Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Rhys Caparn, 1983 November 23

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Rhys Caparn on November 23, 1983. The interview took place in Bethel, Connecticut, and was conducted by Tom Wolfe 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.

Interview

TOM WOLF: I came up here prepared with this book about you. It's a very nice book. It says that your father was a landscape architect

RHYS CAPARN: And was extremely musical.

MR. WOLFE: And did the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens?

MS. CAPARN: The Brooklyn Botanical Gardens - he built it.

MR. WOLFE: That's a beautiful place.

MS. CAPARN: A very charming place; lovely.

MR. WOLFE: I was just there a matter of weeks ago. And your mother seems to be quite an extraordinary woman, also.

MS. CAPARN: Yes, she was. She was a Southerner and she was born a year after the Civil War. When she was about ten or twelve years old, her father apparently was very rich cotton and stuff and he lost it all - bankruptcy. So she and her sisters and mother moved to Goldsboro, North Carolina. They all had a hard time for a while. But my mother was one of those extraordinary women who seemed to be able to handle anything. There wasn't a weak spot. She was marvelous for me because she wanted me to be a sculptor and I did, too.

MR. WOLFE: She wanted you to be a sculptor?

MS. CAPARN: She had this idea. I'd always been fiddling around. But for instance, at school I never mentioned it. I was at the Brearley School. What were you going to say at the Brearly School at that time! Words were the only thing. But she was remarkable.

MR. WOLFE: But it's a very artistic background that you come from on both sides.

MS. CAPARN: Well, it was because it was always the idea. Somebody said to mother, "What should you be?" She said, "You have to have love and beauty."

MR. WOLFE: That's nice.

MS. CAPARN: As far as my parents went I was very, very lucky.

MR. WOLFE: Do you have siblings?

MS. CAPARN: My sister was very interested in art. But she was not an artist; she was a "looker-on" of art. It was quite a different kind of thing. But she was very sensitive.

MR. WOLFE: Also necessary.

MS. CAPARN: Yes, naturally. It was quite a different thing. She read a great deal. She died a few years ago. She had a lot of bad accidents. She had a bad time.

MR. WOLFE: Was she your full sister of your half-sister?

MS. CAPARN: My mother was married to Southerner, originally, and she had two sons. Then she left him - which was not usually done. But mother was not going to put up with whatever it was. I never found out what it was. In those days you didn't tell.

MR. WOLFE: Being a Southern belle.

MS. CAPARN: Whatever it was, I think the man and she were not compatible. But my mother was perfectly willing to get up and walk out. She was really the kind of woman who thought, "This isn't the thing; and I'm going to leave." And I think she was right. I never knew exactly why; but I thought she was right. It would have been much worse for everybody. But my half brothers who went to the war in 1917 and to the Second World War, etc. - They were completely Southern. You could hardly get them out of their warped door, [Laughs] except for the older brother who became extremely rich and had a big apartment on Park and Fifth Avenue. But that was not the kind of world we lived I n.

MR. WOLFE: You weren't close to them or anything like that?

MS. CAPARN: No. I didn't dislike them. It's just that we were not part of it. The South and the North at the time were very severely different from each other.

MR. WOLFE: You were born in -

MS. CAPARN: I was born in Onteora Park in the Catskill Mountains one summer. My father was an Englishman, had been actually until he was twenty-eight or thirty.

MR. WOLFE: Did you grow up there?

MS. CAPARN: I grew up in New York in my very early youth in Westchester County in a little house rather like this. Only my mother and father had an enormous - two and a half, very large - not a garage, but they had horses in it. She and my father made an enormous sort of music room outside of the house. It was almost as far as from here to that other building. That was extraordinary because you could move over there all the time and have space.

MR. WOLFE: And your mother was very musical.

MS. CAPARN: Oh, yes; she was very musical. And so was my father - both of them. So was my sister. Fortunately, I love it; but I don't have a good ear.

MR. WOLFE: I, also.

MS. CAPARN: Do you have that problem, too? It's too bad you know. I've gotten to the point where I can't hear the violin half the time. You can't do much about that. All three of them were completely musical. Mother had been a singer. She had a very pure voice.

MR. WOLFE: And a teacher.

MS. CAPARN: She learned how to clear her voice in Goldsboro, North Carolina from a violinist she found.

MR. WOLFE: Did they have performances or something?

MS. CAPARN: Mother did in New York when she got here. She sang at churches. She left this man and took three hundred dollars and got herself started.

MR. WOLFE: Where did you meet John Alexander? Was that John White Alexander?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. She met him in Paris with his wife. Mrs. Alexander was alive quite a long time.

MR. WOLFE: And she had a big influence on you according to -

MS. CAPARN: Not that much of an influence, but an influence. [Telephone interruption]

MR. WOLFE: She gave you advice - Mrs. Alexander?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. Mrs. Alexander had lived in France for a long time. She as older than my mother. At Onteora Park where I was born there was a woman there called Mrs. Haggin. She was a very rich old lady who became my grandmother. She was very close to me. That was helpful. The thing about Onteora was the place was full of small houses and timbers. It was kind of fancy. It was all right. It was very comfortable and very summer stuff. Nothing fancy the other way. I think that Mrs. Alexander and all her people that she knew lived that way. They were very sophisticated; but they never were show-offs, no clothes, none of that kind of stuff.

MR. WOLFE: Was he in the picture - John?

MS. CAPARN: John - I think he did most of it - he did some of it here - But he worked very hard in France. He knew Whistler very well. John Alexander - I don't think I ever met him. I know I did a head of Mrs. Alexander's

daughter - a little terra cotta - I don't know what's happened to it, that I did for her. Then, -- Who else was I thinking of? Mrs. Haggin helped me a great deal, simply because of the kind of person she was. Young people - they're lucky if they find somebody

MR. WOLFE: Did you know John White Alexander's paintings then?

MS. CAPARN: I've seen a few of them. I never saw them in Paris. The ones I've seen I didn't care for very much. I don't think they're as interesting as they could have been. At the Graham Gallery they had a big show.

MR. WOLFE: Yes. He's being revived now. Enough time has gone by so he looks very interesting now, I think.

MS. CAPARN: I didn't think it would be. I think she probably was more of whatever she was than he was. They were both of the name; but they were not the same family.

MR. WOLFE: What do you mean?

MS. CAPARN: I mean that John Alexander was not Mrs. Alexander's husband. She married another Alexander. That was all.

MR. WOLFE: Oh. So, there's no connection. That's my confusion. So this is just somebody who knew about the arts.

MS. CAPARN: Yes; that's right. She did. At those ages and that very kind of delicate and sensitive kind of people - they sometimes didn't fall very far because they didn't get much excitement. They didn't get much happening. They were beginning in a way to break through.

MR. WOLFE: And then you went to Brearley?

MS. CAPARN: I went to Brearley and then I went to Bryn Mawr. I left Bryn Mawr after two years because I thought I couldn't stand it, simply because I didn't want to be in a - what do you call it?

MR. WOLFE: A college?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. It wasn't for me; that was all.

