, Wurster incidentally brought Kepes to MIT.

MR. BROWN: Yes, William Wurster, right.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: But afterwards, what, you began increase -- the faculty began increasing in size. You mentioned at one point the art historians began to be more prominent --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, that sort of thing. Of course, Kepes had already been the real influence in getting art into the department and visual concerns into the department, and Jan Valencia [phonetic] in the planning department was equally involved in visual matters in planning. And Philip Oskey [phonetic] followed, and then I came. So --

MR. BROWN: With Philip, did you work fairly closely with Philip Oskey?

MR. PREUSSER: Not particularly, no. He had a different kind of teaching method and approach than I did and was quite different. He taught color, color course was his primary course, and he taught in a different way. And we were, you know, comfortable together, but we didn't see eye to eye in a lot of things.

MR. BROWN: Did you both teach mostly undergraduates? You --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, yes. I did also the graduates later with Kepes' course that I took over.

MR. BROWN: What was the -- you mentioned the multimedia workshop which was begun in 1974.

MR. PREUSSER: No. That's '85 when I retired.

MR. BROWN: No. In 1974, the multimedia workshop which was initiated in 1974 --

MR. PREUSSER: Let me see that.

MR. BROWN: Well, we'll pass on that. Did you find that the art historians fit in pretty well in what had been a big technical school and --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, you know, historians and artists don't usually get along together. I mean, that's common experience in every university in this country. There were times, well, in the very beginning when Kepes started his center, the question was should it be in the humanities under the humanities or under architecture, and he said he wanted it in architecture. When we started my program, I mean, the Hayes committee, they proposed the visual arts at MIT, said it should be in humanities, but the institute at large decided it should be in architecture. And I think it was the right choice because there was no one oriented towards art in humanities, and Burchard, the then dean, was in favor of it being in --

MR. BROWN: In architecture.

MR. PREUSSER: -- in architecture. Now, the thing -- there had been various attempts along the way to separate the artists and the historian. At one point, why not historians in humanities. And as a whole, our department has held steadfast that these two should not be separated. Even though they don't quite get along together, they should be together because you should have theory and practice that is closely monitored and regulated in terms of teaching objective. And I've always been in favor of it even though I differed greatly with some of the historians on our faculty through the years, but that's a common experience. And I think it's the fiction there in a way, it's not too disastrous, but it exists.

I would have liked to, for example, for the historians to be more aware of what I was attempting to do and show historically, for example, that technology had a great deal to do with the origins of art, you know. Historic -- Cyril Smith, the metallurgy historian, has pointed out in very impressive articles about how art in its origin and subsequent days was very much a part of technology and the technology influenced the art forms. And that, they never would pick up with me on, and that kind of disturbed me.

MR. BROWN: And there was no pressure for them to --

MR. PREUSSER: No. Except that Cyril Smith was a great historian and is still today --

MR. BROWN: Sure, as well as a great scientist.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right. And I thought it was a mistake not to really pick up on that at MIT in particular. In other words, the historians pretty much hewed to the line of the traditional approach to teaching history.

MR. BROWN: Right. Was Henry Millet [phonetic] one of the earlier ones to --

MR. PREUSSER: He was the first, but he was architecture, not history.

MR. BROWN: But architectural history is what --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, yes.

MR. BROWN: And he surely would have been somewhat interested in the technical side.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, but his interests are much more historical in terms of certain periods, and he's an authority, a great authority, on the Italians and architecture.

MR. BROWN: Were there other historians that you can comment on that --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, the other two major ones that during my time was Wayne Andersen and Stanford Anderson.

MR. BROWN: The two Andersons.

MR. PREUSSER: And both of them, I think, were brought to MIT by Hank Millet maybe, like Kepes brought me.

MR. BROWN: Well, Wayne Andersen got into a program for bringing art to MIT, wasn't it, in the --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, he was responsible for the --

MR. BROWN: -- art museum --

MR. PREUSSER: -- major part of the collection that is at the museum, including the Nevelson sculpture and -- I don't know how. I think Killian had more to do with getting the --

MR. BROWN: President Killian, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: President Killian had more to do with getting the Calder.

MR. BROWN: Yes, but the -- so Andersen was sort of in charge of it. It was a committee, wasn't it, or something like that?

MR. PREUSSER: It was a committee, but he was the one that actually influenced the institute to start a collection and to acquire all of these things that you see on the campus today and on the walls of different offices.

MR. BROWN: What did you think about that program?

MR. PREUSSER: He was the art historian, yes. I couldn't go along with some of the things that he acquired. I just wasn't in that mode of thinking. And his selection has meant a lot to MIT in terms of recognition, that it is an important collection owned by a university, but I just didn't -- I think that it's very interesting. You know, today, the media center -- in that report that came out a couple years ago, it's pointed out that the media center where all the different media that has to do with computers and all that sort of thing -- it started the year I retired -- has declared -- it declared then that they would not show any MIT artists, and that's where Warren, I think, Seamans --

MR. BROWN: Director of the museum --

MR. PREUSSER: Director of the museum and then he picked up and filled the gap. And Wayne Andersen only had a Kepes [Inaudible]. That's about the only thing, artist on our faculty that he had. And it was like being forced into having it because he was so well known, you know. But Phil Oskey and I and others never were offered a one-man show until Warren Seamans did.

MR. BROWN: So they -- Andersen was going alone on another track, so to speak. He wanted celebrity artists and --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and more -- I guess his major emphasis was on [Inaudible] stuff and striped paintings and --

MR. BROWN: Things that were fashionable in the 60s and 70s.

MR. PREUSSER: Fashionable at the time and the kinds of things you put out in the yard, sculpture.

MR. BROWN: Has that attitude prevailed in -- they built another art center, though, the List Art Center, I think it's now called --

MR. PREUSSER: That's what I was getting -- what I was saying, that they declared that they wouldn't show any local art. And the List Art Center, I think they're now contemplating changing the name because it doesn't quite explain what it is. But what they're doing, as I understand it, is the most avant-garde thing of the particular year. My criticism of that is that it should be more oriented towards art and technology because it's at MIT. However, it's received tremendous ovations because of its program being done by nobody else in the city to that extent, but I still think it's a mistake not to make it more oriented towards what MIT understands.

MR. BROWN: Well, it sounds like the picture became rather confused --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, well, that's what this report states, that one of the things they recommend is that people get their heads together and decide is this the right thing to do.

MR. BROWN: Yes. But you were also -- when the Center for Advanced Visual Studies was set up, that was to be a graduate level and advanced --

MR. PREUSSER: No, it was not to have anything at all to do with teaching. Kepes was opposed to any teaching in the research. It was the only thing that was important, and it was research by big people, Takis, Piene, other --

MR. BROWN: A number of others, too.

MR. PREUSSER: A number of others. And he wanted me at one point to join him over there as a kind of a manager, and I said, "Gyorgy, I'll do it if you take on some graduate teaching." I said, "I think the mistake of the center is not to have teaching." I said, "You cannot name another research at MIT that doesn't include graduate students."

But he was opposed to it. This was one of the big differences, one of the very few differences I've had with Kepes over many successful years of collaboration and cooperation. So I said, "I just can't buy the idea of it all being research and not involving MIT students, graduate students."

So I didn't go to the center until Otto Piene came because he had the same opinion I did in terms of involving students.

MR. BROWN: Whatever discipline more or less as you described your courses earlier.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, but graduate students doing research as well as recognized world famous researchers --

MR. BROWN: But graduate students who weren't necessarily in the arts at all; is that right?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, no. They were -- they would be in the arts, yes, and he has them in the -- he has an environmental art program that now is a graduate program. Otto Piene does.

MR. BROWN: I see.

MR. PREUSSER: But at the time with Kepes, that was before we offered a graduate program in the art and in that various sections. And --

MR. BROWN: So you did go over as you were director of education from 1974 which is about when Piene took over from Kepes --

MR. PREUSSER: That's right. Yes, that's when I --

MR. BROWN: -- till your retirement in 1985.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right.

MR. BROWN: And what were your duties and what was your role there as director of education?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it wasn't a great -- it wasn't a really important function as it sounded like it was. I did organize and work with a couple of summer sessions, celebrations, things and events and that sort of thing. And participated primarily in decisions at meetings about what should be done with the teaching part of the thing. I didn't spend a lot of time at it. It was more of a honorary position than anything else.

MR. BROWN: Well, your chief accomplishment in all those years at MIT, do you feel has been in the teaching of the basic courses, the fundamental courses --

MR. PREUSSER: The basic courses --

MR. BROWN: -- bringing in these people from other fields?

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, but also, almost as important, I think, is what I attempted to do in -- when I took over Gyorgy Kepes' light and color graduate course. I changed the title to "Environmental Light and Color." And it's architects that take the course, and what I tried to do was to get the graduate students involved with illumination in terms of architecture. And in particular, we did a lot of experimentation and research in color illumination, and that was during the time when the energy crisis has come along. And you know --

MR. BROWN: The early 1970s?

MR. PREUSSER: The early 1970s. And the big debate up until that point was you have to have the highest lighting levels to not ruin your eyes, injure your eyes. And then all of a sudden, the energy crisis came along, and you'd get full-page ads by General Electric saying you don't really need to have the highest intensity and starting to play down this theory. And as I put it, you don't injure your ears by almost inaudible sound, and you don't injure your eyes with low levels of lighting intensity.

So with that packaged together in terms of lighting, I said why not have colored illumination and be able to change the whole environment of a room with the push of a button, changing the color of the light. This idea first occurred to me in a very interesting way. Ed O'Connor, who wrote "The Last Hurrah," had a house on the Cape, and he had a long table where they would sit and eat their luscious outlay of food. And under his table at

the end was a button, and he changed the intensity of the light and the focusing of the light to control the direction of the conversation.

MR. BROWN: Wow, really?

MR. PREUSSER: Which shows, you know, and really is important. You can create a depressing lighting condition, and you won't have the same conversation that you would in a different color of -- kind of color illumination. So we did a lot of -- we would build architectural models. The students would build architectural models, and we'd put in miniature lights of different colors and make photographic studies of the differences and show what this room looks like with one colored light. And, of course, colored light changes the effects of the color of the walls, for example. So you can completely change the environmental quality by changing the color of the illumination. So that was a very interesting area.

MR. BROWN: This was in the school of architecture?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right.

MR. BROWN: And is this a course you continued to teach until your --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I continued right up till the end on that one, yes.

MR. BROWN: Have many of your students then, say, who've gone through that course gone on as lighting consultants or as creative artists?

MR. PREUSSER: I have no track of that. I really don't know. I don't know. I don't think -- I mean, certainly, they became aware of it, but it takes quite a bit of energy, I guess, to change the idea of having colored light in your living room or in a -- but we also did experiments on public spaces and all of that colored thing. And I always pointed out that the only place you see red colored illumination is in a red light district and in bars, discotheques, that sort of thing. And so I did a number of little articles and stuff on that that was published, and so it might have made some impact. I don't know, but I don't see it being used, certainly not domestically. Maybe it's more --

MR. BROWN: You mean where you can change --

MR. PREUSSER: Where you can change, I don't think -- that technology hasn't been worked, I guess, really, and it probably really hasn't caught on. I still think it's a valid kind of thing to consider.

MR. BROWN: The only thing I can think of is in the cosmetic, the ladies have the -- they can change the light, evening light to natural light, whatever they call it.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, that's why people like candlelight because it flatters you as against incandescent and particularly as against fluorescent. I've often thought I would try it in my house here, but I never got around to it.

We even did studies of paintings and how they would be changed with changing the color of the illumination, which is another interesting phase of it.

MR. BROWN: So this is one of the principle -- would this course be given throughout the year and --

MR. PREUSSER: It would be given either the first term or the second term because they had other things that they had to take in their graduate level study, and so it was a fairly major course.

MR. BROWN: Were you teaching a full load of courses throughout this, what, 31 years?

MR. PREUSSER: I was only part-time until I took on the general institute program studio courses.

MR. BROWN: And what about sabbaticals, were there any other times you had to do your own work?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I managed to talk my way into a sabbatical about 11, 12 years rather than seven years after I'd been there, and that, we took the whole year off. We were 16 months, including the summer, in Europe. My family and I, we traveled through 21 countries. And that was a very enriching experience.

And at that time, I had one academic appointment as visiting professor at the University of Surrey in Guildford, England, and there I did primarily -- my work was to put together a photographic documented exhibition of my student work at MIT which subsequently traveled all over England and then eventually came -- and I did it again in a better format at MIT for Dr. Killian's inauguration at an event. And it has subsequently been exhibited a couple of times at MIT in the corridors, and it has been exhibited at the new Bauhaus --

MR. BROWN: Bauhaus archives?

MR. PREUSSER: Archives in --

MR. BROWN: Berlin.

MR. PREUSSER: -- West Berlin. And then it went -- that came back after the -- I had to turn them down on giving it to them for their permanent collection because MIT had financed that, and I thought that MIT should have it in its archives rather than -- and so it came back, and from there, it went to quite a number of art schools and universities in Canada. And it's now possibly in the future may be an exhibit that sort of brings back the recognition of what was done in those years. You know, everybody forgets what goes on, and this is a good record. It's a very well presented 36 panels of photographic documentations of student projects.

Also, the BBC came over and televised as I taught this course, and that was -- the program was called "Horizons," I believe. And MIT has in its archives that film.

And Japan Asahi, that first exposition, they came and did a big production of -- in color. The BBC was black and white, but this was a big one in color that was the Osaka World's Fair.

MR. BROWN: Well, you've also deposited at the MIT museum examples of your students' work, haven't you?

MR. PREUSSER: Both photographically and actual objects, yeah.

MR. BROWN: That's excellent. So the record of this has been preserved.

Did very many of the students who were not in architecture at all but from utterly different disciplines, did very many of them switch and sort of go into what we might call the art world?

MR. PREUSSER: Not very many that I know of. A couple did and were successful and have been and are successful. Robert Fisher is one who is doing rather large interior sculptures which he uses a computer to design to give him views of what it looks like and to make decisions. That's the most successful one that I know of.

MR. BROWN: This is April 4th, 1991. We're interviewing at the gallery of the MIT museum. This is the second recording.

I thought we'd start this morning by looking at the works on the wall of this exhibition and then referring also to various slides and photographs of work of the same time as those represented on the walls here at MIT. I think we begin with the 1930s, don't we?

MR. PREUSSER: That's right. And the first watercolor on the wall is a small painting by the name "By the Sea." It's 1937. I had done one in 1936 of the Texas Centennial, but this is one of my very earliest works.

MR. BROWN: The one of '36 had a theme you mean?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, it was -- the theme was the Dallas, Texas -- the Texas Centennial, Gypsy Rose Lee dancing and light falling on her.

MR. BROWN: Now, this one here is various -- looks like various marine forms. I think I see --

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, yes.

MR. BROWN: -- semi-abstract, of course, but --

MR. PREUSSER: But there is an indication of water and stars above and --

MR. BROWN: And it looks like starfish, perhaps?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Is this -- you were raised, of course, as we know, in Houston. Would this be a recollection of going down to --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it's been influenced as well by Galveston, I think.

MR. BROWN: And do you remember when doing this, had you -- were you steadily reading and looking at pictures?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, you must recall that in 1930, I started my study with McNeill Davidson, and I was 11 years old at that time. And this is '37, so that makes me pretty young still. Prior to that, I had done some subjects that were more discernible in terms of subject matter such as buildings and people, imaginary figures and so forth.

MR. BROWN: What do you think was leading to this --

MR. PREUSSER: You know, it was so long ago that --

MR. BROWN: Hard to recollect?

