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Oral history interview with Marisol, 1968 Feb. 8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Marisol (Marisol Escobar) on February 8, 1968. The interview was conducted by Collete Roberts 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

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH MARISOL (MARISOL ESCOBAR)

FEBRUARY 8, 1968

INTERVIEWER: COLLETE ROERTS

CR: COLLETE ROBERTS

M: MARISOL

CR: Interviewing Marisol in my studio as it was inconvenient in hers. Now that we have vanquished the machine, or that is that I have, maybe you can just say a few words that you would choose about the background for our discussion and conversation. Maybe to start before we go into what I would call more biographical things I would like to just remark on a thing which I have observed. That is you are such a marvelous- well, observer of people, of yourself first, and of others- second. I would say this: I have a strong feeling that it's because you know yourself so well that you know others that well. This portrait of [Sidney] Janis that I saw in the show at the Museum of Modern Art was to me as if it had been seen from inside Janis and not outside. Would you like to say a few words on this subject, and then we'll go back to what it is to know yourself and what is your background for this understanding of subject matter.

M: I can't explain it.

CR: You can't explain it- not that way? As a matter of fact my question was very self-conscious and very bad. Well, let's just go into very matter of fact-ish things which are like passports, you know. After all you came to this country after studying in your own, in Chile? Or was it after studying in France?

M: No, I went to art school in New York.

CR: You studied all your art studies in New York?

M: Yes.

CR: You never studied anywhere else?

M: I studied in Paris one year.

CR: In what school was this?

M:*L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts*.

CR: The *Beaux-Arts*? That's funny. Incidentally since we speak of the *Beaux-Arts* and that neighborhood, were you familiar with the Paris scene of the time? I mean did you get to know some of the Paris artists and people. After all I did meet you through Rene Drouin and he was responsible for a great deal of French avant-garde of the forties, so I was wondering if you had known some of those people there at the time?

M: French artists?

CR: Yes, or international artists then.

M: No, I didn't meet anyone. I was only going to school.

CR: You were too young? You were just a student?

M: Yes. I met him in New York.

CR: Oh, you met Drouin in New York?

M: Yes.

CR: Well, of course at the time he probably was seeking you because he's always been interested in finding what was going on in the plastic field, and he would look for you at that point. What kind of studies did you do at the *Beaux-Arts*?

M: Just painting the model.

CR: Painting the model? Who was your instructor? Who was your teacher?

M: I don't remember. This was twenty years ago.

CR: Twenty years ago!

M: Yes.

CR: No! I cannot imagine that. That cannot be.

M: Eighteen years ago.

CR: Well, I can see why you wouldn't remember especially since it wasn't that striking. As a matter of fact when did you decide in your life that you were going to be a painter, or that you were interested that much in painting?

M: I never made a decision. It came very naturally that I knew that I wanted to do that.

CR: Did you as a child do a lot of sketches and drawings, or just like any normal child uses whatever comes to hand?

M: No, I was always drawing.

CR: Was it encouraged in your family? Or was it your something that was frowned upon as sometimes it may be?

M: No, it was encouraged.

CR: But to the point that you felt very early that you had some special gift? Or did you just think that it was normal to be that gifted?

M: No, they [parents] made me feel as if I had a special gift.

CR: That's very good. Because I think it's a nice encouragement.

M: And in school also.

CR: Did you study drawing in the school you went to as a child? What kind of schooling was it? I'm very unfamiliar with Chile's schools. Is it like the French *lycée*? Or is it like the high schools here?

M: I think it must be more like the European one, more than the American.

CR: Like the private schools in Europe? I mean more on the religious side?

M: Yes, with nuns.

CR: The studies are taken very seriously?

M: Yes. I remember in grammar school all the things that I learned and then I went to high school in America and I thought it was nothing.

CR: I see. But were you interested in any particular field? I mean some people- let's say, [Mary] Bauermeister, for instance was interested in mathematics. What was your field of interest, aside from drawing?

M: I liked everything except history.

CR: Oh, really? That's interesting. That's amusing. That surprises me because- well, it's probably because it was taught in a very traditional way with dates and things like that?