MR. WOLFE: And then you went to France to study there.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. I got a chance to do it. These things are luck, you know. Johannes used to say to me all the time, "You have to watch for luck because it's the only thing in the world." Rarely which I needed. But I walked out when it was through. I went automatically to Bryn Mawr. I enjoyed it for the first year. It was exciting because I was in Bryn Mawr. But then, the second year I thought, "My god, I couldn't ever stand it again!" because nothing that I was interested in was there.

MR. WOLFE: No art?

MS. CAPARN: The first year that I was there I took early sculpture. The minute I saw it I thought pictures were the only thing in the world that meant anything because that was the first thing that could really excite me.

MR. WOLFE: Greek, you mean?

MS. CAPARN: Greek. It was not only the shapes but it's kind of iridescence that they have, that kind of thing that you find.

MR. WOLFE: It's the greatest. What was the "luck" that had you got to France?

MS. CAPARN: I'll tell you. My sister who was very close to me had left her fiancé - this was in the summer. Not only the fiancé - and also the fact that all the money in the world was going to go. She was twenty-nine. So mother said, "I will send you both to Paris." Ann had been to Paris twice. And I had been there once at that time. We went together. It was the most wonderful year in the world because we stayed with these French people who'd lived in this little house for years, thousands of years. It used to be a small country estate. And now, of course, was the only thing left. Ann spoke French perfectly which I didn't. And she spoke Italian. She loved to wander around. I found this little place that Mrs. Alexander found for me. Mother had written and said, "You've got to find a place for Rhys to do sculpture." So that's what happened. Mrs. Alexander showed me where to go. And I went. Eight hours a day - day after day after day after day. I never wanted to stop.

MR. WOLFE: Making sculpture.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. It started with a rabbit. In about three months I did it - I made a rabbit because I didn't know how to make anything. But it's that feeling of beginning something that you can do something with yourself. I think it's probably the only thing you can say.

MR. WOLFE: And you also studied with this man

MS. CAPARN: Edward Navellier. He was the one who taught me. I paid ten dollars a month and got eight hours a day.

MR. WOLFE: Wow! And he was an animal sculptor in the great French tradition?

MS. CAPARN: Animal sculptor, yes. He was a marvelous man. There were only two other sculptors there all the time. They were two French people.

MR. WOLFE: In the class.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. They were way ahead of me. We had animals all around. And we took care of them. And we all felt absolutely right the way you were supposed to do.

MR. WOLFE: You were already attracted. How did you come in touch with him?

MS. CAPARN: Mrs. Alexander.

MR. WOLFE: Were you already interested in animals?

MS. CAPARN: Yes; I've always been interested in animals, ever since I was very small.

MR. WOLFE: Now this is something that may be an overly speculative idea of mine. But it seems that a lot of women artists are very attracted to animals.

MS. CAPARN: I think they are. I think it's quite natural. To begin with, I think there's a kind of connection, as you would when you look at a female animal and you had suddenly ten children you had to take care of them in a way. I think that's part of her nature in a sense. Now, I've never had children; so I never did get through that. I didn't have to spend all that time. But, I can see it. I also think that I've watched it with the women when they do sculpture that they are much more interested with their hands with feeling in a sense, than an academic or abstract thing. I think there's something else behind it; not always - but I'm just saying that.

MR. WOLFE: Something else; like what? Do you think it's some kind of maternal -

MS. CAPARN: Yes; I think that comes through. I think it's a general thing. It depends; you can't generalize, really. I know that a person who is kind to a dog is to me a nice person. I think any animal that's in any way hurt for any reason - that is to me an absolute outrage. My parents felt the same thing. And I think a lot of people do. It's a part - You just can't cut yourself off all for other people - other feelings.

MR. WOLFE: Did you know some of these other women who work with animals as their main subject?

MS. CAPARN: No. I hadn't known them. I didn't really know them except from pictures, for instance, of the animal artists in Paris. They were wonderful animal artists. Navellier was a very good one. He wasn't one of the greatest ones; but, he was a very good one. He was mad for Rodin, of course. But, that was animalier. I have a little card. I'll show it to you in a minute.

MR. WOLFE: The ones I've come across, American women artists who are very involved with animals, are Rosella Hartman who is still alive;

MS. CAPARN: No. I've seen quite a few of them; but, I haven't seen that group.

MR. WOLFE: This woman, Grace Mott Johnson, who is older. She's been dead For a while and was married to Andrew Dasburg.

MS. CAPARN: No.

MR. WOLFE: This woman, Dorothea Greenbaum.

MS. CAPARN: Yes; I know her. I'm trying to figure out something as I'm talking; because when I did study and went to Paris - I've always liked French art anyway for some reason. I think there's something about it. I think that I was affected by the French. I've always liked style up to a point. I don't mean by dressing well or anything; I'm talking about style of mind, if possible. The French have that beautifully. I don't think the Americans have

learned it too well as compared to that. I think this country in many ways is two-dimensional in that sort of sense. That doesn't mean that it will always be; but at many times it is. In other words, you work on something and it looks fine. And then you look at it and then you think, "is it any better than it was before?" It doesn't - I don't know how to describe it very well. But, I've stopped it. I've done a lot of animal sculpture up to the point where I felt it has really gone into the landscape.

MR. WOLFE: I saw that evolution in the pictures in the book. It seems like at any time you're capable of doing another animal kind of group.

MS. CAPARN: Yes, I can. But one thing that's stopped me is there's a quartz rocks you go over there. It's so perfect in itself. [Laughs] I haven't any chance to do it again. I'll find it sometime; but it'll have to come out very fast because it's a different kind of thing. It has to be the same kind of shattering thing you do - you're going to hit it or you're not going to hit it. You can't go back and forth and work it the same way.

MR. WOLFE: At the same time about animal sculpture, it seems like there were also - It's not exclusively for women - Americans such as John Flanagan.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. He was a great sculptor.

MR. WOLFE: Yes; very good. Did you know him?

MS. CAPARN: I knew him slightly. I mean I've seen him; but I wouldn't say that I knew him. I think that Flanagan was marvelous. I prefer his animals to his people. He was the kind of person who could be anywhere. He was an artist of that kind. It's not anything else than that. He was awfully good. I think a lot of stuff is attractive. But I don't think people even buy the attractive stuff as much as they used to. Now its all very sleek and just effective.

MR. WOLFE: Did you have any awareness of Brancusi when you were in Paris?

MS. CAPARN: That was one thing that got me going.

MR. WOLFE: Oh, yes.

MS. CAPARN: Yes.

MR. WOLFE: How do you mean?

MS. CAPARN: It was the most wonderful thing I've ever seen.

MR. WOLFE: What was it?