MR. PREUSSER: Hard to recollect, but it wasn't long before I departed from the subject matter. This, “Dwarf Dwellings” here, was also in 1937, and I guess that's one of my major works that had buildings in it. And that, of course, is the reason it's in the show. It's still quite primitive, but that was the first recognition I had ever received in an exhibition. It was in a Houston annual exhibition, and it received honorable mention at that early age.

MR. BROWN: Well, this displays -- it looks to me as though from a superficial look, there's a good deal of technical promise. I mean, aren't there glazes on this? This is an oil --

MR. PREUSSER: It's oil and Masonite, and the technique is one that I had used on a number of smaller ones prior to this where I put the paint down and then used an ice pick to scratch through. So that's what created all those different directional, near texture.

MR. BROWN: So you scratched through to your white revealing your white ground?

MR. PREUSSER: Right. And then I think the title is quite appropriate. It has a feeling of almost Disneyland.

MR. BROWN: Well, it does. A small, eccentrically shaped -- surely, the Cubism lies somewhat behind this.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes. I, of course, had under McNeill Davidson was introduced to a lot of the modern painters of today.

MR. BROWN: Now, a painting like this that you say received honorable mention in the show --

MR. PREUSSER: The Houston annual.

MR. BROWN: -- was there at that time in Houston, was it likely you would have had someone purchase this painting, or did you wish to keep these to yourself?

MR. PREUSSER: No. They were available for purchase, but there wasn't much sold.

MR. BROWN: There weren't -- there wasn't much of a public there for modernistic art?

MR. PREUSSER: Not very much. The one thing I must say about the Museum of Fine Arts is that Mr. Chillman who was part-time -- was half-time director there and half-time professor of architecture at Rice was a strong supporter of mine and reinforced a lot of things that he felt got me and related to the critics, and that way, I got some recognition in the press. So those early days were very important to me.

MR. BROWN: But as yet, there was no public for this in Houston to speak of, was there?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, there was no abstract painting going on in particular.

MR. BROWN: There were a few of you, as I recall --

MR. PREUSSER: There were a few.

MR. BROWN: -- you sort of had an informal grouping --

MR. PREUSSER: In the McNeill Davidson's group, there were a few, about three or four that were -- that have gone on and become well known.

MR. BROWN: So this is still 1937.

MR. PREUSSER: '37.

MR. BROWN: And I think there are a few more that -- is there another one of the 1930s here?

MR. PREUSSER: The "Warlike Theme" is the next year. Now --

MR. BROWN: Right here, "Warlike Theme."

MR. PREUSSER: "Warlike Theme" is to me the most important work I ever did.

MR. BROWN: Why is that?

MR. PREUSSER: It means more to me because of the experience. I was listening to the radio while Hitler -- a report of Hitler's march into Czechoslovakia, which was a year before war was declared, and this subject matter revealed itself only to me only after I'd finished it which I thought had a warlike quality. There are tanks, dirigibles, ships, and that's why it's titled that because -- and it was titled that and revealed its subject to me subconsciously.

MR. BROWN: But you do recall that that was extremely important event?

MR. PREUSSER: I can recall the experience and sitting in my studio painting that while I was listening to the reports of Hitler going into Czechoslovakia so that's why it has a special meaning to me.

MR. BROWN: And you say it was very important because that -- the war that followed was a watershed for you in your life?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, indeed it was because I ended up in the camouflage section of the Army.

MR. BROWN: Yes. Now, this is 1930 --

MR. PREUSSER: '38. Now, we -- the next one is again back to 1937. It's an improvisation, and I have quite a number still of that period. I'm just now beginning to appreciate them. I put them -- tucked them away in a trunk until the Transco exhibit developed, and then I got some --

MR. BROWN: The recent exhibit in Houston?

MR. PREUSSER: In Houston. And then I realized that I had something here that should not stay in the trunk.

MR. BROWN: Now, that is a combination that -- the one on the right of -- it's a still life, it looks to me, and perhaps is that an interior? I mean, the one we just -- you're just now talking about.

MR. PREUSSER: No. That's complete abstract.

MR. BROWN: Completely abstract?

MR. PREUSSER: It's called "Improvisation." It's an improvisation.

MR. BROWN: Okay. We're now looking at "Organic Structure" which is --

MR. PREUSSER: 1938.

MR. BROWN: And the oil on Masonite.

MR. PREUSSER: Masonite.

MR. BROWN: Was that your favorite material at that time?

MR. PREUSSER: In the early days, that was, and I later went back to that surface. But this one relates in a way to the "Dwarf Dwellings," the first one we talked about, in that it's etched back with an ice pick. But the paint here was applied with scraped on with a palette knife, and again, this is an early work that I wouldn't part with.

MR. BROWN: Well, this has some feeling -- it looks of buildings and yet it's all -- there are only parts of them, and they're in a rather lively setting, aren't they, of --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes.

MR. BROWN: Almost trouble, isn't it?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and it's not -- you know, "Organic Structure," I guess I must have titled it that because it had some kind of connotation of something that was not man-made even though it has buildings.

MR. BROWN: Were you -- do you recall, were you consciously trying to get away from realism at this time?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, this was '38. By '40, I was out of this period completely.

MR. BROWN: You were out of this period?

MR. PREUSSER: Out of anything that had to do with subject matter except I came back to a little subject matter later.

MR. BROWN: Well, even here the subject matter is very --

MR. PREUSSER: Is very loose, yes, right. So that sort of completes the --

MR. BROWN: The 19 --

MR. PREUSSER: No. We've got another important --

MR. BROWN: This is one called "Time Sonata," oil and Masonite, 1938. This suggests to me some interest and awareness of music as well. Is there --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, as a matter of fact, during that period, our group from McNeill Davidson, we would meet in the evenings or we'd go to the symphony or the ballet, and we were very much in love with music appreciation. And as you can see, it still has the ice pick incised lines.

MR. BROWN: It does have that, yes, but --

MR. PREUSSER: But it's completely abstract.

MR. BROWN: But it's also much more flowing and rhythmic, it seems to me. It is a sonata in a sense. Do you think you were trying to find a parallel in paint for what you heard and felt about music?

MR. PREUSSER: I think not any particular piece, but I think that was, if I can recollect right, it had to do with that. Now, you'll notice that there's a silver cast to that. That was applied by putting the paint on rather thin, oil paint on the Masonite, and then sprinkling silver powder on and scraping it off, rubbing it off. And that is how that -- that was the first time I began to depart exclusively -- from exclusive use of oil paint. So that was an important departure.

MR. BROWN: Was that a rather daring for you to do, do you think? Were you a little intimidated, or you just were very, very curious?

MR. PREUSSER: I was curious, and I started -- I found by accident that you could scrape this very fine powder. It may have been aluminum rather than silver and that it scraped off, that it rubbed on very nicely.

MR. BROWN: And then how -- then you would scrape into it?

MR. PREUSSER: No. Then I would scrape into it afterwards, yes.

MR. BROWN: The colors here are blues and pinks and roses and grays and blacks and silver, quite a different palette from your other work that we've looked at.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right.

MR. BROWN: Why do you suppose you went to this sort of palette? The others seem more earthy and organic.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, of course, you have to remember that there are a lot of things in between these that we have been discussing --

MR. BROWN: Sure, these are isolated from a larger group.

MR. PREUSSER: -- and when we get through with the 30s, we can look at some of them.

MR. BROWN: Very good.

MR. PREUSSER: And talk about them. So I don't know what sequence this was in in terms of what had gone before and after each year, but I was very productive in those years, in the '30s and the '40s and the '50s.

MR. BROWN: Now, this is on the eve of your going to Chicago to the school of design. In '38, you went in '39, as I recall.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right. I went in '39 so this was just before I went to Chicago. And I don't know what I did

after this before going to Chicago.

MR. BROWN: So this is still --

MR. PREUSSER: But you -- there was no influence from Chicago until we get into the '39s.

MR. BROWN: This is still then a -- you're still very much being taught by McNeill Davidson.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: She sounds to me to have been a rather remarkable person.

MR. PREUSSER: She was a very dynamic person. Her father had been the largest slave owner in Texas, and she had been an opera singer in Denver. And she and her husband went bankrupt, his business, and they moved to Houston in the early '30s, a little before the '30s. And she started painting, and she became a well-known woman painter for her day having won recognition in the early St. Louis World's Fair. So she was a painter herself and a very good one, but she didn't paint abstracts. She painted very beautiful landscapes and flowers and that sort of thing, but she was very open to every one of us doing our thing and encouraged these differences.

MR. BROWN: She was a very broadminded teacher.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right, right, and she was well studied. She had read and passed on Albert Barnes' book, "The Art of Painting," which was a bit of my bible at that time.

MR. BROWN: Oh, was it, was it?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes. And incidentally, I guess you've heard, that museum is now going to be open to the public, which is a rare exception --

MR. BROWN: And they also have some financial difficulty.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: What was it in Barnes' book, "The Art of Painting" that you were -- was vivid to you?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I think it was primarily his analysis of structure and organization and how you -- how analyzing that Matisse and Picasso and how their organization. And so much based on that that I grew up with, which is so different from what prevailed later. Organization didn't mean anything in a certain period of art.

MR. BROWN: What, were you supposed to simply express yourself?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right. But that's where my orientation has always been, has been to think of terms of structure.

MR. BROWN: So a painting like this, behind it lies pretty careful planning where –

MR. PREUSSER: Well, in most cases, it's not really sketched. I'll mention the ones that I sketched before. This was never pre-sketched. This was something I just did automatically. I just -- most things are improvised, particularly in this early period. But that's one of the paintings that went to a collector who bought 14 of my paintings recently and he has a large collection now and I'm glad it's in it.

MR. BROWN: You kept this painting as well as many others?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right. But it's interesting that the collector only buys things up to 1949.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see. That's a particular era.

MR. PREUSSER: That era, right.

MR. BROWN: '38 then is your last full year in Houston before you go off to Chicago, school.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right. I went in the fall of '39.

MR. BROWN: Are there other any -- you have photos or slides of other things from the '30s that you wanted to show me before we go to the '40s?

MR. PREUSSER: Let me check.

MR. BROWN: Now, we're looking at some photographs of work of the '30s, and I wanted to begin. You did a great many drawings. Here's one we're looking at --

MR. PREUSSER: That's right. And well, most -- a lot of drawings but even more of watercolors, and that's one of the rare ones. I rarely did colored pencils.

MR. BROWN: This is a colored pencil drawing, 1937, and it is -- looks to me to be quite an abstract composition, very vivid coloration, is contrasted with that, the color in "Sonata," which we just discussed. These are blues, aquamarines and greens which are very vivid colors.

MR. PREUSSER: But you notice they still have structure to them.

MR. BROWN: Oh, yes. They're not simply amorphous or anything of that sort. Here is a watercolor, 1937.

MR. PREUSSER: Now, there was a lot of those that I did, and I haven't even framed them yet. I must have at least 100 of them.

MR. BROWN: Did you do these as studies or just as exercises?

MR. PREUSSER: No. I did them as paintings. Sometimes I would do them larger, and I would cut out sections that I liked and that –

MR. BROWN: Now, some of these are -- this is quite small. This is 5-by-4 inches.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, yes.

MR. BROWN: And it's -- I can't see, but it looks -- is it somewhat abstract, although it looks --

MR. PREUSSER: Very abstract.

MR. BROWN: -- flowers are suggested --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it does suggest flowers but not very.

MR. BROWN: Is this -- it's very -- it looks to be very delicate in its coloring.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, very subtle in --

MR. BROWN: And was that characteristic of your watercolors at least at that time?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, except for the later ones in that period.

MR. BROWN: This, you used casein as your medium at that time.

MR. PREUSSER: Right. Was that -- does that say what, casein?

MR. BROWN: It says casein wash and paper.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, that's right, yes.

MR. BROWN: Now, you've mentioned already when we looked at the "Dwarf Dwellings," and this is another example of what I guess you say was a series of --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I do remember those which probably were no larger than 10-by-14.

MR. BROWN: Inches.

MR. PREUSSER: Inches, which is quite smaller than the "Dwarf Dwellings," which is quite large.

MR. BROWN: This one's called "Hidden Place," and again, one can detect, I think, elements of architecture.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: But it's all within a very -- I think of as a very tumultuous setting.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: The coloration is --

MR. PREUSSER: Has the same technique as “Dwarf Dwellings” with the etching back with an ice pick.

MR. BROWN: I see, yes. And --

MR. PREUSSER: I did a number of those. I must have done 15 or 20 of those before I did “Dwarf Dwellings.”

MR. BROWN: The coloring here is very rich. There are some very dark tones as well.

MR. PREUSSER: But the overall effect of all of them are dark.

MR. BROWN: Was this sort of a -- do you recall any kind of a gloominess in your feelings when you were doing this or --

MR. PREUSSER: No.

MR. BROWN: It says ’38. This is just before the war which you pointed out --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, but this was before --

MR. BROWN: Before that.

MR. PREUSSER: -- that [Inaudible].

MR. BROWN: And then finally in the ‘30s, you really youthfully going and looking at various media, various approaches to -- and this is a stipple addition, 1938.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, it’s one of about five paintings I did with a stipple brush. And it was a breakaway from the traditional brush and palette knife.

MR. BROWN: And you would just sort of dab --

MR. PREUSSER: Stipple it on.

MR. BROWN: -- the paint on. Did you find -- if you only did that many, I gather you didn’t find that particularly satisfying or --

MR. PREUSSER: I didn’t carry through with it very much.

MR. BROWN: This is certainly a very abstract one. It looks like its roots might be a still life but only barely.

MR. PREUSSER: Those are stippling. You know, it was even more improvised than anything because it just carried on from one thing to the other with a stipple brush. Didn’t change any colors.

MR. BROWN: You mean one thing would just lead to another?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right.

MR. BROWN: Most of your painting is either from the imagination or memory or it’s just improvising?

MR. PREUSSER: I’d say most of my paintings grew out of experiences that I only recognized after I did them. So I am pretty much of an intuitive painter all the way through.

MR. BROWN: Then we have here a photograph of a work made, I gather, just after you went to Chicago in 1939.

MR. PREUSSER: That was the first year in Chicago, and that was not an exercise at the Institute of Design but something I did on a weekend. And it is a oil on illustration board.

MR. BROWN: And to what degree do you think you were very quickly affected by the teaching and the --

MR. PREUSSER: I wasn’t affected at all by the teaching at this point. You’ll see some things later that were, but this was just recalling what I was doing in Houston just before I went there.

MR. BROWN: Yes, it has rather limited color range, it looks at least from this photograph. Sort of a tonality of drawing, you can see blacks on sort of a yellow ground --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right.

MR. BROWN: -- or brownish yellow. And these are fairly pre-formed. Some of them are more rather geometric. There’s a circle here and there.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes.

MR. BROWN: Now we'll look at the '40s, and this is a new phase because you've gone -- you're at the School of Design in Chicago.

MR. PREUSSER: It's the Institute of Design.

MR. BROWN: Institute, it was then called, right.

MR. PREUSSER: And this was done, "Color Action."

MR. BROWN: You're referring to the one on the left?

MR. PREUSSER: The one on the left is "Color Action," and another one again acquired by the collector that bought 14 paintings recently.

MR. BROWN: Now, this is certainly suddenly everything is rigid and straight lines.

MR. PREUSSER: Rigid and influenced by Maholy-Nagy, I guess, more than anybody else.

MR. BROWN: Was he your principal teacher?

MR. PREUSSER: No. Gyorgy Kepes was my principal teacher.

MR. BROWN: Kepes was?

MR. PREUSSER: But as you can see, it's a complete departure from the past, and it does show that something has happened in my experiences.

MR. BROWN: Oh, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: As does the one on the right.

MR. BROWN: The one on the right, yes, a sort of irregular forms, but they're geometric forms.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right.

MR. BROWN: They're all within very crisply defined confines. Do you recall doing these sort of under the discipline of school, these here?