M: Yes.

CR: Because otherwise I think, if anything, what comes very strongly out of your work is a deep sense of history. So it amuses me. But of course it's the dates and the battles and that kind of thing.

M: Yes. I could never memorize. And American history is so difficult.

CR: Yes. It is actually much more difficult than European history.

M: Yes, because it's not very romantic.

CR: That's right. It's a much more legalistic story. And whereas, the history of France, it's really pageantry; I mean especially the way it's taught. If you can take the battles away I mean it's all rather very illustrative. But American history is an adult's history. It's not made for children really.

M: Yes.

CR: But going back to those early days, do you have memories of childhood that go with special scenery? Are you conscious in your memory now I mean of remembering a smell of remembering a color or something that really seems to have been a leitmotif that you've carried with you? Or once you left Chile was it a complete- well, past?

M: Smells?

CR: Well, you know- the kind of thing that makes you recollect fragments of one's life through certain sensorial experiences?

M: Yes, I remember the smell of wet mud.

CR: Oh, I see. Like after the rain?

M: Yes.

CR: I see. Unfortunately I'm terribly ignorant of Chile, so I can't really... All I knew was a very charming man, Arturo LePaz. And that's all I know about Chile. Do you know him?

M: No. Who is he?

CR: Well, actually I don't know. I know that his son was responsible for the Prevas Ballets. But he was a banker, I believe, or an owner of copper mines or something like that. But he was a very good friend of a friend of mine. But that's about as far as my knowledge of Chile goes. And I wanted to polish up for you and at least have some background. But if you could give us a little background of, as I say, scenery, were you brought up in the city or in the country?

M: In the country.

CR: Do you associate with the idea of open spaces? Or on the contrary, the coziness of close to animal farms and things like that?

M: I like both things. I like to be in a room and I like to be outdoors also.

CR: Yes, that's just a normal taste. But do you have nothing in your background, in your childhood that has made a really deep imprint in one way or another? I was just trying now- basically we're interested in *now* so it's only trying to create the background for *now*. When did you decided to leave Chile? Do you go back to Chile, by the way, often?

M: No, not very often.

CR: Do you still have family there?

M: No, my father lives in Mexico.

CR: I see. You left after high school- what would correspond to high school?

M: No, because I was born in Europe to begin with. I spent my first five years there and of that I don't remember anything at all.

CR: I see. So you really remember, Europe as your background?

M: No, because I can't remember anything from the years one to five. Zero to five.

CR: Oh, I see. I didn't understand. Yes, yes, I understand [now]. As a matter of fact which part of Europe was it?

M: In Paris. But I think they were travelling also. I can't remember.

CR: I see. Your knowledge of French, which I know is very good. Comes from the little time you spent in Paris at the *Beaux-Arts*? Or did you study it at school?

M: On and off when I was a child we used to go there. And then I studied it in school.

CR: I see. But going from one thing to another, since your masters always remarked your drawing, you never had the temptation to specialize in any particular branch of drawing or painting? From what you said that happened naturally?

M: No, I started drawing first.

CR: It was definitely painting you wanted to do then?

M: Oh, yes.

CR: I see. And how did it grow into sculptures.

M: And then I started doing collages and reliefs.

CR: Yes. So it's just purely a natural development. But when did you discover this marvelous way of putting together the two? That is to say, the heavy hunk of wood and the totally drawn faces? How did that evolve? Because I noticed that at first it was a little more realistic and then it became very abstract in the way it was handled.

M: The first one was quite realistic. It was a family.

CR: Oh, that's the one that the Museum of Modern Art has with the child on the lap of the mother? [*The Family*, 1962]

M: No, I did a few before that one. Smaller ones.

CR: I see. And as a matter of fact how did those get discovered? I mean I'm not trying to get into the gossipy part of who and what, but just say it the way you to, you know.

M: How did I start?

CR: Yes, that's right. How did it- because after all some work stays in the studio for many, many years before you get a chance to have as important an exposure as that one at the Museum of Modern Art. The first group, by the way, was it "Sixteen Americans" in which you appeared?