MS. CAPARN: It was Brancusi's first show in New York. I had been studying with Archipenko. Now, Alexander, [Archipenko] as you know, I loved dearly. I didn't really understand a lot of his work; but I knew him - what he was as a teacher and because of his strength. He had almost a violent strength of not making a delicacy of something that's just soft, but something that's very rhythmical. Wonderful sense of rhythm and of music et cetera. There was this building on Fifty-Seventh Street between Madison and Park on the north side. I think now they have clothes in it or something. I can't think of the name of that building. It begins with a B. The Brummer Gallery! That was the time Lipchitz and Brancusi and there was one other that I remember. But, the Brancusi was the first one that I saw. I was absolutely overwhelmed because it was the only thing I could stand for anything for about ten years - because I think it is that. It has also that feeling of the Socratic feeling and the transparency. He's a Romanian you know. That's not too faraway from all that. For instance, Lipchitz - I admire him; but I have no feeling for him. I have only the feeling of power and enormous strength. But I don't have the other, the changes and stuff. The Brancusi - Every time I go to the Modern Museum which I don't do very much any more. They're always building something. Everything gets too big and nobody knows what it is. I went up once with my sister who loved Matisse. They had done a little house sort of cathedrals and things, about the size, I guess, and all in color. They were lovely. But then I walked into the Brancusi room after many years and it's just - there's nothing like it.

MR. WOLFE: Yes. He's truly great.

MS. CAPARN: The beginning of the world - it might have been anything like that. So you can hang onto that. The thing that I started after my year at Bryn Mawr was when I went to Paris with my mother. This was before the second time I went. There was that figure, "Hero of Samos." That's a wonderful piece. That's a wonderful piece.

MR. WOLFE: Oh yes. In the Louvre.

MS. CAPARN: Because there was all concern. Remember there's no head. There are just these long arms and

these things. It's an extraordinary shape.

MR. WOLFE: It's long and flares out at the bottom?

MS. CAPARN: Yes.

MR. WOLFE: Very beautiful.

MS. CAPARN: It's kind of "something," too.

MR. WOLFE: Well, it's this compact form, I guess, that we get with Brancusi and Flanagan.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. I have a piece that I've been doing, rather done. I just have a little piece of a piece that somebody' bought. It's about this high. It's bronze and it's called "Imminence." Well, it's because it's something that pulls itself in all the time, brings it all together. That you do every now and then; you do that sort of thing.

MR. WOLFE: It's bronze?

MS. CAPARN: Yes, it's bronze.

MR. WOLFE: Where do you have it cast?

MS. CAPARN: I had it cast and it's been sold. I'll show you a photograph of it.

MR. WOLFE: Yes; I'd like to see it. But I'm interested in where you have your pieces cast anyhow. Where do you have your bronze pieces cast?

MS. CAPARN: Do you know where that is?

MR. WOLFE: No.

MS. CAPARN: It's on the Hudson. It's a lovely place, a wonderful place. I haven't been able to pay for it in the last two years. I've sold some of the stuff like these things that are going to get in. But I don't think they'll get in. What I'll do is probably get one of those plastic boxes that you put over it. But, speaking of wax, light wax which I've never used much before, it has no transparency with bronze.

MR. WOLFE: What do you mean "transparency?"

MS. CAPARN: If you come up sometime in the summer and you look through, you could see that the light goes in some of the waxes. It does that kind of thing. Bronze doesn't do anything for you in that sense. So that's one reason I want to keep these pieces here. Here's a thing here. This is the biggest piece.

MR. WOLFE: Is there a title for this?

MS. CAPARN: "Imminence."

MR. WOLFE: Oh, I see. Is it an animal again?

MS. CAPARN: No. I just think of the forms.

MR. WOLFE: So, it's totally abstract?

MS. CAPARN: Yes.

MR. WOLFE: How long have you been doing that? It seems to me you've always had some kind of reference.

MS. CAPARN: This is '83. This is "Seven Trees." This is one I'd rather like to do something about. It's all wax on a background - I have a black wax on a red slate.

MR. WOLFE: So, ideally, you'd want to cast it in bronze.

MS. CAPARN: Yes, I'd like to. I wouldn't make it as dark. I think I'd make it something else, if I could. I'll have to try to work it out somehow.

MR. WOLFE: How about your earlier bronzes? Where did you have them cast?

MS. CAPARN: I had them made at - I had a call today about it. I'll get it for you in a minute. I don't want you to forget the day because you're near New York and I can tell you where to go.

MR. WOLFE: The Modern Art Foundry?

MS. CAPARN: The Modern Art Foundry. They're now called the artists Foundry because they're dong all different things. I went there. I did most of my sculpture [there] for many, many years. They're not exorbitant. But I can't use it because I can't get myself all the way down there.

MR. WOLFE: To Long Island City.

MS. CAPARN: I can't do it. It's all I can do to drive a car that far. But for years I did it without any problem.

MR. WOLFE: You could ship it there; but you want to supervise the casting yourself?

MS. CAPARN: You have to do the casting. I'm a modeler. And that's it. I'm not going to be making masses of stuff because I don't have the energy.

MR. WOLFE: What do you mean, you're a "modeler?"

MS. CAPARN: A modeler, yes.

MR. WOLFE: What do you mean by that?

MS. CAPARN: You make things with plaster. It's a question of handling it. A person who is a modeler begins from nothing. You start off in the middle of nowhere and you put something together - place it.

MR. WOLFE: But, you're a carver, also, right?

MS. CAPARN: A carver is a person who digs into what there is.

MR. WOLFE: You do that, also.

MS. CAPARN: No.

MR. WOLFE: I thought there were a lot of -

MS. CAPARN: Some writer said that I was a carver. But I've never been a carver. I've tried it. It doesn't affect me. I like to see what for instance, what deCreeft does. But it's not the way I would work.

MR. WOLFE: But that is something I wanted to ask you, too. I don't know what some of these materials are. Hydrostone?

MS. CAPARN: Hydrostone. That's a very hard, firm way of plaster. But it's the same kind of thing. Only there's probably a great deal of fine stone within the plaster. That's what it amounts to.

MR. WOLFE: I see. That's still something you model.

MS. CAPARN: Well, that's modeling because you have to model it onto something, don't you?

MR. WOLFE: It starts wet?

MS. CAPARN: Yes.

MR. WOLFE: What about the densite?

MS. CAPARN: That was a wonderful thing. It went on for about four or five years during the Second World War. And it had this marvelous grey stone called densite. It was so hard that they were able to make things for certain kinds of -I don't know- material that they used for airplanes.

MR. WOLFE: But that's also something you model with?

MS. CAPARN: Yes.

MR. WOLFE: They grind up the stone and make it into powder?

MS. CAPARN: Yes.

MR. WOLFE: I see. I didn't understand that.

MS. CAPARN: It gets poured et cetera. It doesn't come from nothing.

MR. WOLFE: That's what you were doing in the late forties.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. I did a lot of that. I think it was about five or six years.

MR. WOLFE: Getting back to the chronology about Archipenko. You started with him in 1930.

MS. CAPARN: No; it was a little later. It was 1931 - 1932.

MR. WOLFE: And that was in New York City?

MS. CAPARN: It was in New York City.

MR. WOLFE: Where?

MS. CAPARN: For two and a half years.

MR. WOLFE: Where in New York City?

MS. CAPARN: He had a studio on West Fifty-Seventh Street. One summer several of us went up to Woodstock. We were doing exactly what we wanted to do. It was the same thing I always wanted to do. When you're an artist, especially when you're younger - is you don't want to hear about anything else. And so you just go on and you get excited. And that's marvelous. It was a different thing because he went back to the figure. I've done a lot of figure. You can see it in the book. I've a couple of others that you haven't seen because they're not in the book. I'll show you. Then what happened was this to tell. Realized that I wasn't working properly and that I didn't really care about the female figure - which I didn't.