MR. PREUSSER: That, yes. Those two, yes. But again, it's not like "Color Action," but it is very geometric.

MR. BROWN: Oh, very. Now, were you -- when you went to the institute, were you -- did you go there primarily as a painter? That was your intention to be a painter?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, it's an interesting thing that happened. McNeill Davidson and my mother drove me to Chicago to interview Moholy. And Moholy told McNeill, he says, "I can't teach your former student to paint. I can't do anything to change his" -- not to change. He says, "I cannot teach him to be an artist, but I can teach him things about structure and about Bauhaus, old Bauhaus philosophy and all that sort of thing."

But he admitted right away when he saw my work that I was on roll in terms of what I was doing in that he couldn't contribute to that aspect of it.

MR. BROWN: So he felt that you had the technique somewhat mostly under your belt?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right.

MR. BROWN: And he could introduce you to --

MR. PREUSSER: The whole philosophy and techniques of machine-derived art.

MR. BROWN: Now, did you know what Bauhaus was all about?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Did you hear this time or did your mother and McNeill Davidson tell you this only later?

MR. PREUSSER: No. I was in on the interview, but the reason I went to there was what I saw in "Time"

magazine, a little article on the opening which was the year before of the New Bauhaus, it was called. And that's when I said I want to go there just from the review of the opening and what it was all about.

MR. BROWN: What do you suppose it was that attracted you?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it was so different from anything that existed in the country. I studied. I knew I wanted to study it, but I'd never seen anything that was of the approach. And, of course, I was proven to be right because eventually, history has proven that Bauhaus and the Institute of Design I followed is the greatest influence in teaching in art and design in this country. So I made a wise decision, I think.

MR. BROWN: Well, when you got there, can you describe a little bit -- were you given a great deal of freedom, or what was -- how did --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it was a very structured program, and it included professors from the University of Chicago teaching biology and mathematics and chemistry and all of that, but it also primarily was focused on drawing. It was minor, but there was a drawing class. And there was a light and color class, and there was photography, the first time I ever used a camera. And architecture, George Fred Keck, who was a well-known Chicago architect was a architectural instructor.

MR. BROWN: Did you have all of these things? Did you take --

MR. PREUSSER: I had all of them, yes. I had the complete program. Yes, it was a full day's program, and I went there for only one year, '39 to '40. And then '40, '41, I was in New Orleans, and you'll see some things that I did there. And then '41, '42, I went back to Chicago, the Institute of Design, and as I was about to go back, I got a call from the Army. And I got to Chicago. Moholy-Nagy wrote a letter explaining that I was doing -- going to do camouflage research with Gyorgy Kepes and could I have a deferment, and they granted me the deferment until the end of the academic school year at which time I went into the 84th Engineers Camouflage Division.

And when I went to enroll when my deferment was over, the sergeant put down infantry. And I said, "Wait a minute, that's supposed to be Engineers Camouflage Unit." I said, "Look in your file."

He looked in the file and said, "Oh, you're right."

If I hadn't been alert enough, I'd have ended up in the infantry instead of the Engineers Camouflage Division, and I was in a platoon of 12 men. I mean, it was a wonderful experience, the camouflage, all the way through. We went from North Africa all the way through to Germany and back to the Brenner Pass. It was all camouflage. So I was in the right place.

MR. BROWN: You were very fortunate then.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, I was.

MR. BROWN: So these are -- that we've seen are two examples from your -- from that first year, '39 and '40. You have Chicago --

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Are there others, too, from that year? Now, we're looking at "Light and Dark Equivalence" of 1941, an oil on canvas. And this was during that brief time you were in New Orleans.

MR. PREUSSER: Between -- yes, and I did a number of things in New Orleans, but this was one of three of the most important works done of that period. It was the middle piece of a triptych. And on the left was a painting the same size, only it was horizontal, and it was "Circular and Angular Equivalence." And on the left was another painting, horizontal, both of which led into this central painting. And the three paintings were the same dimensions, and each was divided in half. This one on the wall, as you see, is divided vertically, and the two horizontals were divided in the middle horizontally.

MR. BROWN: Horizontally?

MR. PREUSSER: Now, the thing I set myself -- this was one of two paintings where I really set myself the problem, and that was the rules -- one thing we learned from Barnes was that you don't divide a canvas in half. But I decided to see [Inaudible] of not being able to divide it in half. And these three paintings were the results of that experiment. As you can see, it works in a way that does allow a division of the canvas, and yet it holds together as a structure completely.

Now, this is another form of stippled painting in part. Where you have the tonal relations, they were done with a stipple brush from light to dark --

MR. BROWN: They were?

MR. PREUSSER: And so the whole painting except for the right side which is one flat color, all of the other colors have very subtle gradations of light to dark. And the other two paintings, the two horizontals were the same.

MR. BROWN: Now, there are occasional -- a red here, part of a disk which in ungradated.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, but most of --

MR. BROWN: But by and large, it is graded, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: And it still is using the etched line.

MR. BROWN: But now this is -- certainly, I like the work you were doing first in Chicago. It's very disciplined looking.

MR. PREUSSER: It is.

MR. BROWN: It's very straight lines or circles, geometric forms. Was there a particular teacher -- this is the Newcomb School of Art at Tulane. Was there a particular teacher there, or were you somewhat on your own?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I went to the Newcomb School of Art to study with one man that was oriented in the Bauhaus, but he taught completely different.

MR. BROWN: What was his name?

MR. PREUSSER: Fields, last name was Fields.

MR. BROWN: Fields.

MR. PREUSSER: And he was the first communist I ever knew.

MR. BROWN: Oh, really?

MR. PREUSSER: And he had a lot of political problems at Newcomb. And I didn't really care for -- I didn't get much from him.

MR. BROWN: No?

MR. PREUSSER: But I took one day a week there, and I also took a history class at Tulane when I was there. Otherwise, I was spending my time painting. And so the learning experience in New Orleans was probably just had no effect whatsoever.

MR. BROWN: It was pretty limited?

MR. PREUSSER: It was limited, and what I had acquired [Inaudible] in terms of [Inaudible] --

MR. BROWN: Well, you obviously had a good deal of self-discipline by then, and if you started doing something as ambitious as this --

MR. PREUSSER: And incidentally, in New Orleans, I stayed in an apartment near McNeill Davidson, who had moved to New Orleans. That was the reason I went there, and she was really no longer my teacher. But she criticized and made comments about my work, and so I had a upstairs apartment that I turned into a studio. I spent most of my time other than those two days a week at the school painting and a lot of sketching.

Now, this was -- this and the other horizontal of this triptych were all drawn out first. They were planned very well.

MR. BROWN: Did you -- would you have begun to learn this in Chicago?

MR. PREUSSER: No, because I didn't study painting there. I mean, my method of sketching out a work --

MR. BROWN: You developed --

MR. PREUSSER: -- execution was not a part of my [Inaudible] at that time until [Inaudible].

MR. BROWN: So until now and you developed -- devised it on your own.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I think this is the first painting that I did. These triptychs was the first that I did in that --

MR. BROWN: Now, there you have a photograph of the one that you say is related to that --

MR. PREUSSER: Circular and angular, you can see it's the same thing on the horizontal divided and the dark and the light.

MR. BROWN: Yes, and so then it's part of that same triptych.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, this is the right -- this is the left side --

MR. BROWN: Left side.

MR. PREUSSER: And the right side, I've lost track of. It was auctioned off, I hear, in New York from a collector who had it.

MR. BROWN: Now, is there another one you wanted to -- first [Inaudible] called "Composition No. 1" of 1940 now in the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, and it's also "Intermediate Pulsation" of '41.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, now, both of these --

MR. BROWN: These are fairly large paintings, aren't they?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, no, the one that won the purchase prize in 1940 at the Houston annual is the --

MR. BROWN: Is the "Composition No. 1."

MR. PREUSSER: -- No. 1. Actually, it was three smaller watercolors that won the purchase prize. This is the only one of them I have documented.

MR. BROWN: And this is a watercolor.

MR. PREUSSER: And this is a casein, yes.

MR. BROWN: Casein. Now, what can we say about that?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it certainly --

MR. BROWN: It certainly continues the increased structure that we're now seeing in your painting.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right. But it was a completely different medium, and I think for that reason, except for the structure, it's quite different. And it was the first real recognition I had gotten because it was a purchase prize.

And the other painting was done in 1941. I think I did that in Chicago as an extracurricular activity, and it was Masonite with pen and ink as well as oil.

MR. BROWN: Well, this suggests to me that you're moving -- being able to handle increasing number of media. Right now, you've just mentioned pen and ink plus oil that your -- in your schooling and in your -- you're still exploring a great deal.

MR. PREUSSER: I think was one -- yes, the experience was that it gave me some idea about how I might go about being exploratory with medium.

Now, that's -- now, we go into --

MR. BROWN: We are looking at an untitled work, casein on paper, 1940, very crisp. It looks to me like a combination of lines, lined lines in ink and then essentially primary colors.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and that was done in Chicago before I went to New Orleans, last year in Chicago. And perhaps [Inaudible] probably most influenced by Moholy of anything I did. It's not Moholy really, but I mean it has the kind of precision that Moholy's work had.

MR. BROWN: Do you recall, did Moholy or others critique your work?

MR. PREUSSER: No, they never even saw it.

MR. BROWN: They never saw these?

MR. PREUSSER: No, no.

MR. BROWN: What would they have seen of your work?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, what I did in photography and in the design workshop and hand sculptures and design color problems [Inaudible].

MR. BROWN: But was painting your sort of -- I think what I'm getting is painting is your private --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right, and I think the influence came from a problem that I had in receding and advancing color. And this was a way of working with color that made differences especially -- a special depth and were advancing and receding. The warm colors advanced. The cool colors recede. But it's a very precise -- perhaps the most precise thing I've ever done. That's casein and ink.

MR. BROWN: I take it this was not your own free choice to work in this fashion so disciplined was this.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it was my choice of the moment because I was really influenced by the Bauhaus, by the Institute of Design's disciplined way of organizing, which was a different kind of organization than I had experienced with McNeill Davidson.

MR. BROWN: You have some photographs of some drawings of this time, I think. It's a little hard to tell, but maybe you could just describe them briefly.

MR. PREUSSER: On Sundays, I would sit down and make little 8-by-10 on typing paper as the surface and made ink drawings, thermals of weird figures and others completely abstract and then birds.

And then I did the next event, I guess you would say, in the '40s. I went in the Army in 1942, and I did three drawings only during my two and a half years overseas. And this is the three drawings, pen and ink on paper, three drawings.

MR. BROWN: Well, these are sort of almost still lifes, aren't they, but they're very abstract. It's hard to tell.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, red flower, a sort of a flower and another is an indication of a head.
MR. BROWN: Certainly, they bear little resemblance to the fact you've gone to the Institute of Design.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right, yes. Now, the next thing we should move to, I guess, is around the corner here in the exhibit.

MR. BROWN: Okay. So the Army was not a productive time.

MR. PREUSSER: Not productive at all.

MR. BROWN: You obviously, though, were in camouflage. You had to do a lot -- you had a lot of assigned work that was somewhat related to design.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes. We did a lot of things in camouflage which was most of it was quite interesting work.

MR. BROWN: And did you end your time -- I think you said in Germany? Is that where your --

MR. PREUSSER: I ended up in Germany, yes, but we crossed the Rhine with a dummy bridge. And we prepared a bridge on the Rhone in France and dismantled it. And the dummy bridge was to deceive the enemy thinking it was a tank bridge. As a matter of fact, it wouldn't hold up anything but people. We used to -- one of the men in my platoon was a very humanistic guy, and he would steal across at night and help the refugees walk across to safety on that bridge.
But it was primarily designed to get the bombs away from the real bridges, and that was a very [Inaudible] task to get a pulley over to the enemy side and a rope back and then oil drums pushed across, pulled across and then canvas on top of it. But that was one of the biggest camouflage missions that we performed. And after that -- or prior to that in Italy, we did dummy command posts, and we did dummy baseball diamonds and deceived the enemy that we were preparing for the big push in Italy. Make them think that nothing was going on. We deceived them by showing playgrounds and all kinds of stuff that didn't seem to be preparation for an advance.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see, yes, as though you were just settling in.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Much of this time, you were in or near the combat area then in this work?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, not really upfront, but I mean we did a lot of camouflage of garlands over tanks and that sort of thing in the back. Particularly in Italy, it was all working up to the Arno and the big push. And I can recall that I was on my way to the Arno at night and got orders to turn back, and that was the biggest slaughter of American soldiers that had took place during the war was on -- except for D-Day in France.

MR. BROWN: Was what, the --

MR. PREUSSER: The Arno crossing.

MR. BROWN: Crossing the Arno?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and that was another stroke of good luck I didn't foresee. I was halfway and got orders to turn back, my particular section.

MR. BROWN: What would your days be like in the camouflage? Were you building these mock structures or painting them or --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, we were building -- when we weren't doing that kind of thing, later on, we did signs towards the end of the war for the military, directional signs. So I did a lot of sign painting. In fact, we were in Oberammergau, I guess, for over a month, and all we did was paint signs.

MR. BROWN: Oh, really? So you got a very peculiar tour of Europe at first?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, all of our unit was artists of some kind, either industrial designers or painters. It was a very congenial group except for one man who had chosen the Army over a prison sentence, a steeplejack from Texas. And he was always getting in trouble, but he always did the most dangerous jobs. But --

MR. BROWN: He's the one that would swim across the Rhine, for example?

MR. PREUSSER: That's right. And he went AWOL at one point, and I recall being a sergeant. I was in command of him when we were in a convoy moving from one post to the next, and I was informed by my lieutenant that if this man got away, I'd have to serve his sentence. So -- and we had an air raid en route. And I had to follow him with my rifle very closely to make sure he didn't get away.

MR. BROWN: Second tape. The camouflage work, did you have to follow strictly ways of doing things, or as artists, were you given some leeway?

MR. PREUSSER: We were given hardly any leeway. I mean, it was [Inaudible] the manual on camouflage was very primitive in the Second World War, and there was an awful lot that was not known about. But we did try to get into the problem of using -- what is it called -- [Inaudible] photography where you can whether it's artificial color or real color. We had that problem to deal with which was the most technical and --

MR. BROWN: You mean you had to therefore disguise things --

MR. PREUSSER: Had to disguise things differently and we had to put -- we had done research on that in Chicago. Incidentally, I don't know if I mentioned in a previous tape, but the research in Chicago included --

MR. BROWN: I remember that. I've seen the pamphlets that Kepes and so forth put out. The Institute of Design had courses on camouflage.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, they didn't have courses, but he had a class. It was commissioned -- not commissioned but had a grant to do camouflage research, and he and his wife and another student, Jesse Rochape [phonetic] and I were the team. And besides doing a lot of the studies of how [Inaudible] shadows and all of that sort of thing which related to how you camouflage a building standing up in the air, we did research on how you could transform Lake Michigan into looking like the city of Chicago so that if enemies came over, they would drop the bombs in the lake instead of --

MR. BROWN: The city.

MR. PREUSSER: And we did this as a diagram in terms of lighting. That was the most interesting job we had and a great experience, but it was so far from what we all [Inaudible] the enemy coming into Chicago. But at that point, we didn't know what was going to happen.

MR. BROWN: But now, when you were -- then went abroad in the Army, were there times when you had to be quite innovative?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, indeed. We had to be innovative in techniques, in getting across the line and all that sort of thing. We sort of invented it as we went along and tried under trial [Inaudible].

MR. BROWN: But what were you -- you began, I believe, you said in North Africa.

MR. PREUSSER: In North Africa is right. We went straight from the States to North Africa.