M: At the Museum?

CR: Yes. No, it was "America '63" wasn't it? That was when there was *The Beach* [1963]?

M: Yes.

CR: Oh! And the *Mona Lisa* [1963]. How did you get that idea of the *Mona Lisa*? That's such a marvelous idea!

M: I don't know. I think I got the idea from looking at a piece of wood and it reminded me of her.

CR: I see. So that really when you saw all the ages of the wood on the trunk--

M: Yes.

CR: It was the form that it took that made you think of the *Mona Lisa*? Or was it the conceptual idea of how fascinating it would be to use the ageless with the aged?

M: I don't know what you mean. To my mind I found this piece of wood in the street.

CR: In the street?

M: Yes, and then I visualized it that way.

CR: It's so marvelous. It's so marvelous. By the way, since we speak of the *Mona Lisa* [1500's], and it's been used and misused any number of times, what were your reactions to let's say, [Marcel] Duchamp, since after all he used the symbol quite a bit.

M: Of the *Mona Lisa*?

CR: Yes. Did you discover him in your later yours, or in the early stages of the history of art?

M: No, I was familiar with Duchamp's work for a long time.

CR: So what were your reactions to it the first time? I'm not talking of you now as a formed artist and so forth, but when you first read his writing and saw what he was doing to the debunking of the art scene? Because after all, it's very interesting to see how your sculpture is a form of continual debunking and at the same time building up the debunked. When did you first get conscious of the philosophy of Duchamp?

M: I wasn't really very involved with European art except with Picasso and Matisse. And then I became involved with American artists like [Robert] Rauschenberg.

CR: And you really had very little contact with the movement that came just before that? That is the abstract expressionists?

M: No, I had a lot of contact with that also.

CR: You had?

M: Yes.

CR: And who in that group were the ones you sort of associated with more freely, that you knew personally?

M: I guess all of them. In the fifties when they had The Club, I used to go there and listen.

CR: Right. So that really your evolution came absolutely following one step after the other?

M: Yes. Because I didn't have any contact with the Surrealists. That was before the abstract expressionists.

CR: I see. You had no contact then?

M: I think I was too young then. It must have been in the thirties.

CR: Yes. Before we started to tape we were mentioning Dali because of this mutual friend of ours- how did you react to his work? To his interest of the world of appearance per se?

M I like his work also. I don't know what you mean [by] "how do you react?"

CR: I mean because in a way it's extremely different from your own conception, which is observation and debunking. I mean he is using reality to get into dream; it's really according to the traditional surrealist. You have no use for the dreams, do you? Reality is- what I mean reality for whatever it stands for, I mean you're much closer to Duchamp that way.

M: Yes.

CR: But I was thinking of that first exhibition. You had a whole room in 1963 at the Museum of Modern Art.

M: Yes.

CR: And I was trying to retrace how you got to be known. Was it after your show at the Stable that you had that show at the Museum?

M: No, the first time was at the Stable when they used to have big Annuals.

CR: Oh, down on Seventh Avenue? In those days?

M: Yes.

CR: Oh, I didn't realize that at all.

M: Then I showed in one of those Annuals and it was something that everybody liked very much.

CR: What was the subject of them?

M: It was a box full of little figures made out of clay.

CR: I see. I don't think I saw that.

M: Then I guess people kept an eye to see what I would do next. And [Leo] Castelli gave me a show in 1957.

CR: That's right. That's right. Now I remember. Yes, you were showing with Castelli before the Stable.

M: Yes.

CR: That's right. How many shows did you have at the Stable?

M: Then I had two- was it two? In 1960 I had a show there; and maybe in 1962.

CR: I see. So that really the Museum of Modern Art was the natural development of those solo shows?

M: Yes. No, it was 1962 and 1964 at the Stable.

CR: I see. Therefore there were two before the room in 1963?

M: Yes.

CR: Now I remember the *Mona Lisa*, the big trunk with the face so perfectly, beautifully copied, drawn with every cycle of the ages in front. That I remember so clearly. I remember less clearly a combination of people on a horse.