MR. WOLFE: Which he stressed?

MS. CAPARN: I've always loved the torso. I think that's marvelous. But there's an imminence, too. But much, much better than the "Hero of Samos." She would have been full of all sorts of things on top of her that would have ruined it, I think. What was I going to say?

MR. WOLFE: Archipenko and the figure. You didn't like the female figure.

MS. CAPARN: I loved Archipenko. I really loved him. I thought he was marvelous as a person, as an artist. I really felt, that I do not feel now, still, that I felt he was a better draftsman than a sculptor. I remember working on that and then I suddenly thought, "I've got to throw the whole thing out," the stuff that hasn't been torn down. Some of the things were done before. But, then I wanted to go back to animals. So I went to the zoo two or three days a week for about two years and drew constantly because I wanted to understand them better.

MR. WOLFE: How were you supporting yourself in those days?

MS. CAPARN: My family, my mother and father. It wasn't anything very rich; but we got through. My mother believed in art to the extent that she not only wanted me to do it; but because she wanted to do it because she believed in it.

MR. WOLFE: Yes; that's wonderful;

MS. CAPARN: She was like that.

MR. WOLFE: And Archipekno? In class were you working from a model?

MS. CAPARN: Oh, yes. I have some drawings I must show you, early ones. It might amuse you. I've been showing these things together because I thought I'd better get thigns together that I hadn't seen for a long time. I used to keep them up here. Here's one of an old animal. My father could remember that panther so well. He was a tired old panther in New York. And you had a feeling that he was just about to disappear. This is the kind of thing I did when I was a student. I used to do it at night. I used to go do it at night with Archipenko and a few other people.

MR. WOLFE: On Fifty-seventh Street you did these?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. That was while I was still studying. And this was one, too. You see it was very full. TW; Yes; very strong.

MS. CAPARN: It was very full and strong, in the figure. There was a lot of energy there.

MR. WOLFE: Was Archipenko talking about cubism when you were doing these?

MS. CAPARN: He talked about it. He talked about almost everything. He gave me a round feeling of the whole thing and the sense of its being what it is. Nobody else could have done it as well.

MR. WOLFE: This one is 1933. I can see how it connects to your recent drawings, just the freedom of the line.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. When I draw at all, it's because of release. It has to go very fast. For instance, there's one. There just isn't a way that I can live with it. This one is rather free and I like this one.

MR. WOLFE: That's recent.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. That's not too far back. Then there's this one here. This was not far from here. That's when winter came and I was out here. I'm kind of fond of this one.

MR. WOLFE: This if of trees kind of reduced to a few basic contours. But, you did that outside from nature?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. This is one I kind of like, not new, but not old. But it just has that feeling that I have about the woods. And it's all falling away. I don't want it to be all this sort of picky stuff which I can't bear.

MR. WOLFE: They're very loose.

MS. CAPARN: I think it has to be. If you can somehow make it both ways, I don't know. It's a little difficult. I keep moving them around just to get an idea. [Tape interrupted] [Laughs] There's a kind of violence about that.

MR. WOLFE: That's a lot more energetic. Well, they're all energetic and bristly.

MS. CAPARN: I think there's a kind of anger in it, don't you?

MR. WOLFE: Yes. Bristling forms. But about Archipenko - what was his attitude at the time?

MS. CAPARN: He loved my drawings. He just adored them. For those two years when we worked at night.

MR. WOLFE: That was very encouraging.

MS. CAPARN: It was terribly encouraging because to be honest I had an awfully hard time believing I could do what I wanted to do. I was not a strong person to say, "I'm going to be a Rodin," because I knew damn well I wouldn't be that. But at the same time, that's one thing about Archipenko you see, it was his love for somebody who wanted to be an artist and he could help. That was worth as much as anything else. He did that for a great many people.

MR. WOLFE: Did you have much consciousness that you would end up being a woman artist as opposed to just an artist like everybody else?

MS. CAPARN: No. I think as a sense because my mother was in a sense almost like a man. You couldn't have put up with her because if you were going to pretend, "Well, this is nice; but now it would be nice to do something else," you couldn't do it in my family. It just wouldn't be. It wouldn't have worked. None of these things can be done simply. They all have to be done around all the things, the people around them and their lives and all those things. But were marvelous. There are strings that happen to you that make it very difficult to live at all because it's too much too much. You can't handle it. But, that's our fault. It doesn't have to do with anybody else. These things - there's one other that's out. - But there's one rather like this. A student of mine has it up to town. There's that feeling of enormous size. I didn't have a big enough place to put it in.

MR. WOLFE: This drawing almost makes me think of Michaelangelo. It's just so muscular. I guess that it's seated and still so expansive.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. I never wanted to go beyond this because I don't want to see everything has to be there - the same place at the right place. I think, for instance, deKooning is wonderful in some ways. I love some of his work. Some of his work I've gotten a little tired of although I think he's a wonderful painter. There's something left for somebody else to look at. But deKooning liked looseness.

MR. WOLFE: Did you know him?

MS. CAPARN: No, I've only seen him. There's that one picture of his with the big,yellow thing on it - the shape - at the Whitney.

MR. WOLFE: "The Door to the River."

MS. CAPARN: I think that's a beauty.

MR. WOLFE: Great painting. Like everybody else sometimes he's better than others; but that's supreme.

MS. CAPARN: That was a great beauty.

MR. WOLFE: His recent work, I think, is really extraordinary.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. I've only seen little pieces of it. If I can get into New York again, I'll get there.

MR. WOLFE: They're having a big retrospective coming up this summer.

MS. CAPARN: I think of him more as a painter than almost any of the people round, in the painting sense.

MR. WOLFE: Yes; a painter's painter. But you didn't know him personally?

MS. CAPARN: No; I'd just seen him around.

MR. WOLFE: When you were with American Abstract Artists, he wasn't?

MS. CAPARN: I'll tell you. The American Abstract Artists - I was in that for a long time. There never was a feeling of "with each other" to the same extent. The Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors - I was one of the beginners of that. - went on for years. There was a kind of feeling between us because we were all very different. The American Abstract Artists were rather "set up." They're smug in a sense.

MR. WOLFE: Because why?

MS. CAPARN: Because they tightened this thing up. There's nothing wrong with it. I've been asked to go down. I said I would take my name off because I can't get there and I don't feel there's anything more for me to do. I've been to the shows. And I've paid my fees et cetera. This last winter I had a very had time to get down there and get back. And there was nobody sitting there and looking at it. So there's no point of it to me. I don't think the Federation is very interesting; but it's still people, individual people who have done individual things and have watched each other.

MR. WOLFE: Back in the forties, say, the American Abstract Artists was somewhat a different situation.

MS. CAPARN: I think it was. I think it was very pure then. Things get pushed into it which really don't belong. It should have been smaller, if anything, and carefully done with enough room for each of them to have more.

MR. WOLFE: For the exhibitions themselves, you mean?