MR. BROWN: What about the desert, how did that differ from what you --

MR. PREUSSER: It was not -- it was teaching the French camouflage, the French army, and it was [Inaudible] something difficult to try to teach the French when you don't speak French. We had to do it all by demonstration, but it was an experience with the French army. And that was our mission there before we went on D-Day into [Inaudible] France. But the -- that started the camouflage.

And the desert was a very, physically very taxing situation in North Africa. It was right after Rommel had been defeated that we [Inaudible]. I was suffering from hay fever, and it was a terrible experience for me.

MR. BROWN: Well, you came out when -- did you muster -- when did you muster out of the --

MR. PREUSSER: Came out in '46 and went home to Houston and by '47 was in the Art Center in Los Angeles with [Inaudible].
MR. BROWN: What led you to go there to the Art Center School?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I just decided I wanted to try something else. I didn't know what else to do with my life at that point. However, I did do some painting in '46 to '47. This is a photograph of one I recall [Inaudible] 1946, and you can see where there is a theme here of fish.

MR. BROWN: Yes, was this one done before you went out there?

MR. PREUSSER: Before, these were done before.

MR. BROWN: This is one -- this is a 22-by-14, a fairly modest size. The medium is --

MR. PREUSSER: The medium is scratchboard, I think, with paint.

MR. BROWN: Did you throw your -- once you were out, did you throw yourself into your painting? Do you recall, was it a great release after having been in the military?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I did. Yes, right. But, of course, we had to spend some time before we came back on the Queen Mary or whatever it was [Inaudible] so there was a period of dormancy there.

Then in '46, I also did this painting, one of the many that the Downtown Gallery sold called "Visual Ensemble." I think it was reproduced in "Life" magazine.

MR. BROWN: That is a -- what is the medium there?

MR. PREUSSER: The medium is oil on Masonite.

MR. BROWN: When did you begin with Downtown Gallery which was run by --

MR. PREUSSER: 1951 to '54, I was with Downtown Gallery, called the Newcomers Group. Ten people, selected by Mrs. Halpert after touring the country as an addition to her roster, people like de Kooning and Stuart Davis and Garver, all those. That is another story which was a very interesting experience [Inaudible], all that.

I might just mention quickly that the opening, I didn't get to go to in New York of the Newcomers Group. All of the people were provided an envelope in which they sealed their selection of [Inaudible] most prominent painters of the future, and I still don't know whether those envelopes have been opened or not.

MR. BROWN: You mean people who can --

MR. PREUSSER: Because Mrs. Halpert died and her estate went somewhere, and I don't know whether there was a limit on the date at which time it could be opened or not. But the 10 --

MR. BROWN: You mean the people who came to the opening were asked to write down who they --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, who they --

MR. BROWN: -- feel.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Now, this -- these three drawings we're looking at here which are charcoal pencil 1947, are these done as you went to Los Angeles?

MR. PREUSSER: These were done as problems at Art Center, and this was -- "The Logic of Drawing" was the name of the course.

MR. BROWN: "The Logic of Drawing."

MR. PREUSSER: Uh-huh, "Logical Drawing," I guess it was called.

MR. BROWN: Logical. What was the aim of that course?

MR. PREUSSER: The aim was to use your imagination in terms of configurations, both to make them real in terms of light, shadow, reflective light. And as you can see, the one on the left is a creature, an imaginary creature with a bird sticking out of some cliffs and --

MR. BROWN: It's almost a skull, isn't it?

MR. PREUSSER: It's almost a skull, but it's a very unreal image. But it has realism that comes with one source of illumination with the highlights and the reflective light at the core and all --

MR. BROWN: Texture, everything and yet they are nonexistent forms.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and --

MR. BROWN: Was this -- certainly reminds one of some aspects of surrealism which by then was --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, you see this --

MR. BROWN: -- playing out. You would have been aware of surrealism, I suppose, even in the '30s; is that right?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes, sure. I didn't care for Dali at all, and I thought a great deal of Paul Klee.

MR. BROWN: Paul Klee, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: But the one on the right here is another one of that same thing which I did on my own, not as a class project.

MR. BROWN: A strange picture.

MR. PREUSSER: A strange picture, yes. And the one in the middle was done from a model, a [Inaudible], and you can see at the top, it's broken up into the analysis of what the basic forms are, the cylinder. This is where -- and the pyramid.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MR. PREUSSER: And then they're put together above in a stylized way, and then the rendering of the skull according to that analysis. I guess this is about the only thing in the exhibition that was done as a school project.

MR. BROWN: Were your teachers there particularly good?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, exceptionally good in this particular course.

MR. BROWN: Who was the teacher in this course?

MR. PREUSSER: I can't remember his name now, but he's written a book. And this was reproduced in the book. I can't recall his name.

MR. BROWN: Were there --

MR. PREUSSER: It's a Russian name.

MR. BROWN: What were other examples of the teachers out there? Was the curriculum fairly broad?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes. Ayers Agency, advertising agency, was a strong supporter of this school.

MR. BROWN: I see, financially.

MR. PREUSSER: So this was a commercially-oriented school teaching advertising design and life drawing. I did a lot of life drawing studies there, my first real life drawing studies. And had drawings of class and so it's quite different from Chicago from two respects. One, it was commercially oriented, and it also did a lot of realistic drawing and that sort of thing. But it was excellent. It was an excellent school.

MR. BROWN: So in a way, you got the basic grounding that most conventional education you would have probably had in the beginning.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Did you think ever staying out there? Was this a place that you could settle down --

MR. PREUSSER: No, as matter of fact, after the -- at the end of the first academic year, I got a call from Houston Museum of Fine Arts offering me a teaching position in the Museum of Fine Arts School. And I picked up on it and came back.

MR. BROWN: So that was in the spring/summer of 1947 then?

MR. PREUSSER: '47. And then later in the '50s, I took a professor's job at the University of Houston as well, and I was later also curator of -- social curator of education at the Museum of Fine Arts. But I did a lot of teaching in Houston. And at the same time, I was an art editor for the "Texas Cancer Bulletin," which was a real thing at that time in terms of medical.

MR. BROWN: Yes, we'll go over that.

Now, we're looking at work that I gather you did after you got back to Houston in 1948, "Directional Multiplicity," which is oil on canvas.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, on canvas board.

MR. BROWN: Canvas board.

MR. PREUSSER: And it is still reminiscent of the disciplined kind of structure that I learned in Chicago. We considered it a important thing again. It's part of the 14 -- one of the 14 paintings acquired by a local collector here and --

MR. BROWN: Now, this looks to be -- it's very worked, isn't it? I mean, I think you've -- have you scraped away?

MR. PREUSSER: No, there's no scraping.

MR. BROWN: But there's this little --

MR. PREUSSER: But there's a lot of little --

MR. BROWN: -- or something, lines.

MR. PREUSSER: -- texturing, yes.

MR. BROWN: Texturing.

MR. PREUSSER: But it's made up primarily of lines incasing color areas.

MR. BROWN: And then there are lines that almost become color areas themselves.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right.

MR. BROWN: They're rather broad areas that are gradated, I would say, the way -- but not done with a stippling technique; is that right?

MR. PREUSSER: No, I don't think there's any stippling in that.

MR. BROWN: Did this require -- or in this case, did you plan ahead? Is there an under drawing?

MR. PREUSSER: No, I didn't plan ahead.

MR. BROWN: Is there any under drawing on something like this?

MR. PREUSSER: No, no. This was -- primarily, I think I may have planned the lines somewhat, but the color incasing the color with the lines and the overflow of color beyond the lines was improvised.

MR. BROWN: This took place in the process of doing it?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes.

MR. BROWN: So was this typical, would you say? This is 1948. Is this typical of that time?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, why don't we just see right here, '48 right here.

MR. BROWN: Very good. So this one is not particularly typical. You have a photograph here of another work which is called --

MR. PREUSSER: It's the same year, '48. What's that one?

MR. BROWN: And this is called --

MR. PREUSSER: "Undulant Forms." Sold by the Downtown Gallery, and it's the same technique except it doesn't have the linear aspect.

MR. BROWN: No. It curves.

MR. PREUSSER: But it has the same kinds of textures, and it's all curvilinear and it's free forms and geometric.

MR. BROWN: Well, there's a great deal of working of the ground, isn't there?

MR. PREUSSER: Very much.

MR. BROWN: Is that through scratching?

MR. PREUSSER: Scratching, yes, most of it was through scratching, but some of the line painted on. The small thin lines painted in.

MR. BROWN: And this has an interesting combination of the kind of crisp and hard where it's scratched and then the very soft form, gradated forms.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Were you -- do you think perhaps intuitively or subconsciously you were trying to develop a balance, a tension between those two?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I think that's probably right. But it was a very meticulously executed, as meticulously as the "Directional Multiplicity" we were just talking about only in complete amorphous, free form shapes rather than geometric.

MR. BROWN: But again, done without under drawing or preparatory studies?

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, no preparation on that one.

The '40s with two things here, we have color prints of one is a couple of paintings on -- oil paintings on paper which I think indicate a considerable influence by Kandinsky, and they were done in the late '40s. And then the last one here in the very late '40s, like probably '49, a picture of birds which is a recurring theme in a number of my paintings. Fish and birds are recurring themes.

MR. BROWN: Yes, it's not unlike the one called "Shoals" that we saw.

MR. PREUSSER: No, and this is alcohol color on parchment paper.

MR. BROWN: Alcohol color?

MR. PREUSSER: Uh-huh.

MR. BROWN: Was alcohol color a new medium at the time?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, it was a new medium at the time, and it on the parchment would soak up the color. It made a very interesting effect.

MR. BROWN: Oh, indeed. Did you do many of the Kandinsky-like things, or was that simply a passing phase?

MR. PREUSSER: That was very short. I just only did three paintings of that type.

One done earlier than that was “Color Subtraction” which again is similar to “Undulant Form,” and then this very -- “Tonal Oval” painting which is a very --

MR. BROWN: I was going to ask that. For example, knowing about Kandinsky’s work, would that -- you had perhaps gone to see the Guggenheim collection by that time?

MR. PREUSSER: No, I hadn’t been -- well, I’d been to New York when I was in the Army, and I saw -- I went to the Guggenheim. I went to all the museums while I was in the Army at Fort Totten before I went overseas at which time also, I had quite a session with Alfred Stieglitz. He took me in his back office and talked to me for a long time.

MR. BROWN: Did he?

MR. PREUSSER: Very personable and very wonderful interview -- not an interview, but a wonderful discussion.

MR. BROWN: What kind of things -- wherein lay your interest in meeting him, photography?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, McNeill Davidson had met him earlier in New York, and so I had kind of an introduction. So that was why I stopped by to see him.

MR. BROWN: Do you recall some of the points he made to you or --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, he talked about the importance of modern painters and what he had done. That was before I read his book, his famous book. What was it called? “Alfred Stieglitz in America” or something.

But, of course, he was married to Georgia O’Keeffe, and he took me around the gallery and showed me a lot of his own photographs, that sort of thing.

MR. BROWN: Were you aware of O’Keeffe’s work at that time?

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes, I was aware of all of those people, yes.

There is one that’s called the “Drunkard” that’s still in Houston now at the Parkerson Gallery, and it is not unlike the “Undulant Form” and the “Directional Multiplicity” except it has a feeling of intoxication, I think, and a figure.

MR. BROWN: And a suggestion of a face that’s -- or a head that’s sort of askew.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: It combines the “Undulant Forms” and the more geometric forms of the other two paintings.

MR. PREUSSER: Now, this is a painting I --

MR. BROWN: What is this one called?

MR. PREUSSER: That’s also of that era, but it’s much more controlled.

MR. BROWN: It looks like ---

MR. PREUSSER: “Tonal Oval” is what it’s called, and it’s all made up of vertical strips of tonal changes with each strip.

MR. BROWN: And they look almost like parts of cylinders.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right. That painting, as the case with some other paintings, was returned by a collector in exchange for another one. So I now own this one. I’m glad it was returned because it was an early work, and I only have about 11 paintings from the ‘30s and ‘40s left in my studio. Less than 11 paintings do I own.

MR. BROWN: Well, this was of the late ‘40s, this “Tonal Oval.”

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, the ‘40s and the ‘30s, I have only about 11 [Inaudible], yes.

MR. BROWN: Let me ask: You were called in ’47 to teach in Houston, and did that teaching -- did you teach, how, in a very disciplined way or --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I kind of carried over what I experienced in the Institute of Design in Chicago, and that was I saw a lot of young ladies and old ladies along with youthful people and --

MR. BROWN: Were there an increasing number of serious students, or were they --

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes, they were very serious, and it was a good school. It was a good experience. And then I enjoyed also being the associate curator of education, which I had direction.

MR. BROWN: When you say you were influenced in your teaching which was your first teaching, right, in Houston --

MR. PREUSSER: Uh-huh.

MR. BROWN: -- by the Institute of Design, you mean there was a breadth of offerings, there was design --

MR. PREUSSER: No, it was primarily painting. I taught painting. I guess the influence was that they knew I'd been to a famous school and I discussed a lot. And also, I taught a big class to art teachers, high school teachers, on how they should -- might be change their ways of teaching children, and I did some TV programming on that, too.

I also taught at the community Jewish center in Houston.

MR. BROWN: Yes, a great variety of teaching you've done.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, well, the teaching, really, including the University of Houston and other places and the museum school went from '48 to '54.

MR. BROWN: We're now in the '50s. Until almost the mid '50s, you were in Houston, and then you came to MIT.

MR. PREUSSER: Until '54, right.

MR. BROWN: This painting we're looking at now called "Quadratic Gems," 1953, it looks as though again you're looking at other media. This is called a plastic --

MR. PREUSSER: Plastic paint, yes. I started working with paint that was manufactured for painting on Plexiglas. Now, there's an interesting story behind this. I did a lot of paintings, most of them [Inaudible] plastic paint. Calder visited my studio in Houston at one point. He was going to visit. He opened the -- went into the door. It was a separate building behind our house and he saw I was using plastic paint and he wouldn't go in. Those early years, he was aware of the hazard, health hazard, of what artists were working with. Now, I don't know whether he's accurate or not, but he wouldn't even go in the studio because of it.

MR. BROWN: What had led you to try this out? You just liked the effect it had on Plexiglas?

MR. PREUSSER: No, I just ordered some of it because I thought maybe I ought to try it. And you will note that this is owned by Dr. Brazelton. This is Dr. Brazelton, the famous pediatrician, and I exchanged three paintings during our child upbringing, our two children upbringing. And we paid for his services by exchange of paintings instead of money.

MR. BROWN: Oh, really? Well, that's not an unusual thing for artists to do.

MR. PREUSSER: And the other we'll get to will be a more important painting that he owns.

MR. BROWN: Well, this one looks very complex. There's a great many -- almost look like picture frames, one overlapping the other.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Again, did studies lie behind this in any way or --

MR. PREUSSER: No, this really just happened. I mean, it was --

MR. BROWN: But it's done extremely meticulously.

MR. PREUSSER: Actually, the whole background was manipulated very freely with the paint, and I believe -- just a second. Yes, that reminds me of -- this was -- everything was painted there except the white edging gradations was plastic paint put down and then gauze pressed on and lifted off so that's another technique I used.

MR. BROWN: Very nice, it gives a very nice textural effect. So did you repeat this sort of thing in working with plastic paint, or was this sort of just a short phase?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I did a lot of this plastic paint.

MR. BROWN: Oh, you did?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, a lot of paintings in plastic paint. Let's just go to that one even though -- it's in the '50s because it's another collector's. It's owned by --

MR. BROWN: This is after you arrived here.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and it's owned by Dr. Rosenbluth of MIT.

MR. BROWN: Yes, who's an official here at --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and also, Dr. Killian owned three of my paintings which I was unable to get for this show, but I wished I could have.

MR. BROWN: Now we're looking at a painting called "Kachina Dolls," 1954. Again, an example of the use of plastic paint on Masonite.