M: Well, there were two generals on a horse.

CR: That's right. But there was something strange about the duality; there was something- didn't they share certain limbs or something? Were they really two passengers on a horse?

M: No, there were two.

CR: There were two complete human beings?

M: Yes.

CR: So *The Beach*, that, and this; now what else am I forgetting? There were more.

M: Yes.

CR: Can you recall other pieces that were in that show? Of course we could take out a catalogue? I must have one around that would help us. But anyways incidentally this *Beach*- did you see that show in Paris at the Museum--?

M: Rodin?

CR:*Musée Rodin*, yes. Did you see that show?

M: No, I didn't see it.

CR: Well, it was rather Surrealist at this point the way that *Beach* stood because it was under a vaulted arch in the chapel when I saw it anyway and I can't say that the arch was very symbolic of sun for *The Beach*. It gave a very, very strange atmosphere to the piece. Does your sculpture stand in gardens? I mean does the wood resist?

M: No, it couldn't go outdoors.

CR: Because of the painting for one thing.

M: Yes. And the wood rots and warps.

CR: You know it's very strange how your work makes special images. I mean of each show there's something terribly vivid that comes back to my mind. And I'd like to talk to you about the piece in the Carnegie of-well, the Carnegie before this one. That was 1964, wasn't it?

M: Yes.

CR: It was called *The Visit* [1964], wasn't it? All those people, the mother and two girls seated on the sofa.

M: Yes.

CR: How did you conceive such a piece? I mean how did that come into your mind? Because you had the barrels? Because they became alive as you saw the forms? Or did you feel that there was something terribly awkward and wood-like in the weight that could be translated into something rather--?

M: That one I found the couch on the street.

CR: And then you made the pieces, the personages for it?

M: Yes.

CR: I see.

M: I took the upholstery off and I covered it with wood. But the idea came from the couch.

CR: Well, that's very interesting to see. By the way, in the last Carnegie how did those personages appear? They almost look like lamps.

M: Oh, yes.

CR: How did that come?

M: That one I got the idea from being at the beach.

CR: With the big hats?

M: No. People sunning themselves with big foils, you know they hold it like this so they can get sunburned underneath the face.

CR: Well, I'm very ignorant. I never saw it.

M: You've never seen it?

CR: No! Of course I usually avoid too much sun.

M: They make special things that are like this and then you hold it here and there is a reflection.

CR: It is the reflection that gives you the sunburn, the sun complexion?

M: Yes.

CR: Well, that's something I hadn't-- I didn't know the observation and therefore didn't quite interpret what I saw there. *The Party* [1966] in the Janis show for me, was extraordinarily *Directoire* and I can't explain why.

M: What do you mean "*Directoire?*"

CR:*Directoire*- you know that style in France where women had dresses with the waistline just under the breast and with great sober elegance of a sort and a great rigidity because of the style of the time, the people who painted those, even Davidian, if you want- even David at a point.

M: Oh, yes.

CR: And this to me was extraordinarily of that period. Directoire is before the Empire style. You know it's during that period. The woman who was holding herself against the wall with her handbag and just at the end of an evening is extraordinarily tired. It's almost like a vignette.

M: Was this one of *The Party*?

CR: Yes. One of *The Party*. She was leaning against the wall with her handbag like this.

M: No, I think that is not part of *The Party*.

CR: Oh?

M: No. Women leaning against the wall.

CR: It was in the same show though?

M: Yes.

CR: Oh, yes. I see. How did you get the idea of *The Party*? Just of course by going to parties, but-

M: Yes. Because it's a ball. It's not a regular party. It's a very elegant ball. And I like to look at elegant people with nice clothes.

CR: I was very much interested in some of the details of the clothes. But also of the constructions of the heads and of the goggles, for instance under the glasses, what happened underneath? And how did you mix those two things, your knowing so much about drawing and then putting it in three dimensions? How did you get to build them so close to one another that they talk for one another?

M: Yes-

CR: I mean might it have been that at some point you drew a personage on a piece of wood that had the depth of the wood. And that it became then a revelation of what it could be- a three-dimensional drawing?