MS. CAPARN: For instance, for the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors which was shown at 1941, I w as one of the second or third persons to come in there. You went into running it. I'll have to show you something there. There was always a feeling of brotherhood, you might say, of people of all kinds. What was so interesting to me about the Federation show was that here were all these groups of people; so many of them had to come out of Europe. That, of course, fascinated me. I love interesting people. I love seeing people that you don't know anything about, for instance, if there is something that we can connect with. They had a lot of people who came to New York and then quite a few of them came back. But that has never been changed in that sense. They've lived back and forth before. I think before that happened we were still "stick-in-the-muds."

MR. WOLFE: Why did you join the American Abstract Artists?

MS. CAPARN: They asked me to; that's all.

MR. WOLFE: When was that?

MS. CAPARN: I don't know. I'd have to look it up.

MR. WOLFE: I'll have to look it up. And who was in there with you?

MS. CAPARN: The only thing I am in now is Federation. I've left the Sculptor's Guild. I think there's nothing else there. The National Association of Women Artists - I was in everything. But I went back to the Federation. I had a fuss with one person in Federation years ago. That man I never liked. And I stayed away for three years. I didn't like what he was doing.

MR. WOLFE: But who were the main figures in American Abstract Artists when you came?

MS. CAPARN: Of course, Mondrian, Bolotowsky - whom I loved. Terrible the way he died. Was an awful shock. Several others I could think of.

MR. WOLFE: Reinhardt?

MS. CAPARN: Yes, and then there was that woman who had been there for years. She died. No; I don't think she's dead. I can tell you it; but I can't think of it as I would as quickly at the Federation.

MR. WOLFE: What was the Federation? What was its goal?

MS. CAPARN: They were the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors. And they all came together in 1940. And it was the war that started it. It became a war of freedom in a sense. People could do what they wanted if they wanted to work that way. It was very sophisticated. It became that way in a sense

[end of tape one]

MS. CAPARN: I was president and then I think I was president three years later.

MR. WOLFE: What did you do as president of the Federation?

MS. CAPARN: You have to run a show. You have to run a lot of people. And building. They had a whole floor. And they gave it to us for eight years. We usually had two or three painters that could have two or three groups, not just necessarily a long line. I can send you stuff about that because I have a lot of old connections with that.

MR. WOLFE: Was Rothko part of that?

MS. CAPARN: No. I think Rothko must have been there. The first time that I saw Rothko and remember him was when he was walking on feet. He was on figures, on feet - almost like somebody on a - I can't say exactly what it is; but, there were these figures that were kind of floating.

MR. WOLFE: That he was painting?

MS. CAPARN: that he had painted. And with him at the same time, I think, was Gottlieb. Now, Gottlieb I see all the time. I find it very difficult to find Rothko's name. Gottlieb started much earlier. From looking at these papers you could find that out. At one point and I think it must have been that time, I think it was a big show at the Riverside museum. I maybe skipped something here. But, the Riverside Museum had a wonderful place for stuff, for big art, for big pictures. I think the Wildenstein - I'd have to get that figured out. But I've seen Gottlieb's shows a lot. They were very large feelings. Things were rather dark and very heavy, large pieces. He's changed entirely from that break. This is Edward Alden Jewell. I'm sure of it. I remember very well that Edward Alden Jewell had made remarks in the newspaper against Gottlieb, Rothko and his other man whose name we can't remember.

MR. WOLFE: Gottlieb and Rothko and -

MS. CAPARN: It was somebody else. I can't remember his name. He disappeared. We fought it for them. But they have to go out. This is what they needed. This is their show.

MR. WOLFE: This was with the Federation?

MS. CAPARN: Edward Alden Jewell was the critic. They broke his thing. They broke this away from Edward Alden Jewell in a sense. Jewell was a fine person; but he had stopped in a way.

MR. WOLFE: I don't understand. He was writing about Rothko?

MS. CAPARN: No. I didn't have a personal relationship. I'd met him; but it was all quite distant. I've seen him. That thing came through and Gottlieb, I must say, came back to thank me for being part of the ones who let them loose But, I can't say about that. I've seen Rothko at places. I've seen some lovely paintings. I've seen their daughter. I did two heads of her when she was at Dalton.

MR. WOLFE: She went to Dalton?

MS. CAPARN: Yes.

MR. WOLFE: So you knew him through that?

MS. CAPARN: Well, since I taught her two years. You have to think the father and mother and I would at least know each other; but it isn't anything very close. I sat at a table with her at one of those big parties. But that's not a big thing. But there's that wonderful phrase that they have about him. What is it? I get myself all cock-eyed and think I have it all together. There's a marvelous phrase that they use about what he does, with that mysterious background he has. He made up himself for whatever he did. He's been to me always a person who's

not mysterious entirely, but removed. I don't object to that at all. I've got to try and find that piece.

MR. WOLFE: I would like whatever kind of memories and recollections you have of him. Quotes about him they will already have at the Rothko Foundation. In other words, you didn't know him too well.

MS. CAPARN: No; I never did know him too well. I know he was there because he was there.

MR. WOLFE: Where? Just around, around the art world?

MS. CAPARN: I didn't get much connection. I don't think he was a man who went with lots of other men, It's not the same kind of thing. Now, Gottlieb I've always felt of Gottlieb of being able and tough. There was something about him that I never really grew to, if you know what I mean. The other - I felt I didn't know him; but, I respected him more, if you can understand that.

MR. WOLFE: Rothko.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. I can understand that I would rather be like that. And also, I think as he got older his work was more and more extraordinary. What must have happened really was that it was much too much for him. I think that's all you can say, really, because I think he made great things of what he did. It's not the same thing as these others; that's all. I don't think you could imagine sitting down and talking to him at this stage. I wouldn't know. I tell you, also, I think that Rothko and Gottlieb and all that crowd - they all got fussed up with that horrible - What's that man? - McCarthy. McCarthy had a very bad reputation Joe McCarthy. There was a division. I remember going to division and sitting down at something because Gottlieb said that you mustn't do this; you must do this and not the other thing. Whatever I said was I was not going to listen to him.

MR. WOLFE: What was he trying

MS. CAPARN: There was cowardice in the people who don't think about it much. I've been brought up with people with ideas about politics from the time I was born. You were supposed to be able to disagree or agree; but you didn't have to be cut out because you were Mr. McCarthy or not Mr. McCarthy. But that was part of the whole business. And I had a slight fuss with Gottlieb about it. What's her name? I know so well But, that whole thing - it was not just me. It wasn't anything else. It was just that I felt that I didn't want them to be like that. I don't know how it could have been handled.

MR. WOLFE: What was the fuss about?

MS. CAPARN: We started the Federation with the idea that people were completely free to do anything they wanted to do and nobody was going to cut them out. We kept that. And then this damn thing came in the cellar door, as much to say, "Now this comes down and stops this and ends this." And back and forth. It's awfully hard to describe. But that combined with that business about the stuff at the Metropolitan which was absolutely harrowing -

MR. WOLFE: That was in 1951?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. And it went on and on and on. It's never been easy. It's not been easy any But the thing was absolutely outrageous, the whole thing.