MR. PREUSSER: Masonite and the --

MR. BROWN: Was this done in Houston before you came here?

MR. PREUSSER: This painting was done before I came east. The -- just a minute. Let me check something. [Inaudible] closely -- all the paint was put on with a palette knife, and I think it is quite suggestive of kachina dolls.

MR. BROWN: Indeed, it is. And you had that in mind when you --

MR. PREUSSER: I had that in mind when I was working on it, yes, but it was not pre-sketched. I mean, it was -- but I consider it one of my better paintings that have implications of subject.

MR. BROWN: Well, this, you used a palette knife, but it's used very lightly.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and it's very thin.

MR. BROWN: The lighter colors seem to in a feathery way almost float above the others, above the background.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and the overall background is structureless whereas the configuration is linearly defined configuration of the images.

MR. BROWN: So it's linear plus structuralist underlying larger structures?

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Well, across the hall, here we have another painting I gather of the same time which looks much freer form.

MR. PREUSSER: Now, this was done on the Cape.

MR. BROWN: This is after you arrived.

MR. PREUSSER: Roughly after we arrived, and it was another painting that was owned by a collector and built a smaller house and it wasn't big enough for the painting. So I traded him two later works for this one, of which I was very happy because I consider this one of the really important things.

MR. BROWN: And what is the name of this painting?

MR. PREUSSER: "Ocean Side." And you can see, there is the moon above and reflection though it's very abstract. I guess the only real thing there is perhaps the color in terms of the subject and the moon.

MR. BROWN: The color of land or the beach and the sky.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: And it's essentially -- the structure is horizontal.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible] the bands and this you feel -- this is --

MR. PREUSSER: This is very thin plastic paint.

MR. BROWN: Plastic, now, you're still using that plastic paint.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and it's very thin, and this is one on canvas. And extremely thin and very subtle color changes, all in the blue and brownish hues.

MR. BROWN: You use canvas -- paint on canvas fairly rarely; is that correct?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, early things were paint on canvas. I remember some of the Halpert sales were on canvas, quite a few that were on canvas. As a matter of fact, we could talk about that right now.

MR. BROWN: Yes, let's do for a moment, the Halpert things which give you the start --

MR. PREUSSER: '51 to '54 and these are [Inaudible] of bird migration which is like the shoal -- fish.

MR. BROWN: Are these fairly large paints or of what size?

MR. PREUSSER: These are not too large. This was -- incidentally, is on plywood, 19-by-27 plywood in which the bird images sort of reveal themselves in the frame of the plywood.

MR. BROWN: How did that -- in terms of stability, how was plywood as a medium, as a ground?

MR. PREUSSER: As a -- what about it?

MR. BROWN: In terms of stability.

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, it worked out very good, yes, because this is very thin paint, and I developed this technique when I did some painting in California where I took plywood and developed the images -- no, I guess it was Chicago that I did this, where the found objects that were revealed in the pattern made up the subject.

MR. BROWN: And as long as you --

MR. PREUSSER: And I did quite a number. This is --

MR. BROWN: As long as you didn't lay the paint on very thickly, I suppose it didn't cause warping or splitting --

MR. PREUSSER: No, no, it didn't, and these shapes really go out of what I imagined. I guess I could have gotten a different subject, but I started with birds so I found birds all over the place. And it kind of followed the contours of the grains of the plywood. Then --

MR. BROWN: So that's one example of the things that Edith Halpert sold.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and here's another one, "Interiority," 1950.

MR. BROWN: "Interiority," I wonder, what'd you mean by that choice of that special word?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it is something that is inside. And it has a lot of texture and is not unlike some of the others of the '50s we've talked about.

MR. BROWN: It not long looks organic, but it looks almost as though it's of interior, of organs of the body.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes.

MR. BROWN: Do you suppose -- did you study such things as that ever?

MR. PREUSSER: No. Well, I did in terms of being --

MR. BROWN: At the Art Center?

MR. PREUSSER: No, as art editor of "Texas Cancer Bulletin."

And here's one, "Stick Figure Ballet," 1951, again, this was done on plywood. And the whole thing is made up of

divisions of larger areas and superimposed over those areas are very rigid structure of lines that suggest stick figures.

MR. BROWN: But that certainly doesn't comply with the grain of the plywood in this picture?

MR. PREUSSER: No, it doesn't. That's one which I imposed -- well, you can still see the pattern in it.

MR. BROWN: Underlying --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes. And another one Halpert sold, and I did a number of things of this building. This is "The City," 1951. And it again is very complex.

MR. BROWN: Well, it has -- there's a great deal of what we could call drawing on it.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, there's line --

MR. BROWN: And suggestion of --

MR. PREUSSER: -- but it's canvas and oil.

MR. BROWN: Now, you're saying throughout this time, there's no preparatory studies for most of these --

MR. PREUSSER: This [Inaudible] just came about. I mean, I just worked on it.

MR. BROWN: And the others, as I've said before, so many of them look very carefully worked on. I mean, did they --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes, they were very carefully worked on and repeatedly built up.

MR. BROWN: So these -- you could go back and back to them. Were these -- some of these in the plastic medium, or were these oil?

MR. PREUSSER: This one was oil, but this was the plastic medium with the gauze imprint. And that's called "Cathedrals," 1951. You can see it has a cross and some of --

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MR. PREUSSER: But it's a lot of cathedrals.

MR. BROWN: Was this based on a trip, say, to Europe or --

MR. PREUSSER: No, no. I just --

MR. BROWN: Did it have religious input or --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I started with nothing in mind, and then I began to see cathedrals.

MR. BROWN: So it had no religious overtones or anything like that?

MR. PREUSSER: So then I pushed it in that direction, yes, right. And here's one, '51, "Organic Structure." Again, by --

MR. BROWN: These look to be marine forms.

MR. PREUSSER: Marine forms --

MR. BROWN: Corals and the like.

MR. PREUSSER: Marine forms. And here's one, "Subterranean Structure," 1952, same kind of thing, broad lines. And here is a painting, '52, done on felt paper, casein in felt which gave a completely different effect than -- and that's called "Arena."

MR. BROWN: These were all shown through Downtown Gallery?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right, and --

MR. BROWN: How many did they handle in the end, quite a few?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, Edith Halpert would buy a certain number of paintings each year outright, and then she

would sell them. And she would take on about at least 10 or 12 a year, so there's quite a bit that's owned. Some of them anonymously that didn't want their name, I couldn't locate them for the show, for example.

Here's one on canvas board. This is owned by someone in Houston, though. Of figures, it's called "Wetnesses." It's elongated figures. And there's -- that's "Kachina Dolls" reproduced.

This is very interesting in that it was done after I arrived here and was done in 1955. It's a New England landscape, and you can see it's the ice and snow on trees. I was influenced by the landscape in the winter. That was very intentional.

MR. BROWN: Well, you seem to be and seem to have been since you were a youth, you were affected by an occasion or location, aren't you, to a degree?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes. Here's "Archeological Forms," 1955, similar technique.

MR. BROWN: Now, I think we also --

MR. PREUSSER: And so that's -- yes.

MR. BROWN: Okay. We're looking now at --

MR. PREUSSER: "Coastal Fog" and it was done on the Cape. Again, another one like "Ocean Side" and is reminiscent of what happens climatewise, but it's heavily textured paint.

MR. BROWN: Yes, it's very heavily impasto.

MR. PREUSSER: And you can see there is the sand shore --

MR. BROWN: Yes, on the bottom.

MR. PREUSSER: -- and you can see the sun peeking through the clouds or mystic. So it has a coastal fog feeling to it, which seems to be appropriate.

MR. BROWN: Indeed, and why the -- perhaps you have used it before now, but why the very heavy buildup of paint?

MR. PREUSSER: I don't know. It's probably the heaviest buildup of any painting I've done.

MR. BROWN: It suggests fog or storm or --

MR. PREUSSER: As a matter of fact, the medium, I don't know --

MR. BROWN: Well, it's probably just a mix or --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, the medium probably was Elmer's Glue and plaster and then painted in this white that was white and then I painted the relief areas.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see. So you laid it out --

MR. PREUSSER: I did quite a few paintings building up with plaster and Elmer's Glue.

MR. BROWN: And then you laid on pigment?

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Because it has a dryness to it. Was that pigment -- was the medium for the pigment not necessarily oil but maybe something else?

MR. PREUSSER: No. It was oil paint without any gloss to it.

MR. BROWN: But with plaster, that would contribute to the dryness --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, to absorb the paint.

MR. BROWN: -- to absorb the paint. Did you have any doubts about the stability of the plaster, whether it would stay on there?

MR. PREUSSER: No. That's why I used the Elmer's, the Elmer's Glue.

MR. BROWN: Was you're going to hold it forever.

MR. PREUSSER: In fact, I fill up cracks at my home plastered wall, but I always put in the plaster Elmer glue and it's held over the years. So I was pretty sure that would work.

MR. BROWN: Well, it's evident that you on coming to New England were strongly influenced by its landscape and seascape.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, [Inaudible] New England landscape and winter scene and this and the "Ocean Side."

MR. BROWN: Were you beginning to spend time down on Cape Cod?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, we would go there every summer.

MR. BROWN: There were a group of people in the arts who were beginning to move to places like Wellesley --

MR. PREUSSER: Professor Kepes and his wife had a home there designed by Wurster, the architect.

MR. BROWN: William Wurster?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Did you know him? He had been at MIT.

MR. PREUSSER: I didn't know him because he left when I arrived, but he built their house down there. And it's a wonderful place. They still go there. We stayed sometimes in Bruno Rossi's house, which was right next door.

MR. BROWN: Bruno Rossi?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, MIT physicist, had something to do with the atomic bomb and everything.

MR. BROWN: It was Kepes who urged you and got you to come here in 1954.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, yes. He asked me to come for one year while he carried out a research project on perceptual form of the city with Kevin Lynch, a city planner. And he wanted me to -- be relieved half-time and that's why I came. He had written to me while I was in Europe in the Army frequently and referred to the fact that he hoped sometime I could join him. He was my real teacher at the Institute of Design.

MR. BROWN: And you had obviously exceled as his student; is that right?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, he --

MR. BROWN: He thought so.

MR. PREUSSER: And so he said he wanted me. And the first offer came a few years before '54, and I turned it down. And the second offer came after we had built our own house in Houston, and we came just for a year. And since it was half-time, I also managed to get a job at Harvard VSD teaching drawing. So the two together were -- made it possible to eke out an existence.

And incidentally, my wife [Inaudible] time going back and forth from Beacon Street to the Boston library. She read something like 65 books in that period, that one half year.

MR. BROWN: Why is that? She was --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, not much to do.

MR. BROWN: And you --

MR. PREUSSER: She had been working in Houston so --

MR. BROWN: And you had small children?

MR. PREUSSER: No, we had no children.

MR. BROWN: You had no children yet. Now, had you -- you'd met your wife in where?

MR. PREUSSER: In Houston --

MR. BROWN: After you came back?

MR. PREUSSER: -- at what was called the Texas Stage. She was an understudy for "This is Illyria" lady.

MR. BROWN: For what?

MR. PREUSSER: For a Shakespearean play. She was an understudy, and she was stage manager. And I was doing the stage sets. That's where I met her, in Houston, and we were married in February of '50. So I met her just late '49.

Now, we've got one other painting I guess we should --

MR. BROWN: We should look at the -- now we're looking at "Ascent" which is mixed media on canvas of 1959.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: And it's owned now by an MIT official.

MR. PREUSSER: By Dr. Rosenbluth. This painting again is with plaster and Elmer's, only it's not as thickly applied as in "Coastal Fog." And it's thick enough, though, that I could use the end of a putty knife to incise the lines, and the incised lines are over the colored areas, going through the colored areas.

MR. BROWN: So you laid out those colored areas first.

MR. PREUSSER: First, yes.

MR. BROWN: And then you incised with a putty knife.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right. Now, again, it's like all the other different techniques I've talked about. I did a number of things like this. This is the only one like this in the show and --

MR. BROWN: You mean a number of things where you had had to incise --

MR. PREUSSER: Incise into the plaster.

MR. BROWN: -- mixture of plaster and glue?

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Now, the name is a very vague one, "Ascent." It is vertical in format. It does suggest something rising.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes, that's what I thought. So that's why I called it that after I finished it. I wasn't thinking of it particularly, but you'll notice the triangular areas point upward or up and down.

MR. BROWN: Oh, yes, and there is a -- here a rather muted color. It's not as high key as in the one we just discussed.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, it's very, very muted.

MR. BROWN: Do you think you -- I notice from time to time you go back into the muted range. Do you think that's perhaps your natural range or your usual --

MR. PREUSSER: What I think it was, from the '50s on -- well, then -- no, there's some that were quite in the '60s got into a lot of color. We'll see that later.

MR. BROWN: I wanted to ask you particularly about one of this time. It's called "Staccato," and it was acquired from the Addison Gallery in --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, that was in a one-man show at the Boris Mirski Gallery.

MR. BROWN: Your dealer in Boston?

MR. PREUSSER: Dealer in Boston and it's in the permanent collection.

MR. BROWN: And this was -- Mirski, how long -- you were with him for several years?

MR. PREUSSER: I was with him from '54 to '60 -- I can't remember.

MR. BROWN: For a good long time, at any rate.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And how -- did you find him fairly satisfactory as a dealer?

MR. PREUSSER: Not too satisfactory in that all the other painters were of a different style. I mean, there was a difference in the people. He handled very good people, but I didn't do as well as I did at the Downtown. And the Downtown is actually what -- Edith Halpert is what helped me get into Mirski because I had gone -- the Downtown, the assistant at the Downtown Gallery, Mr. Alan opened his own gallery and walked away from the Downtown, and she closed up the Newcomers Group at that time. So he took them on automatically.

MR. BROWN: That was Charles Alan?

MR. PREUSSER: Charles Alan, Alan [Inaudible] brother. And we didn't get along at well. Finally, I left there and Halpert helped me get into Mirski's because she had an association with Mirski. And so that's how Mirski took me on. And he did some sales, but his clientele was not out for this kind of painting. It was more figurative.

MR. BROWN: That's right. It was, wasn't it? Expressionistic, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: This was purchased --

MR. PREUSSER: This was purchased, and again, it's done on the Cape, coast --

MR. BROWN: It looks like the one we saw previously, very heavy buildup of the impasto.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, that's right, and "Shore Staccato."

MR. BROWN: And you said that this was -- of course, the buyer at that time for Addison was Bartlett Hayes.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right.

MR. BROWN: Did you get to know him a bit?

MR. PREUSSER: I knew him quite well.

MR. BROWN: Renowned --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I got to know him fairly well, and he was a wonderful man, very dedicated to American art, being of the -- as the gallery. And he made it his -- made a point of visiting every show in town that had American artists, and that's how he acquired the whole thing.

MR. BROWN: Did you ever -- did you get to know him in later years? I mean, did you keep up with him?

MR. PREUSSER: I did, yes, and he was on -- I think he was on the visiting committee at MIT here, and at the annual meetings, we'd talk and -- so I -- he knew me, and I knew him. He didn't know me when he got that, I don't think, but -- and then I guess the other thing is, is this painting here which is "Autumn."

MR. BROWN: And this is "Autumn," 1959.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Which was originally owned in Houston, I believe.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes. But it again is a plaster and all of that stuff.

MR. BROWN: And a series of paintings from the 1960s, why don't we start --

MR. PREUSSER: In the middle of '60s.

MR. BROWN: This one here is "Fluctuating Symmetry."

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: Of 1965, mixed media on canvas.

MR. PREUSSER: One of my larger canvases. And I have this in my study, and sometimes I'm sitting there looking at it. And I begin to find practically every little area is some image, either a person, a bird, a fish. If you

stare at it, I had none of that in mind, but as you can see, the painting is broken up into many small, little fragments of color. And if you start at it long enough, you begin to find all these images. The painting was done with sand and oil. Is it oil? I think, yes.