M: No, in the beginning I drew on a piece of wood because I was going to carve it. And then I noticed that I didn't have to carve it, because it looked as if it was carved already.

CR: That's what I thought. Yes.

M: I notice that when they take photographs of my work that some parts are drawn and then you can't tell; they look as if they were carved.

CR: Right. In other words, the observation of the forms are such that there is a sort of *trompe l'oeil* automatically?

M: Yes.

CR: Well, I feel that very strongly. And that's what I was wondering about. Now how did you conceive- since you don't like history- the idea of taking such historical figures as those you have in the last show at Janis?

M: It was a commission from the newspaper. And then I found they were interesting characters to do because I'm so familiar with them.

CR: Do you work a lot from photos?

M: Yes, from photos.

CR: Do you find TV, that kind of thing stimulating to give it that sort of life that you give it? I was just wondering.

M: TV?

CR: Yes, television.

M: I don't know what you mean.

CR: Well, I was actually referring to the fact that your drawings are not static. I mean there's a certain feeling of movement in those personages. And so I was wondering if they came not strictly from photo but from the film?

M: If I saw films before--?

CR: Yes. If you are perhaps conscious of those features through film as much as through the photo that you would have on your table or on your easel?

M: Yes, that's possible. Well, at least for that show they invited me to England for and they really made me do research. They showed me movies of all the people.

CR: I see. It's funny, I didn't know that. But I mean it seems there is something about it which breathes the kind of- well, the kind of dimension that you would have in a film I thought.

M: It was a good idea of them. And they sent me to Paris and they took me to what do you call that place- the Congress? No, they have something else?

CR: Chamber of Deputies.

M: Yes. So that I would see how things work there in politics. And in England they took me to the House of Commons.

CR: "They"- you mean the newspaper which commissioned you for this?

M: Yes.

CR: Which newspaper was it?

M:*The Daily Telegraph*.

CR: It was the *London Daily Telegraph* who wanted you to do that?

M: Yes.

CR: What a brilliant idea!

M: Also they took me to theatres so I could look at the Queen from a distance. The Queen and her family. And they showed me hours and hours of movies.

CR: That's really funny. Do you know what the reaction of the royal family was about the piece?

M: Nothing. There was no reaction. They said "no comment."

CR: What about the Johnson family? Did they have a comment?

M: No. Nothing.

CR: And I don't suppose you asked de Gaulle?

M: No.

CR: I'm curious to find out- aside from the amusement, because I'm quite sure that the research for all this was rather fascinating, rather amusing--

M: Oh, yes. I really enjoyed it.

CR: I'm sure you did. It comes out; I think you feel it in the pieces. But at the same time did you feel a little bit put upon by having to keep so close to personification? Or was it an amusing challenge; aside from the research which was amusing?

M: No. For me it's an interesting thing.

CR: It was interesting even as a challenge?

M: Oh, yes.

CR: I see. By the way, what made you feel like putting de Gaulle on wheels? Because there is a cart underneath.

M: Yes. I went to a place in Paris where they keep photographs of everybody. And I saw hundreds of photographs. And then I chose that one where he was actually in a cart--

CR: I see. He was on a cart bowing to people.

M: --with horses.

CR: With horses?

M: No, with his hands like that. It must be an old photograph.

CR: Because the thing which makes it sort of- well, gives it its character is that the carriage is relatively small for the general so that you don't know if you have put him on wheels personally; whereas from what you say it was really a regular carriage.

M: Yes.

CR: You didn't go to the Elysee?

M: To look at him?

CR: Yes.

M: No, I didn't. It's very difficult to look at him. They wanted to send me to a press conference, which he only has twice a year. And I was there at the wrong time. It was to be the next month. So I missed it. Then they showed me a movie of the press conference that he had. And I thought he's really a very good speaker.

CR: Oh, he's a marvelous speaker. There's no doubt.

M: Yes. And so funny.

CR: Strangely enough, he has a very strong sense of humour.

M: Yes.

CR: Well, in his lack of it sometimes.

M: Yes.