MR. WOLFE: Well, tell me about it.

MS. CAPARN: Well, all I can remember is that I got Minna Harkavy who was a wonderful sculptor. She knew me and knew me very well. We liked each other very much. We weren't intimate friends; but we respected each other. She was a lot older. And then, of course, she and I got the "women" prizes. And the whole thing fell apart. I've got pages of stuff to document it.

MR. WOLFE: The conservative critics were indignant?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. But, the conservative critics have nothing to fear. The younger people who are trying for new things and they have to make promises they can't keep or something. But, these old characters who are just like a machine - but it's their belief. Someday when I have time, I'll send you some papers about it.

MR. WOLFE: So, they were all upset that you got the prize for your -

MS. CAPARN: It didn't upset me at all. I would have loved to have it be. But the thing is to be categorized - castigated by it because you did anything.

MR. WOLFE: For what?

MS. CAPARN: Because they said that you're crazy or this, that and the other thing.

MR. WOLFE: Because of your sculpture?

MS. CAPARN: Or that you're anti-quality or something, whatever it is. I've got so much of it in there, Tom. Someday I'll have to get it together for you. But, pages and pages.

MR. WOLFE: Let's try and pin down what went on with Gottlieb and Rothko and you. Rothko was in the Federation of Modern Artists and Painters?

MS. CAPARN: I'm trying to remember. I figure he must have been. I couldn't be quite sure that Gottlieb was.

MR. WOLFE: And you had a disagreement with Gottlieb because -

MS. CAPARN: Oh, that was a slight, slight thing at the party at what's her name's, you know, down on Thirtieth Street. You know the place I mean. The woman sculptor, the big woman sculptor.

MR. WOLFE: Nevelson?

MS. CAPARN: Nevelson. Yes. She has always been very shrewd; but, she's also very able. I have respect for her because I think she's a very strong person.

MR. WOLFE: Absolutely.

MS. CAPARN: She didn't try to to anything nasty. I think Gottlieb and I just had a slight fuss.

MR. WOLFE: What was it about? McCarthy -- did you say?

MS. CAPARN: It was something to do with the McCarthy thing. I just had this feeling, "To hell with this; I'm not going to let myself get into this kind of thing." And then everybody calling everybody names. [It was] very bad for other people. It was an ugly business Probably you could survive it - most of it. But, it shouldn't be. I have this same thing that I have about art. I don't think it should be fought this way. It shouldn't be about that.

MR. WOLFE: Was the Artists' Congress part of this at all?

MS. CAPARN: The Artists' Congress was way before that.

MR. WOLFE: That was in the thirties. I know Rothko was a member at the end.

MS. CAPARN: Rothko?

MR. WOLFE: Rothko - His name was still Rothkovich. - was a member in the late days of the Artists' Congress.

MS. CAPARN: I remember the Artists' Congress.

MR. WOLFE: What do you remember about it?

MS. CAPARN: I think the Artists' Congress was left and we went to the Federation.

MR. WOLFE: So was the Federation political?

MS. CAPARN: No, they didn't consider themselves to be. The Artists' Congress was - I'm trying to remember this perfectly. This friend of mine - What's her name? - we were all on these things because of the war. And we weren't thinking about anything else much. We moved from the thing before the Artist's Congress which had become completely political. They were trying to fight for the Spanish and everything else. It was a different period. And then it moved into the Artists' Congress. I went and got into the Artists' Congress the first or second week.

MR. WOLFE: The Federation, you mean.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. the Federation. That started the Federation.

MR. WOLFE: Who started the Federation when you got in?

MS. CAPARN: I think most of us who left the Congress.

MR. WOLFE: Such as whom?

MS. CAPARN: We left it in the sense that we added to other people and we didn't want to be crowded with one group which had become very tight. You couldn't move. So we moved out into this Federation thing.

MR. WOLFE: And who was "we"?

MS. CAPARN: You mean who left?

MR. WOLFE: Yes; the names;

MS. CAPARN: Mrs. Phillips had left. There were quite a few. By this time, you see, we were having a hell of a life. But it was not too bad. I think about ten people left. Then you get your beloved Barr. I have a letter from Barr if I can find -

MR. WOLFE: Are you talking about Alfred

MS. CAPARN: Alfred Barrr whom I cannot stand.

MR. WOLFE: Who started the Museum of Modern Art?

MS. CAPARN: I know; but I couldn't stand him.

MR. WOLFE: Why don't you wait with the letter because I'd like to hear a little more what you have to say.

MS. CAPARN: All right; I'll get you all those things together.

MR. WOLFE: So people left the Artists' Congress to form the Federation.

MS. CAPARN: Yes; I can't say exactly which day they did or when they did it. But I remember quite well that it moved into the Federation.

MR. WOLFE: Who were the people who did that? Do you remember?

MS. CAPARN: Most of us.

MR. WOLFE: You say "us;" but I don't know who you mean.

MS. CAPARN: I don't remember exactly at the moment because I don't' have the faces.

MR. WOLFE: Who were your friends then?

MS. CAPARN: I'll have to give you the list.

MR. WOLFE: And then Rothko was just kind of around then.

MS. CAPARN: I can't place Rothko exactly when. And, actually, I didn't even remember that Gottlieb had gone so much. I think that their real beginning was a break into the new group of painters.

MR. WOLFE:

MS. CAPARN: That was it; that was the beginning of that.

MR. WOLFE: So who were your artist friends back in those days in the thirties and forties?

MS. CAPARN: Just doing sculpture. Mostly forties. I did a lot of animals up to '40 - '41. I did a great deal. Then, I went into -

MR. WOLFE: But who were you hanging around with then?

MS. CAPARN: I never did hang around much.

MR. WOLFE: Where was your studio?

MS. CAPARN: It was on West Fifty-sixth Street right opposite the - It's no longer there. - men's residence hotel. I think it's been torn down. It used to be a Salvation Army place.

MR. WOLFE: Close to the Art Students' League, also.

MS. CAPARN: Yes, much nearer. Johannes. and I had an apartment for thirty years on Fifty-seventh Street. The little place which I could work in which changed and would get more and more expensive were always a block

away.

MR. WOLFE: Did you know Dorothy Varian? She was there. She has a studio in Carnegie Hall.

MS. CAPARN: I never heard of her.

MR. WOLFE: She's a Woodstock person. I know a lot of Woodstock artists.

MS. CAPARN: You're a lot younger than I.

MR. WOLFE: Oh, well, she's older than you. Kuniyoshi is somebody else who I -

MS. CAPARN: He's been dead for a long time. He died of cancer. I've never been much of a group of artists as such. Do you know what I mean? I think it's partially because I have other problem with my family.

MR. WOLFE: Well, maybe temperament.

MS. CAPARN: I've been alone a lot in my life.

MR. WOLFE: I kind of envy them they had so much of a community.

MS. CAPARN: I've never had too much of it.

MR. WOLFE: I think it's more unusual than it is common. I don't know. For a while all those guys, Clufford Still -

MS. CAPARN: All those people down at the Springs. They must have had a wild time. I've never been able to do that kind of thing. I just didn't work it out. Of course, both my parents were very "one" people. I think that had an effect.