MR. BROWN: And it looks like it was at least partly done with a palette knife or something like it.

MR. PREUSSER: No, I don't believe any of it is palette knife. That's the sand. The brown line, you mean?

MR. BROWN: Well, no, I'm just saying not the lines so much as these areas looked as though they were applied with some kind of -- not with a brush.

MR. PREUSSER: I think they were applied with a brush but rather thick.

MR. BROWN: Very thick. Now, what led you to use sand?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, that's one of the influences Kepes had on me.

MR. BROWN: Oh, he was beginning to -- or had been using --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, he'd been using it a lot. But I used it differently from him, but I think the sand, it sort of started.

MR. BROWN: And how did you -- you would get a reflection. You'd get a surface shimmer.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, what you would do, you would get the sand laid down, and then when you paint over it, the sand is very absorbent. So you get a very matte, dry, fine texture. But the dominant thing here is the color patches.

MR. BROWN: Indeed, it is.

MR. PREUSSER: That's one of my -- as I said, one of my larger canvases.

MR. BROWN: It has a very slight resemblance to ancient art forms of, say, mosaic or colored glass.

MR. PREUSSER: Mentioning mosaic incidentally, I worked with Gyorgy Kepes as collaborator on many mosaic murals --

MR. BROWN: Oh, is that right?

MR. PREUSSER: For many Sheraton hotels and for Crocus' [phonetic] buildings. And we had quite a thriving number of commissions, and that's probably what led to that as well as the next painting which is called "Mosaic [Inaudible]."

MR. BROWN: Mosaic --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and it has the little tesserae about the same size as real tesserae, and I was very affected by the experience with Ravenna mosaics there.

MR. BROWN: Had you seen those during the war?

MR. PREUSSER: I had seen them after the war. And this, the thing that was interesting about the mosaic murals was that in Ravenna, in all ancient mosaics, each tesserae was slightly angled differently so that the light play on it was very dynamic. Now, most commercial mosaics today are done on paper upside reverse and pressed into the plaster, and they're all flush. But towards the latter part of our commissions, we started to insist that once they were put on and the paper removed, that they go around and angle them. So it made quite a difference.

But that's what that [Inaudible] was.

MR. BROWN: Now, in these two paintings here, you've more or less angled the surface of the paint or the sand, and you get the light picks it up differently, doesn't it?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right.

MR. BROWN: So you attempted in paint to try to replicate that effect of the tesserae?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, that's what I -- right. But tesserae here is used as a linear element rather than an overall mosaic, so.

MR. BROWN: In “Mosaic [Inaudible],” it seems to me you’ve used it, yes, at that, but not so much for to try directly -- to get an approximation of the effect of tesserae --

MR. PREUSSER: That’s right, yes.

MR. BROWN: -- whereas in “Fluctuating Symmetry,” the shapes are not that of tesserae, but the effect of the paint is similar --

MR. PREUSSER: But they closely -- yes, right.

MR. BROWN: Now, this third one of this era, you’ll have to --

MR. PREUSSER: The third one, “The Embers” --

MR. BROWN: Yes, “Drifting Embers.”

MR. PREUSSER: 1968.

MR. BROWN: Yes. Now, this is certainly at least appears to me to be impasto but also some overlay perhaps of sand and then pigment laid on?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, mostly sand first.

MR. BROWN: Mostly sand first.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And then pigment laid on.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, sometimes thin, sometimes thick and you’ll notice I have filtered through from behind these thicker areas of blue which has a effervescent effect.

MR. BROWN: Yes, I see. Here?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, right.

MR. BROWN: Was this applied before or after the sand?

MR. PREUSSER: After, after.

MR. BROWN: And it does seem to be very rigid. It gives a suspended quality.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right. A very weightless --

MR. BROWN: I assume the cruciform shapes are merely accidental designs --

MR. PREUSSER: That’s probably true. You’ll notice that practically every -- many of my paintings tend to go to the right. Do you see?

MR. BROWN: Uh-huh.

MR. PREUSSER: That goes to the right. That one doesn’t because that was --

MR. BROWN: You were working on “Fluctuating Symmetry” as being symmetrical, right, centering --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right. But many of the paintings are moving to the right.

MR. BROWN: Okay. Well, this painting has a -- the “Drifting Embers” has a great delicacy but also power. The blues coming through the raised surfaces.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and you’ll notice that there is a point native of primary red and green which are opposite colors which reinforce and strengthen each color. When you take the opposite colors on the color wheel, you get a strengthening of each color.

MR. BROWN: Surely, by now, you were pretty much doing these intuitively; is that correct?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, but I was working for --

MR. BROWN: Obviously, you knew --

MR. PREUSSER: But this I was working for in terms of color complementary.

MR. BROWN: You were?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Tell me, how was your teaching, very intensive teaching, at MIT, do you perceive any effects in your own work from those years of teaching?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, to answer that, let's go to the wall in back of me here. Now, you asked about whether my teaching at MIT had any influence or my being at MIT, and I guess this is the closest it comes to it because it deals with a completely new material. And I taught a course -- my main course was experimental in nature and challenged students to work in their discipline in the media of their own specialties, metallurgy, electronics. There are 10 different departments. They had different media.

And in a sense, I guess you could say that the fact that I'm using polyurethane here is a new material technologically --

MR. BROWN: In the 1960s, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: -- developed. And perhaps is the most drastic change in style and effect because they're all white. These, I had an exhibition at the Joan Peterson Gallery of all my white things in 19 -- latter part of 1969 and the -- just before I took my sabbatical and went overseas, Europe with my family for 14 months.

These paintings are done in two different ways. The one on the left there is done by pouring on the urethane. You've got two consistencies of mixtures, and you mix them together and you pour them out. And they form an image, a shape. Some of them are controlled by a wall made of putty and then removed, but the shapes are either carved on, carved only -- that is, hard polyurethane pasted on and then carved -- or poured on and carved or carved and left free form, so three different things that happened.

MR. BROWN: Now, this one here, the "Polyurethane Relief #17," there are very precise circular forms and other crisp shapes. So these were carved?

MR. PREUSSER: These were carved. Well, these were poured on but they --

MR. BROWN: Poured on to this surface?

MR. PREUSSER: Poured on in those shapes. I mean, they take form except a circular. I used my son's drum rings to get the circles.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see. You used that as a molding --

MR. PREUSSER: As a molding, yes, right. But this is a combination of poured and also carved.

MR. BROWN: And you can carve this after it was hardened?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, it hardens practically immediately, but the problem here -- now, the technical problem is the one that I'm quite proud of, of developing. Number one, polyurethane is very soft, and if you push your finger, you can go right through it. So I had to make the surface hard after it was poured on or pasted on which meant many layers of Elmer's Glue to build up a resistance to being punctured. Then I covered the whole surface with a gesso, a white gesso, and on top of the gesso, I laid a very thin layer of Elmer's Glue and poured on glass beads which are minute spheres about the size of granular sugar.

Now, the problem is that you can have only one layer of glass beads or you do not get the light reflectivity that you get on a stripped down highway or on illuminate sides when your headlights hit it. And we're not seeing these as they are most effective because if the light comes over your shoulder and it can be a 25 watt bulb 50 feet away, it illuminates, reflects back the light because the light goes through the glass bead, hits the white gesso and bounces back at a different angle.

So this, I guess, is the main change in my work that was brought about by MIT in some unknown reason.

MR. BROWN: I mean, this greatly extended the effect that you could have in your work.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, and until the late 70s, I worked in this and was later the same thing with plastic beads which was spheres in color. And these are glass and perfectly clear.

I might add that the problem that all of this brought about was a health problem. I think part of my physical

breakdown in terms of asthma and possibly other things was due to the use of polyurethane because came the year 1983 or maybe it was in the late ‘70s, I called up the company that I got the polyurethane from every year at the summer so I could work over the summer. And I got it through MIT because I could get it for less cost. And in ’83, I think it was, I called, and they said they can’t sell it to me. I said, “Why not?”

They said we’re not giving a reason from authorities, but we just can’t sell it. We cannot sell it to hospitals or educational institutions, which I think was probably due to the fact that they realized it was a real health hazard. But the fumes were very strong, and I think that was really --

MR. BROWN: And I assume you didn’t do the -- with the windows open always.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I had usually tried to use the ventilation, but the -- you know, the other interesting thing about this getting away from the health hazard is that they had to be laid flat when the beads were put on.

MR. BROWN: I was going to ask. Even to lay in the polyurethane --

MR. PREUSSER: And then you have to take off all the excess, and it had to be done in areas because the thin layer of Elmer’s dried very fast. So the whole thing had to be strategized area by area and avoid doubling up of the beads because then you lose the lamination reflected.

MR. BROWN: But you had to pour the polyurethane in as they were lying flat on the table or floor, weren’t they? You had to make little frames, didn’t you?

MR. PREUSSER: Of -- say that again.

MR. BROWN: When you were pouring the polyurethane, you couldn’t put it on a vertical wall, you had to be lie it flat.

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, it had to be lying flat, yes, and of course, if that tilted up, it would make it flow one way or the other. So that -- this one here, I think is completely the preformed sheets carved so that’s --

MR. BROWN: They’re carved. They’re sheets.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, they’re carved and sanded into concave shapes.

MR. BROWN: And then you -- I see.

MR. PREUSSER: And then I did the same process.

MR. BROWN: Whereas the free form, you see more of the free form in these other two?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes. I sold a number of these out of the Peterson gallery.

MR. BROWN: That was the gallery at your dealer in Boston at the time?

MR. PREUSSER: In Boston at the time, yes. And I guess the other thing we could do is go right around the wall and see what started all this. In ’67, this “Rock Relief” is built up with not polyurethane. This is before I got into polyurethane. Built up with different sizes of sand and rock and use of aluminum paint is predominant in it. It is called the “Rock Relief.” As you can see, they’re heavily weighted down. That canvas is extremely heavy, and as a matter of fact, is the reason that I started to investigate polyurethane which is very light.

MR. BROWN: Because this is what, the base of this is, what, plaster?

MR. PREUSSER: The base of this is sand, heavy kinds, not just fine sand, different kinds of sand, heavier and different granular surfaces, things that weighed it quite a bit. I had done before this a vertical out of all sand, and then I did this. And I was only disturbed by the fact that it was so heavy.

MR. BROWN: Well, now, this is a very muted color range, almost mineral colors, grays and toward the yellow, toward even the purple in a ruddy range.

MR. PREUSSER: Right. I think that this is predominantly the color of the granular surfaces, the medium used, and I just tinted the edges mostly of the relief parts.

MR. BROWN: Why did you use aluminum paint as you described?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, I liked that, and I had used it very early in my career.

MR. BROWN: Yes, indeed.

MR. PREUSSER: And I found that it worked very well with the colors of the granular substances.

MR. BROWN: This is a very early one around the early ‘40s or so, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible] aluminum paint when you etched away.

MR. PREUSSER: But it was used differently there. Here, it was painted on, and the other was scraped on.

MR. BROWN: But this tends to then absorb by the medium, by the aluminum paint.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right.

MR. BROWN: And it’s laid on fairly loosely in places. You may have blotted it down [Inaudible] --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, there may have been -- I guess there was some plaster and Elmer’s to give it a roughness of the background.

MR. BROWN: Well, this is a very lively piece.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I think it’s a --

MR. BROWN: But you --

MR. PREUSSER: -- the rocks, the formations are all balanced so they could be -- exist in reality and not fall down. You see what I mean? One rock’s form is set on top of the other in an attempt to make them appear as though they were there forever, that way not falling down.

MR. BROWN: But you gave to them this because it was specifically [Inaudible] --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, first, let’s go close here. This was --

MR. BROWN: This other one we’re looking at is --

MR. PREUSSER: -- done in ’68. This was ’67, and in ’68, I did this one which is all sand. And it’s even heavier than the other one because there’s more surfaces of sand.

MR. BROWN: And the sand bound with what, Elmer’s Glue?

MR. PREUSSER: Elmer’s Glue and all painted with white which was before I did anything with gesso under painting on polyurethane, but this sort of -- being at MIT, I guess, and being a little concerned about the weight, it was a natural alternative was to go into the polyurethane. But this is a very structured situation, as you can see, as well as the rocks. And I did use some different sizes of sand in this and some slight modulations in the whites, but that’s what led to it.

MR. BROWN: Now, here is something we have a quite intense color and rich textures.

MR. PREUSSER: This again is in the ‘60s, I think it was ’65.

MR. BROWN: This is “Pulsation.”

MR. PREUSSER: And it was before the two we just talked about.

MR. BROWN: Yes, because this is on canvas, obviously, it can’t be so heavy.

MR. PREUSSER: And the background is another material I discovered at MIT. It’s called corundum.

MR. BROWN: Corundum.

MR. PREUSSER: And that’s what causes that sparkle. Corundum has that quality. And this is sand very lightly laid on outlined. Well, first I poured down the lines in plaster and Elmer’s and stained it and then filled in the areas with sand and color, but that -- I used corundum in a number of paintings in addition to this one which I like because of the way the light --

MR. BROWN: Did you mix it with the sand? Is it --

MR. PREUSSER: No, it’s just corundum, and the corundum comes in different gradations of size, too, many

different --

MR. BROWN: Where is the sand in this then? The --

MR. PREUSSER: The sand is this.

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see.

MR. PREUSSER: All of the --

MR. BROWN: Underneath there --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it's -- right. Everything bound with lines is sand.

MR. BROWN: And this one here, "Red Dominance" --

MR. PREUSSER: What year is that one?

MR. BROWN: This is '65 as well.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, that's '65, yes.

MR. BROWN: This is on Masonite.

MR. PREUSSER: I don't think that's '65. Just a minute here.

MR. BROWN: No, '85, sorry.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, that's 85.

MR. BROWN: This is one that's called "Subterranean Strata." It's on canvas in 1965.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and this again is before I got into the polyurethane, and I consider it one of my more important canvases. It's owned by --

MR. BROWN: Doris Held.

MR. PREUSSER: -- Doris Held whose husband was -- is a professor of psychology at MIT.

MR. BROWN: Well, this is certainly a great variety of textures and surfaces.

MR. PREUSSER: And there's different sands and other things so I can't remember everything that's in it, but I think it's properly named with it being horizontally broken up into stratas and --

MR. BROWN: Yes, there's a mixture of what looks like a heavily thinned paint with turpentine or some other means.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes.

MR. BROWN: Metallic pigments.

MR. PREUSSER: Right. And then the other one in the before the polyurethane era is this "Desert Dawn" in which is made up of a lot of different kinds of stuff that I acquired at MIT labs, different kind of substances, materials, granular stuff and then --

MR. BROWN: Which you hope was inert, right, and not toxic?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right. And you can see there are areas where the paint was put on real thick which cast shadows of the little shapes, and then it was stained in different reds and oranges and yellows. And I think has a very -- again, that's one of my favorites. I have it hanging at home.

But now, I thought we might do before we get out of the '60s -- well, I guess we can --

ROBERT BROWN: Now looking at "Polyurethane Relief #32," 1974. I think you have plastic spheres.

MR. PREUSSER: These are colored -- well, let me back up a minute. This was actually executed, the original part, in 1970, and it was all white like the ones around the wall here.

MR. BROWN: The ones we discussed a bit earlier.

MR. PREUSSER: Right. And I decided that I'd get away from all white, and I took colored beads and put over -- first, I put down some color, and then I put colored beads down on top of it and some glass beads. The outer area is still glass beads, but the other is of colored plastic spheres which are the same size as the glass beads and the same problem of laying them down in one layer. And so I added -- I began to use color in that process.