MR. WOLFE: So, what happened to the sculpture animal form that was so controversial at the Met?

MS. CAPARN: I got two thousand dollars. I needed much more, if possible. I had two of them. One of them was already in Paris in the Petit Palais. It was one of those shows of six women artists. We had that piece that, I think, I sent back after the show. It was put in the Metropolitan show. Then there was the other one which was wandering around with a friend, this other piece. A man who I never liked, but I needed the money, said he would sell the piece for three hundred dollars. O f course it was absolutely absurd. There was all that money around! I had to do it because I needed the three hundred dollars. He was entirely disagreeable and thought he should get much less than that. Then, the other piece belongs to someone else. And put it in bronze. But I never got anything out of it, really. And that kind of thing. But that wasn't the point. But it was a damned good piece, if you want to know!

MR. WOLFE: Yes; it's a nice piece. Really fine.

MS. CAPARN: It went fine. Of course, I lost it.

MR. WOLFE: It's in a private collection or something?

MS. CAPARN: I don't think so. If I could find it, we might be able to - But, again, this was in the bad period - 51.

MR. WOLFE: What do you mean this bad period?

MS. CAPARN: Because '51 was a very bad period - the McCarthy period. It's all tied up. It was very hard for lots of people. This country is like every other country; it's a wonderful country and then suddenly it turns into something ghastly. And it behaves in a very strange way, I think.

MR. WOLFE: And most of the people in the arts were liberals so they kind of -

MS. CAPARN: Not always. I learned a long lesson long ago. And that is that people can be a great artists and be absolute sons of a bitch. So you have to be careful.

MR. WOLFE: I've seen that, too.

MS. CAPARN: I'm very fond of Constance and people of their kind that I know. And Bolotowsky and that crowd.

MR. WOLFE: Bolotowsky seemed to be a lovely man. I met him a few years ago.

MS. CAPARN: He was a wonderful person.

MR. WOLFE: But in other words, the McCarthy years just kind of polarized everybody?

MS. CAPARN: Well, I don't suppose everybody. I've put myself into it. I've put myself in about the Spanish War and everything. What are you going to do? Run around and say, "No; I didn't think about this." And go off. It's ridiculous. You get caught in it. I still feel that it was a terrible thing. And that's the way you live. You can't just be a monster of some kind. So I think we've all been shaken. And that's all right. Maybe you c an do better work if you are shaken than just being smug.

MR. WOLFE: Yes; I believe that.

MS. CAPARN: I do feel one thing, though, now that we're coming down to this if I haven't mentioned it. I do believe in art enormously and I also believe in people, some people anyway. I think that here's too much egotism and a sense of "I am the only thing worthwhile and everything else should disappear." I don't think that's good enough. I don't think that people should have to write the "right" stories and do other things. There should be more humanity in the world. For instance, George Constant is not the world's greatest painter; but he's a marvelous man. And I think it makes a lot of difference and I think you need it. Not just to be bright and cheerful and everything. I think there's a corruption about it because they have gotten too much money.

MR. WOLFE: That's certainly changed that whole thing. But, how as Archipenko in relation to this?

MS. CAPARN: Archipenko was way out. He was not in anything yet. He was lost as far as that's concerned. That's one reason I like him because he

MS. CAPARN: What was he like when you were studying with him? What were his attitudes about his own work? He kind of was in the middle of the Parisian avant garde and he lifted himself out of it and left.

MS. CAPARN: No; I don't think he ever lifted himself out, really. I didn't know him that well because he was quite a lot older. I think he was a man who was not capable of handling himself, for one thing. He was so far away. He was not even in Russia; he was in whatever that other place is with all the black soil, wherever it is. You know what I'm talking about - the big city place. He was not meant for this. He should have stayed on in Paris and if there had not been a war, he would have gone to Germany. because there are certain German fields. I found a thing of German work. I have a lot of papers and things that I never get to.

[tape interrupted]

MS. CAPARN: Perhaps, if he could have had a little less. It would have been better for him.

MR. WOLFE: For Rothko. A little less success, you mean?

MS. CAPARN: Yes.

MR. WOLFE: Yes; it seemed like his success was overwhelming.

MS. CAPARN: They treated him like a Michaelangelo or something in the sky and I guess it was too much.

MR. WOLFE: Yes. that seems to be. But did you have much impression of him as a man back then?

MS. CAPARN: Did I have an impression of him? Not much. For instance, I sat with him at a table, he was very degage. I couldn't say to you what I knew too much. I knew he was there. I was delighted he was. And I always went to see them. But it was not a human thing.

MR. WOLFE: What do you mean, you went to see them? The paintings?

MS. CAPARN: Yes; I liked to see his paintings. I liked to go view his paintings very much.

MR. WOLFE: and was he friends with Avery then, do you know?

MS. CAPARN: With whom?

MR. WOLFE: Milton Avery.

MS. CAPARN: Yes; I liked Avery very much. I've never known him very closely. But I've liked his work. He's always been very nice to mine which is nice. [Laughs] He was a human being. I should imagine that Rothko, in spite of all these great things that he had done == it must have tightened him so hard that he wouldn't have been able to let go.

MR. WOLFE: Yes. I think he had trouble.

MS. CAPARN: Something like that. I don't know what it could be.

MR. WOLFE: But you didn't spend a lot of time with him socially, then.

MS. CAPARN: No; I never have. I've been looking through this because of what you called me about. I'll have to have you come some time with longer time.

MR. WOLFE: That's an impressive file of documents.

MS. CAPARN: What was I saying?

MR. WOLFE: About Rothko, that you didn't have much social contact with him.

MS. CAPARN: No. I didn't have social contact with any of the artists. And then there were the bad periods. And illness in the family and all that kind of thing had happened. About twenty years of it. That you can't really take out. You keep on because you want to. [Noises from the background]

MR. WOLFE: So Rhys doesn't really remember too much about Rothko. Irving Sandler, I think, suggested that we talk to you about Rothko.

MS. CAPARN: What did he say?

MR. WOLFE: I don't know. He didn't tell me. They told me - The Rothko Foundation. I called them up today to ask them what kind of questions I should ask you. They mentioned that he -

MS. CAPARN: You can mention what I said, the kind of person I think he was - something that's remote.

MR. WOLFE: I guess he was a very sensitive man.

MS. CAPARN: I think he was. He was a sensitive I can understand just out of what I have in my head that he tied himself to something that he could never change. It's almost as though there were a cloud in the sky and none of us is going to be able to pull it around. And that is going to be what he is going to be. There must have been something there, some tension that was almost unbearable for him. Of course a lot of artists have that. Well, I can understand it because it might be in such a situation that there was nowhere else to go; and that they wouldn't want to be left with nothing.

MR. WOLFE: I think he was overwhelmed by all that sudden success.

MS. CAPARN: Yes and I think I also had that feeling about Rothko. I didn't see him very much. I saw him very little. But I had a feeling that he couldn't even tell himself this. That's what used to frighten me about him, that he wouldn't be able to change into something else - that he always had to be what he is. I'm not saying it right.

MR. WOLFE: That sounded pretty good.

MS. CAPARN: I didn't like his first work; that's all. But since we were all fiddling around - we hadn't come to any "spot" where we were going to work. I think that Gottlieb fixed himself a spot and made it so and would say so and it would be made, if you know what I mean. But the power there is "ashes of power." That's the way it goes.

MR. WOLFE: Where did you see his work?

MS. CAPARN: In the [Museum of] Modern Art, and also at the big place on Riverside Drive. I tried to find anything at the Wildenstein but I didn't see anything there. Quite honestly, I didn't remember the Gottlieb things unless they told me about them. I could've told you almost anybody that I've been through these eight years - I would have known every single on e of them.

MR. WOLFE: With the Federation, you mean?

MS. CAPARN: Because they were known. They weren't necessarily well known; but they were known. And the Wildenstein hung to it.

MR. WOLFE: The Federation has showed at Wildenstein? Yes; that is a beautiful place.

MS. CAPARN: That is a beautiful place and it was a wonderful thing for them to do it.

MR. WOLFE: Yes; it really is.

MS. CAPARN: It was all done with no fuss. It was really marvelous for us.

MR. WOLFE: Who was that - Daniel Wildenstein?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. There was the one who ran it. Now, Johannes will know because he knew him very well. Then there was the cousin who stayed on with gray hair, who was very American, very conservative. The other one was very French. Daniel, I think, is the son. That was a wonderful thing. It gave us a start.

[Tape interrupted]

MR. WOLFE: Let me ask you this. You were a member of The American Abstract Artists; but your work wasn't totally abstract.

MS. CAPARN: No. But the thing is that the totally abstract didn't stay totally abstract. A lot of these people didn't come until they could. I've forgotten what year I went into it. They had asked me twice. What was the name of that man who put me in? He's a painter; again, I can't think of the name.

MR. WOLFE: Not Bolotowsky.

MS. CAPARN: Oh, no. Bolotowsky was there before. He was really a Mondrian person, have the time.

MR. WOLFE: Who? Bolotowsky?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. he went back and forth.

MR. WOLFE: Mondrian had a great influence.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. He was kind of the father of it. What was the name? Well, he got me in anyway. I don't know why I did it. I'd always had an excitement about the abstract artists. I think there's something marvelous about it.

MR. WOLFE: And they were a good bunch of artists, too.

MS. CAPARN: That's the one I sent to them.

MR. WOLFE: Is that there now in the Brooklyn BotanicaI Gardens inside?

MS. CAPARN: Yes. it was when I had it. That was about two years ago.

MR. WOLFE: I'll have to go take a good look at that. This you have.

MS. CAPARN: That's right in the garage. This book only goes up to '72. I've eleven years more to put in. But I have to get photographs together. But I don't know that I'll get to it.

MR. WOLFE: I like these reliefs very much.

MS. CAPARN: Yes, I like them. I'm glad you do because I loved doing them.

MR. WOLFE: They're very "painterly" in a way.

MS. CAPARN: Yes; and it was an idea to be able to do it. It's kind of a try-out, in a sense. Lots of these are gone, of course.

MR. WOLFE: Yes; that's how it goes. This looks very impressive, too, the "Barnard Bear Landscape"of the Barnard Bear which is up at Barnard now?

MS. CAPARN: Yes; that's right. That was to keep people from going into the elevator. [Laughs] That's what they told me. They wanted a wall so they could walk up to the second floor.

MR. WOLFE: And it's a big bronze.

MS. CAPARN: Yes. it was a very expensive one. I only got a little out of it.

MR. WOLFE: Really.

MS. CAPARN: They didn't mean it; but we didn't know what we were doing.

MR. WOLFE: [Laughs] To cast a piece that big was quite an undertaking. These are nice; I really like these.

MS. CAPARN: That piece I loved and it smashed, the base. I did that piece in 1955. that's when I broke away

from the Dalton, not because it was the Dalton but because I said I had to stop. And I took five years. I didn't take five years; but I worked very hard. I did it on a kitchen table. It was about this high. You can see it in the garage.

MR. WOLFE: I glimpsed it coming in. but the base of it is broken That's what happened?

MS. CAPARN: Yes; but that can be fixed. This is what her name - that woman at the Museum of Modern Art. She used to talk about it. I said, "I can't do anything about it: I don't have the money." She said, "I don't have the money either." So that was the end of that. Those damn people could easily put the money in. They have all the money in the world. But you see, that's another there that has to do with Barr. I'll have to find that letter because then you'll understand about Barr.

MR. WOLFE: It's a hard lot being a sculptor, I think. I think the sculptors have it the worst. It's so expensive to execute [a piece].

MS. CAPARN: Oh, yes.

MR. WOLFE: You didn't know this artist named Ernest Feine a sculptor?

MS. CAPARN: I've heard of him.

MR. WOLFE: He lived up in Woodstock. I visited his widow.

MS. CAPARN: I've heard of him a lot.

MR. WOLFE: She just has dozens of plasters that she has no money to have cast. And they're kind of deteriorating.

MS. CAPARN: I know; it's terrible. That's one reason that I'm going to go right down to the fathoms because I'm going to do them because I want to do them and if nobody ever looks at them, I'm not going to give a damn.

[Tape interrupted]

MR. WOLFE: So, this letter, though, is from the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors to the Museum of Modern Art complaining about the lack of representation of contemporary American art. I guess that was a controversial issue for you then in 1944.

MS. CAPARN: I don't remember anything like that.

MR. WOLFE: This is the letter you showed me.

MS. CAPARN: We were always struggling along doing our won things.

MR. WOLFE: And Rothko is part of this. He's still Marcus Rothko here; but he didn't play a very active role. Gottlieb was the vice president when you were president; so, that's why you know him better.

MR. WOLFE: So this was the end of that debate with the Modern. It just kind of ended here with this letter? Sounds like it; it's about the end. Did all these artists meet together with the Federation? Did you meet together in one place?

MS. CAPARN: Oh, sure. I was sitting in the room.

MR. WOLFE: And, then, what went on?

MS. CAPARN: They talked about it and decided what to do. Somebody has to be the head at the moment. The next day somebody else will do it, maybe. You can't just have seventy-six people just standing there and saying different things.

MR. WOLFE: And John Graham was part of this, also?

MS. CAPARN: John Graham was a very good painter. A very unusual person, apparently. I didn't know him well. I used to see him walking up and down Madison Avenue for some reason.

MR. WOLFE: Going to art galleries, maybe. And this Pepino Margravite?

MS. CAPARN: Yes, I knew him. I haven't seen him - I don't think he stayed on with this group.

MR. WOLFE: I've been seeing reproductions of his work lately. It seems kind of interesting in a kind of

illustrational way.

MS. CAPARN: I think that what I'll do is to look at another list of this because it will be ten years later. And I'll send it to you.

MR. WOLFE: O. K. This sounds like an interesting organization.

MS. CAPARN: I'm quite sure that - Is the Phillips woman in there?

MR. WOLFE: Yes.

MS. CAPARN: She left. And I'm sure that Margravite left.

MR. WOLFE: Majorie Phillips.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...October 3, 2005