MR. BROWN: Was there any different challenge in using plastic from using glass?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, yes, because the colors were very limited and Dow Chemical Company makes them and they were very hard to acquire. I managed to get somebody in the lab to give me these, and I had a very limited palette to work with.

MR. BROWN: On the other hand, this whole color range, you must have added pigment yourself, right?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, no, that color range --

MR. BROWN: The one with the glass beads?

MR. PREUSSER: That's red glass beads.

MR. BROWN: And then these are paint glass --

MR. PREUSSER: I mean red plastic beads. The pink is glass beads, and then there are certain areas here that all of it is -- a lot of it is glass beads, too. But why don't we just look at something here, the only one that has colored plastic spheres in it. Here are a number of reproductions, color reproductions, of [Inaudible] done with polyurethane but using colored plastic beads and some -- whenever I used the glass beads, I used it over a colored painted surface. And you can see this --

MR. BROWN: Whereas with plastic, what did you --

MR. PREUSSER: Plastic, I did over white.

MR. BROWN: Over white.

MR. PREUSSER: Because they were colored.

MR. BROWN: Yes, that's right.

MR. PREUSSER: But the glass beads are clear so I put color underneath, and here are just a number of different ones of those that were done in the late '70s.

MR. BROWN: It's almost impossible to photograph --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, again, the plastic spheres reflect back light just like the glass beads do, and to illuminate it from over your shoulder is the important thing.

MR. BROWN: Are you saying that these are not -- here in the exhibition, these are not properly illuminated?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, that's right. Well, I mean, there'd have to be a light behind me, but it's too high. It has to come --

MR. BROWN: And then you would get this reflecting this powerful reflective quality?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, and then I went on in that period and did some where I used metallic paint only. It didn't have reflective qualities.

MR. BROWN: Metallic paint with again the plastic or glass beads?

MR. PREUSSER: No beads, just plastic paint.

MR. BROWN: Did you find that satisfactory?

MR. PREUSSER: There's one.

MR. BROWN: Did you find that --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I liked it. These are all --

MR. BROWN: But these are still quite relief.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, very heavy relief, yes.

MR. BROWN: What are you carving from, polyurethane?

MR. PREUSSER: Poured on and then carved, right. So that sort of concluded the ‘70s.

MR. BROWN: Now, we’re moving into the ‘80s, and it seems to me that things are getting more resolved. There’s not really massive qualities of some of the polyurethane work.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, that’s when I realized I shouldn’t work with polyurethane anymore.

MR. BROWN: This one we’re looking at here is called “Red Profusion,” 1985.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and it’s actually on cardboard, not what it says there.

MR. BROWN: And it’s acrylic which --

MR. PREUSSER: Acrylic paint, fast drying.

MR. BROWN: Fast drying, post-World War II medium.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: But a conservative one.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: The effects are not unlike that of oil.

MR. PREUSSER: It dominates in the primary colors again, red versus green.

MR. BROWN: Yes, to create balance?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, and its structure is not unlike some of my earlier works with vertical and horizontal breakup.

MR. BROWN: Grids.

MR. PREUSSER: Grids. And then the one at the other opposite wall down here, we can talk about here is called -- what is that called?

MR. BROWN: Yes, this one is called “Red Dominance,” same year, 1985.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, this is about the only two paintings from ’85. I didn’t paint --

MR. BROWN: That has --

MR. PREUSSER: -- I mean ’79 until ’80, maybe ’82. I didn’t pick it up again till ’85 and only a few things.

MR. BROWN: Did you just quit for a while?

MR. PREUSSER: Two reasons, one, my health was deteriorating, and the other was that I was disgruntled over the gallery scene and the impermanence that dominated art and events rather than work that lasted.

MR. BROWN: Oh, you mean fashions that would change?

MR. PREUSSER: Fashions and it just wasn’t conducive to my -- the reception wasn’t conducive to my work, and so I just didn’t even bother with galleries.

MR. BROWN: So you had last had a gallery in, what, the early ‘70s with Joan Peterson?

MR. PREUSSER: In the ‘70s, yes, about the mid ‘70s, that was the last time I had in this area. I’ve had galleries in Houston and Dallas but in this area, yes.

MR. BROWN: But that affected the amount of production --

MR. PREUSSER: Amount of production, I mean, I lost -- I really kind of was disturbed by the whole art scene.

MR. BROWN: But then when you did come back to painting again in the mid ‘80s, you didn’t do a great many

paintings?

MR. PREUSSER: No.

MR. BROWN: And these are the examples?

MR. PREUSSER: These are two examples, the only two.

MR. BROWN: So these are -- you've had a hiatus of several years really before you go back?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes. The other one is down at the other place which is another one of '85.

MR. BROWN: We'll look at that, but first, the "Red Dominance" [Inaudible] looks like metallic paint.

MR. PREUSSER: Let me get up there and look at it just a minute.

MR. BROWN: We'll bring ourselves down there.

MR. PREUSSER: -- "Dominance," not too much to say about it except it was one of -- again, one of the few that in the mid '80s when I started painting again, and it was made up of again acrylic but in this case rather thickly applied and a lot of other kinds of little fine textures resulting from the use of different granular substances, not sand but other stuff like that from the lab here at MIT. And it requires close examination to see all the minute differences in those surfaces.

MR. BROWN: I was going to say, each of these paintings are rather smaller than those of the '70s.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes.

MR. BROWN: These -- and they're much quieter in that respect. However, does the word -- does the title "Dominance" refer merely to the color dominance --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes.

MR. BROWN: -- or to some other way, dominance of --

MR. PREUSSER: No, just color.

MR. BROWN: -- that shape which is --

MR. PREUSSER: Both of them are red primarily, but they're very subtle construction. And this one is more so than the other one, but there's not too much to say --

MR. BROWN: You said much earlier that when you were a youth, you admired the work, at least as you saw it, I suppose, only as reproductions, of Paul Klee.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes. I guess I admire Paul Klee as much as anybody.

MR. BROWN: Usually fairly small, refined.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, all of his paintings were small, too, although that's not the reason this is small.

MR. BROWN: Well, not necessarily. But I mean there's a similarity, probably purely coincidental.

MR. PREUSSER: And some of those early drawings of heads and so forth were reminiscent of Paul Klee. I guess I respected Paul Klee more than any other painter. I mean, [Inaudible] meant more to me.

MR. BROWN: Now, the same year, 1985, "From Outer Space," which you --

MR. PREUSSER: "Outer Space."

MR. BROWN: And it is on Masonite and mixed media as most of these from the last 20 years have been.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes, and you can see I used glue and silver paint here, and I titled it because it looked like it could be a spaceship or a creature from outer space.

MR. BROWN: Now, you obviously, this is reminiscent of what you did around the time you went to Chicago, the pentagonal shape and the --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes.

MR. BROWN: Was that to suggest that the manmade things in space --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes, and it has a very dominant image which is different from the other two.

MR. BROWN: Yes, it does.

MR. PREUSSER: And I think that the use of the gold, different kinds of gold and silver complement each other. Sometimes it's hard to make gold and silver work together, and that's why I did consciously want to work out something there.

MR. BROWN: And the various tones of gold paint.

MR. PREUSSER: Gosh, I covered that. Did that cover --

MR. BROWN: I think you're -- again, it's a relief. I mean, it's built up on, what --

MR. PREUSSER: It's on --

MR. BROWN: -- three-dimensional media.

MR. PREUSSER: Let me check. The medium is scraped on thin plaster and Elmer's mixed, and you can see the lines at the bottom, horizontal, curvilinear lines are actually incised. No, I mean up above, the gold, all that's incised.

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible] incised --

MR. PREUSSER: Incised, yes.

MR. BROWN: -- into the plaster into the medium.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: These, some of the colors, the dark ones are allowed to just bleed into the medium.

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: And the metallic, of course, was that applied last after --

MR. PREUSSER: The metallic was the last thing, yes.

MR. BROWN: Applied even after you had incised each line?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes.

MR. BROWN: So this shows the return to painting, so to speak, in the mid '80s, and I did get a few examples here in the current exhibition of the work that you've just done last year.

MR. PREUSSER: We can conclude what's in our exhibition here at MIT with the last three, the last three paintings that I did which were completed in 1990 but they were started in 1985 -- no, 1987. And --

MR. BROWN: Then you let them --

MR. PREUSSER: Let them sit because I was in the hospital and all kinds of things. And these are -- so I date them 1990 to bring them up to the last year, and this one is "Arctic Region," I believe is the title.

MR. BROWN: "Arctic Region," right.

MR. PREUSSER: And it's done with a lot of different kinds of granular chemical substances, and it's very monochromatic.

MR. BROWN: It does suggest by its palette the artic or very, very frozen.

MR. PREUSSER: Very cold, yes. That was one. Then there were two others that I completed last year. The one on the far left is "Ancient Crypt," and there is a cross which you can see from here but not nearly as clearly as it would be if it was illuminated with a lower light source over your shoulder in which case that cross jumps out. It really is dominant.

MR. BROWN: And that's not only owing to its color but to its medium.

MR. PREUSSER: Glass beads.

MR. BROWN: Glass beads, okay.

MR. PREUSSER: Over color.

MR. BROWN: And in present lighting, you don't get the reflectivity.

MR. PREUSSER: You don't get it. Even here, you can see it is kind of dominant, but it's not really reflecting as is possible with glass beads when they're illuminated properly.

MR. BROWN: You have such a mastery of so many media now. You feel that -- in future, do you foresee your continuing to work with a great variety of media because you know the properties of so many, such a range?

MR. PREUSSER: I've thought quite a bit about what I want to do, and the first thing I want to do is go back and get a lot of my old scraps from different periods, frames, paintings.

MR. BROWN: Your old scraps, yes.

MR. PREUSSER: And see if I can montage them in some way. I thought that would be an interesting thing to do, but I'd also if I paint, it will be probably with oil on canvas.

MR. BROWN: Oh, really? Why do you suppose so?

MR. PREUSSER: Well --

MR. BROWN: In other words, the most traditional of the --

MR. PREUSSER: I don't know. I mean, I don't know what it will be because it's whatever my spirit moves me to do if I get fortunate enough to be able to paint again.

Then the third one here completed in 1990 is this "Light in Darkness," and as you can see, it's a very subtle overlay of an area of light squares background by darker colors and very subtly broken up into various squares and irregular square shapes. And this was done with oil paint, some cases stamped on again with gauze. But because it's on canvas, the paint is so thin, it is not the same effect. But I feel good about these three paintings in terms of the last thing that I can claim I did, and I think that they hold together as a consistent kind of direction. And I'm not sure whether I would continue that way or not, but it's interesting to contemplate what would have happened if I had finished them when I started them as compared to how they are today when I finished them a number of years -- a few years later.

MR. BROWN: Would they -- do you think that you're a bit bolder now? In '85, it struck me, particularly in those smaller pieces, as I said, they were quieter. I compared them with Paul Klee.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, but I think the major difference is the geometric versus the more freely formed shapes. The early '30s were very improvised almost Kandinsky like.

MR. BROWN: I was comparing your 1985 work with the ones you did not finish until last year.

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, well, you can't really --

MR. BROWN: It seems to me this is a little bolder --

MR. PREUSSER: Oh, yes, right, in size as well as in --

MR. BROWN: These are fairly large.

MR. PREUSSER: -- technique. But --

MR. BROWN: Has this show itself been a profound experience for you in any way?

MR. PREUSSER: It's been a very profound experience for me. I originally had hoped that the show could be done sequentially by decades, but now that I see it the way that it's hung, I think this is the best thing that could have been done. We've had to move around a lot through this interview to get them in sequence, but I think it's rather interesting the way it's been laid out.

MR. BROWN: By the way, how was it -- what did determine the way things are hung here?

MR. PREUSSER: I don't know --

MR. BROWN: Simply visual --

MR. PREUSSER: I don't know Ms. Moya [phonetic], she just decided this was the way to do it, and it was all right with me. I think you can even though they are disconnected in terms of decades, you can see the major changes if you read the labels. You can see.

MR. BROWN: Do you feel -- I mean for yourself, has coming to look at the exhibition, do you feel -- has it had an effect on you?

MR. PREUSSER: Well --

MR. BROWN: -- going to have an influence on you in the future?

MR. PREUSSER: -- first of all, it's very interesting. Let me just review the fact that I never had a show at MIT in my 31 years as a professor. And I always felt as though that was not right. There are other artists on our faculty that also hadn't had one-man shows, and I think that this has been a mistake for MIT not to. But now, the only place they will show MIT-related people is this MIT museum. The media center, Wiesner Center, shows nothing that has anything to do with MIT artists. So this museum is fulfilling a need that has existed not only since the media center was opened in '85, but it fulfills a need that has existed for many years. And that makes me very appreciative of Lawrence Seaman [phonetic], the director of this museum.

MR. BROWN: Whereas the Hayden Gallery or now the Wiesner Center never or very rarely showed the faculty work.

MR. PREUSSER: Well, they don't show it all. It's against their rules. The Hayden Gallery did. It showed a Kepes exhibition. It was about the only artist --

MR. BROWN: But that was the exception.

MR. PREUSSER: It was the exception to the rule, and that was when I think they just realized they had to recognize him because of his --

MR. BROWN: -- well known through his --

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right. But you asked me how this exhibition makes me feel. I must say that the one in Houston, the two simultaneous exhibits in Houston, the one at Transco Towers which is a Philip Johnson building and he says it's his most important building. And he had provided for a huge gallery on the first floor which is a fantastic gallery, showed much of my work much of which was owned by others in the South and Southwest, paintings I hadn't seen and people who came to the opening that I hadn't seen for 50 years. So that was a traumatic experience, I'm telling you. And there were paintings in that exhibit that I can't even remember doing. There's one painting --

MR. BROWN: I've been lucky then. You've remembered every one of these this morning.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, but there was one painting there that a man picked up from an estate in the border of Texas, a little painting this big, and he now lives in Albuquerque. And I received a year or two earlier before the show a letter from him and a Polaroid shot of him wanting to know what the title and what the value was. And they managed to get that from him in the exhibition, and it was done when I was -- I think it was done in 1938. That was very early, and it was a beautiful painting as far as I'm concerned. Everybody was just amazed that this was done. And it was a very small painting.

That, and then the Parkerson Gallery, Sandy Parkerson is the one who initiated the whole affair, and it was fortunate that when he decided -- he came East, and he went to my studio. And he said, "Yes, I want to give you a show."

And he picked out what he wanted for the show, and he says, "I'm also going to go back to Houston and see if we can get you a Transco exhibit."

And it turned out that there was an opening at the same date that he had planned for my show at his gallery. So everything at the Transco exhibit, almost everything, was either owned by others or things that I would not sell. A few of them came back like "Warlike Theme" that I won't sell. They were at the Transco, and they went up to '49, maybe a couple into the early '50s. But the gallery was only '49, not past '49, and that show and the Transco were simultaneous. They had simultaneous openings --

MR. BROWN: Did they show different --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, the Transco went a little beyond '49.

MR. BROWN: But all this earlier stuff --

MR. PREUSSER: All the earlier stuff, nothing -- none of the recent or more --

MR. BROWN: "The Houston Period."

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, "The Houston Period" is what it was called. Yes, and that went up to '54. But the gallery was only up to '49, and Transco was up to '52, I think.

MR. BROWN: So the MIT --

MR. PREUSSER: When the report came out.

MR. BROWN: -- in '57.

MR. PREUSSER: And it was incidentally, a running joke. That it was the first such report of any university in the country. It was before Harvard's by several years, Harvard's report.

MR. BROWN: Report on the fine arts.

MR. PREUSSER: On the need for them in the curriculum. And '57, Albert Bush-Brown, an art historian in our department, he became president of the [Inaudible] together a program that suggested that it should be as part of the humanities requirement of taking something in the humanities that this was -- like music was an option. And this was 10 years since after music was introduced as an option.

We put together this program proposal that went before the entire MIT faculty, and it consisted of a proposal that students take -- they had to take three semesters. Two of them could be in hands-on studio work or two in history or vice versa. This passed the entire faculty vote, so it went into effect that year.

MR. BROWN: In '57?

MR. PREUSSER: In '57. And I taught that class, my class in visual design experiments and that sort of thing until my retirement in '85. But during that period from '57 to '85, we managed to get other options other than mine. We got photography, graphics and a number of things that were not just my option. So that program became a very big one, and that's the kind of thing we didn't discuss in this report which was a pretty revolutionary --

MR. BROWN: You mean this recent report?

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, the [Inaudible].

MR. BROWN: But something like this had been called for in the Hayes committee report?

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, and that's what Bush-Brown and I built on was that proposal.

MR. BROWN: But you were sort of -- you were pleased. You found it worked. In MIT's "Technology Review" magazine in 1961, you said that, "Contrary to the myth that art and science don't mix, students are freely electing studio courses and performing creatively."

MR. PREUSSER: That's right.

MR. BROWN: So presumably, four years into the program, it was working very well.

MR. PREUSSER: Let me just back up. You said did I have this idea before it occurred. No, I did not. The first year or maybe it was just the first semester of my course, my course was the option or one or two semesters which followed one another. I had a painting class, easels and regular arts, and I realized after the first few weeks that this was not the way to get science and engineering students involved in visual forming process. And that's what led me to this thing, so it was the second year that I changed it completely into that --

MR. BROWN: You found that the traditional painting and drawing methods were just too complicated?

MR. PREUSSER: Not only were they -- did they require a buildup of preparation of acquiring skills to begin to accomplish something, but they were not very close to the language of science and engineering. And they just didn't relate, and they couldn't. And in order for that course to be successful, it would have to go beyond two semesters. And I don't think it would ever be successful as the other.

MR. BROWN: So it was far better as you did in the second year to --

MR. PREUSSER: To get -- right.

MR. BROWN: -- materials and methods to make so they could get right into the program?

MR. PREUSSER: Right, right.

MR. BROWN: So this -- though you taught this for, what, almost 30 years --

MR. PREUSSER: Almost 30 years.

MR. BROWN: -- this course evolved, must have had many variations within it --

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it did --

MR. BROWN: -- tinkering with it?

MR. PREUSSER: -- more and more sophisticated to playing on the computer. In '65, two of my students were approached by the art director of "Fortune" magazine to help him computerize a design for the cover. The year before, they had turned on the Time Life building with the words -- with 500, the lights of the building made the configuration of 500. He wants to do something different every year. This was a man that was a Bauhaus-oriented man, Allner.

MR. BROWN: What was his name?

MR. PREUSSER: Allner, I believe, was his name. And he came, and he says -- and he's seen it through publicity through "New York Times" and other -- I mean "Time" magazine and other things, publications that we were fooling around with the computer with the visual arts. And he claims it's the first time a computer was used to design a cover on a magazine.

Anyway, he came, took two of my students that had been collaborating in my class, a mathematician and electrical engineer, I believe, using the computer. And they couldn't do this project on MIT computers because you can't make money as a student using MIT equipment. So they had to go out and the art director from "Fortune" magazine went with them and they spent a whole night formulating and computerizing this design.

So you say what did we do, I mean that -- by '65, that kind of thing was going on. I had a man from -- an Israeli, a brilliant guy, he was working at the Smithsonian -- not -- the observatory here.

MR. BROWN: The Harvard Smithsonian astrophysical --

MR. PREUSSER: Harvard Smithsonian, he was working on a computer for one of the liftoffs, and he came from Harvard going in my class. And he developed a way of imaging things you don't see. I mean, this was a flat plate with holes in it and a light bulb behind it, and by scanning it for a light intensity domains made a graph, beautiful graph presentation of light that is not perceptible. So that was a real breakthrough in terms of computers in those days, nothing like they're going on today with virtual reality and all that sort of thing.

But every discipline was represented in this course, and it went all the way from metallurgy to electrical engineering, just everything.

MR. BROWN: You crossed various disciplines. In fact, at one point in the '70s, you mentioned that the emphasis on the art experience as a pattern for creativity regardless of professional commitment was one of your goals. How did you achieve this? How did you, do you suppose, create interest in people who were going to be electrical engineers or something else in pursuing these creative activities that apparently had -- at least apparently had no practical immediate application?

MR. PREUSSER: Well, it kind of built on itself. By that I mean as the course progressed from year to year, I would always introduce a project by showing work of previous students and how they had developed some wonderful visual things with their own idioms. And I think this is one of the things that made it progressively more and more impressive in terms of what was results.

Now, for example, computer, there are a lot of other computer stuff than I just discussed that was included in the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, the first exhibition that was ever put on that had to with the computer. And they published a big catalog on that, a little magazine catalog. But that has a complete coverage of what had been done up to that point, I think, and I don't know what year it is. You can find out.

But so the computer stuff was -- it made "Time" magazine even in the Italian edition, that sort of thing. So it was an important step.

MR. BROWN: So the cumulativeness helped to overcome --

MR. PREUSSER: I think that's right. To answer your question, I think the cumulative building on what had gone before and challenged students to see what they could do in a different way [Inaudible] in their particular area. And it was a class that really turned on a lot of students. It really did.

As a matter of fact, turned them away and into the arts, a few of them. One of my former students about five years ago completed a huge sculpture for a big hotel in Las Vegas, and he worked the whole thing out -- incidentally, it's a sculpture that hangs. He worked the whole piece of sculpture out with a computer, visualizing it in its different dimensions and in its different points of view.

MR. BROWN: How about for your part, did you get increasing intrigued in adopting this sophisticated technologies?

MR. PREUSSER: I did, yes, but I never in terms of my own production never really went into anything beyond the use of polyurethane which was another part of a project, using physical materials such as polyurethane. In fact, one of the big exhibitions that I put on at the Hayden Gallery was the students' work in which there was a wall that was 10 feet high by 15 or 20 long that was a polyurethane relief.

MR. BROWN: By students?

MR. PREUSSER: By students, right. And using the other things we're using, diffraction grating, using all kinds of materials that just have never been conceived of as possible.

MR. BROWN: Do you recall in terms of experimenting with new materials, there was a sculptor who worked there for a time, Al Duca?

MR. PREUSSER: Duca, yes.

MR. BROWN: Alfred Duca.

MR. PREUSSER: That had do to with using Styrofoam, I think, as a dissolvable material for forming the metal.

MR. BROWN: It could be molded by --

MR. PREUSSER: Right.

MR. BROWN: -- process. Also, while you were there, Kepes founded in the late '60s, I guess, his Center for Advanced Visual Studies. Were you involved at some point in that?

MR. PREUSSER: I was not involved in that at all, only involved in that I inherited his light and color course.

MR. BROWN: His course.

MR. PREUSSER: I started out assisting him, and then I ended up taking over his course because his -- did that big project and that took him a long time and a lot of energy and the support he got was primarily from Dr. Killian. He was the most supportive of all of that project.

MR. BROWN: And looking back, you'd say he was the most supportive of any of the heads of MIT since then?

MR. PREUSSER: I think -- oh, I would say that definitely.

MR. BROWN: The center does still continue.

MR. PREUSSER: It does continue, but it has difficulty because of the competition with the media center which is getting all the money.

MR. BROWN: Oh, that's a newer thing, isn't it?

MR. PREUSSER: That's a newer thing, and that's the one that Negroponte who was a former student of mine is director of. But my perception of what it is is not so much art, and it's stated as such. It's not so much art as it is image processing and holograms instead of photography which is a beautiful form of photography. But it doesn't embrace the visual arts to any great extent, and as a fact, it's a thing that should be going on at MIT. I'm very supportive of it, but the unfortunate thing is that up until this last report that I mentioned earlier which ended up in getting somebody replaced. It has not been a good thing for the whole visual arts program and the department. So [Inaudible] I left the very year that the media center opened.

MR. BROWN: 1985.

MR. PREUSSER: And Filipowski left about a year or two later. And Otto Piene is the only one left, and he's half-time so -- and the graphics woman, I can't think of her name now, but she went to that and is more involved with computers and that sort of thing for image processing. But Otto Piene is having a difficult time. You've interviewed him, haven't you? You know the whole story on that or at least his version of it.

MR. BROWN: Well, are you optimistic --

MR. PREUSSER: But incidentally, I was the one responsible for Otto Piene getting that job. Every faculty member that is given tenure or promoted or taken on has a spokesman, and you go to your faculty, into our faculty, and you make a case for them. And I was the person that represented him and succeeded in his becoming director.

MR. BROWN: Well, he's a man of great, varied talents and great, broad background.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, he is.

MR. BROWN: He's an international figure. That was certainly a healthy thing to bring to MIT.

What are the -- your design and creative studio work. You run the department of architecture which also contains, you said, art historians and then, of course, people instructing in architecture. Did the three -- there were sort of three groups. Did they work together by and large pretty well?

MR. PREUSSER: Not very well.

MR. BROWN: Not always?

MR. PREUSSER: Particularly the art historians and those of us who taught studio, hands-on visual arts. And that is consistent with what happens in every university setting, and that's the debate we've had ongoing as to whether or not there should be separate departments. And many universities do have them in separate departments. Most do, I think. But there is a natural kind of antagonism between the doers and the theories, and I even worked out a course where both of us, historian and artist, worked together on courses to try -- I promoted the idea. Didn't get very far with it, but I was in hopes that by including both simultaneously in relating projects to history and theory, this dichotomy [Inaudible] happened about it.

MR. BROWN: In your own work, are you -- you've been able to be quite productive since your retirement from MIT? Is this --

MR. PREUSSER: No, because I've been somewhat ill. I haven't really produced much at all. I've produced three paintings -- four paintings in 1990 that had been started in 1985 at about the time I retired. I completed them in 1990. And one of my problems is this pulmonary condition which I believe -- I'm almost positive was brought about by the use of polyurethane.

Interesting story about that, every summer I would purchase polyurethane through General Latex on Main Street in Cambridge here. But I purchased it through a requisition from MIT so that I could get it cheaper and came a summer of -- an oncoming summer. It must have been in '72 or '73, I called them up as I always had and asked them -- order this and he says, "We can't sell it to you." I said, "What do you mean you can't sell it to me? You've sold it to me now for a number of years."

They said, "Well, from the president and the other authority figures in my company, they say we can't sell it to educational institutions or hospitals."

Now, its primary use is for insulation and that sort of thing. That got me to thinking it's a health hazard.

MR. BROWN: They wouldn't come out and say that?

MR. PREUSSER: They wouldn't come out and say it, but that's -- and then I stopped using it immediately, but that's what brought on my -- I'm almost sure and the doctors confirm that's one of the factors besides smoking that brought on this pulmonary condition. And it brought me back to the thing that had happened -- and maybe I've said this in a previous interview -- when Calder -- when the de Menils brought Calder to my studio in Houston, he started to go into the studio, and he saw I was working with plastic paint, plastic paint that is designed to work on Plexiglas but I was using it on canvas, on Masonite. And I like it because of its real strength and quick drying, and I did a lot of paintings with it. He saw that, and he wouldn't even come into the studio. He spent his time while the de Menils and the other people in the party went and looked at my work, he wouldn't even come in the studio.

Now, that's interesting that he was aware of health hazards. That was back in 1952 or '52, something like that.

MR. BROWN: But you've not therefore been anything as nearly as productive as you would liked to have been?

MR. PREUSSER: No, no.

MR. BROWN: I would think that these retrospectives, on the other hand, have filled a large void, haven't they, the assembling of things, the --

MR. PREUSSER: Yes, I've been fascinated with my research into my own work in terms of the fact that I've just now made a count of what I have documented photographically and what I have no documentation but I have records of sales, anonymous as well as a few things I've given and a few things I've presented to auctions and that sort of thing.

MR. BROWN: And the things --

MR. PREUSSER: Let me give you a figure. I have -- and this is not the production of any great number compared with Kepes, for example. I have done -- I can account for over 800 what I consider good drawings and paintings. Now, that's not much to do in 60 years so [Inaudible] Picasso and the other [Inaudible]. And out of those, I've sold 100 -- sold or auctioned or given away 100 -- 285. Now, I'm sure that that's a poor record compared with most artists.

MR. BROWN: But that -- those are just numbers. Those are just quantities.

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, yes.

MR. BROWN: I mean, after all, a good deal else has gone on, and the numbers, sheer numbers, don't reflect particularly that you've been a teacher --

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, yes. I think there was periods during my teaching that I hardly painted except in the summer, and yes, there was a lot of that.

MR. BROWN: Now, are you at base quite pleased with your production of your work?

MR. PREUSSER: I'm very pleased, and I think it's the retrospective that -- I look back at what I was showing you earlier, back in pastel drawings, and I can't even recall having done some of them. And it's an amazing experience to see them in retrospect.

MR. BROWN: So you had sides to yourself more diversity than you'd even remembered you --

MR. PREUSSER: That's right, that's right, yes. And I think less of a consistency as many artists have had. I have never striven to be identified with one form of abstraction, for example. During my Chicago years and after, for a while, I had been very much influenced by Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus approach, and I had very geometric forms. And I'm proud of that period because it was something I did on my own. I was not influenced there.

I had a period following that after I got here where Kepes was a very strong influence and have been accused of being influenced too much by Kepes, and I think there is a short period in there where that applies. But by and large, I think what the "Art News Review" says, I concur, and that is that I was a painter that did not adhere -- adhered to my own call and not to trends.

For example, I have -- I'm no longer resentful of or argumentative about it, but when Pop Art came in, I was not for it. I mean, I couldn't see myself in that role. And conceptual art, I never could. I've always been oriented toward the motion of design, of organization in the classic sense, in the way it is presented by Barnes in his book, "Art of Painting." And Chaney [phonetic] was a very big influence.

MR. BROWN: Calvin --

MR. PREUSSER: Chaney, big influence. And, of course, my teacher, McNeill Davidson who did the most for me and except for following that, Kepes who supported me very strongly.

So the production has ceased and I don't say -- I hope it's not ceased forever, but I have in the past year and since my retrospective been trying to put together a complete record of all that I have done with the emphasis on my painting rather than -- I've got recordings and news articles and everything else that report completely on my teaching both here and in Houston. But it's that area of my life and that to which I've been really committed all my life, since I was 11 years old. I first exhibited in 1933 at a Houston annual competitive exhibition and got an honorable mention.

Ever since that time -- and, of course, we've gone through a very interesting period of how one gets about exhibiting besides the gallery world. During the early years, during these competitive exhibitions both regionally

-- locally, regionally and nationwide, for example, international watercolor exhibition in Chicago in 1942, I was accepted. Those kind of exhibitions are no longer open to the artists. If they are, there's a charge involved. You have to pay so much to enter, and you have to send slides instead of just sending directly your paintings for judgment. So the whole world of exhibition in terms of museums is a different situation than what I -- I haven't presented anything in a competitive exhibition to be juried in 30 years, I guess.

MR. BROWN: It's just too indirect, the process?

MR. PREUSSER: And not that many occasions. It used to be I was exhibit through the Midwestern exhibition in Denver, Kansas City Art Institute or Chicago and as well as Texas, all around Texas. Those things don't -- there isn't even an annual Houston artists exhibition. So -- which is competitive. So as you can see from my résumé, I have broken it down into exhibitions to which I've been invited and those to which I participated as a competitor being juried, and then when you put those two together, there's quite a --

MR. BROWN: Oh, certainly.

MR. PREUSSER: But it's -- you can see also by the dates that they started waning in the latter years.

MR. BROWN: I think you've adequately and at length indicated what you evolved to do and what you've accomplished.

MR. PREUSSER: Right, yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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