CR: The royal family, do you know any of the reactions that any one member might have had? Were you able to know, for instance, what Princess Margaret's husband- Lord Snowden- do you know what his reaction was to such a piece? I would be interested in what he would have to say.

M: I don't know. Maybe he didn't see it. I have no idea. In some of the newspapers they didn't like it at all.

CR: Well, you can't say that it's in any way flattering to any of the people, but--

M: They didn't take it as if it were a piece of sculpture but they thought it was an insult to the family.

CR: They thought it was a cartoon?

M: Yes.

CR: Oh, I see. Well, that's the danger of such a subject of course. What are your plans- the part of your plans that you are willing to reveal- for the forthcoming season? I mean are you going to have a one-man show in any special place- museums, or out of town?

M: No, I don't have any plans right now.

CR: You don't have any immediate plans?

M: No.

CR: But do you have any special type of research project? Because for instance, when I talked to Janis they didn't want me to bother you because they said that you had a great deal of work to do at present and you might not be available. And that's why I understood very well the difficulty we had of getting together. And I was wondering if that was something you could talk about or not?

M: Well, no, I really don't like to be interviewed because I don't have much to say and I think they know it.

CR: Oh, so they wanted to get you off the hook?

M: Sure.

CR: I see. Well, I don't think you don't have much to say. I think that when anybody is creative, if nothing else, it's interesting to find the kind of vision and the kind of things that make them be what they are. And I think that in an interview you can have some kind of an idea. It can be artificially made, but I'm not trying to do that. I'm just trying to go back to what you see. What I think is very important is that your sculpture because it is so much debunking in so many respects could be cartoon-like. And it is not. And that is exactly what I would like to stress and find this very strange line where something becomes strictly humor and forgetting about the plastic element, and when on the contrary humor is- well, is added. And that's why I was very interested in finding out your- well your involvement with the art world at large. Did you go a lot to museums when you were young? Was that an interesting thing for you to go and see other people's work?

M: Oh, yes, I went to museums all the time.

CR: And among those early gods of your early development, who were the painters you were looking up to?

M: Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci; and all the religious art I used to like very much.

CR: And did you start early being interested in modern art? I say that because I know you told me that Matisse and Picasso were very important for you, but did you start that early? Or was it after you had already fully developed at the *Beaux-Arts* a certain curiosity?

M: Yes. Later on.

CR: It was later on?

M: Yes.

CR: Did you feel that your interest in Picasso and Matisse was a reaction against your training at the *Beaux-Arts*? Or were they a complement of it?

M: No, it's a part of it.

CR: I take it that when you went to the *Beaux-Arts*, which was eighteen years ago, it was much less traditional and conventional than in my youth, for instance. I was a student of [Roger] Bissiere. And other people went to other private academies because the *Beaux-Arts* was so traditional. But since then I have met many American artists who had a splendid training at the *Beaux-Arts*.

M: No, I have to say that I didn't learn anything there.

CR: Oh, you didn't?

M: No.

CR: In other words, you left the way you had entered?

M: Yes. They made me paint in a New Impressionistic kind of way.

CR: I see. A few years later?

M: Yes.

CR: And was there any other academy that you could have gone to? Wasn't there [Fernand] Leger around at that time? Twenty years ago I think he was around.

M: Yes.

CR: You were not tempted to go to him? Or you didn't know of his existence as a teacher?

M: No, I wasn't very well informed. And I was curious about the atmosphere also. I had never seen any Bohemians.

CR: Oh, I see. Are they very bohemian at the *Beaux-Arts*?

M: Oh, yes.

CR: They are? Well, I know of course of the Quatres Arts, the Bal des Quatres Arts, and of course the big dancing parties on Bastille Day, but I didn't think of them as being terribly bohemian the rest of the time. Was Yves Bruyere teaching in your days?

M: No, I don't remember.

CR: Now as a sculpture goes in this country, was there any sculptures that attracted you particularly when you came back to America, when you went to museums? I mean were there any pieces that you felt a sort of particular attraction to?

M: No, I don't remember.

CR: Now as sculpture goes in this country, was there any sculpture that attracted you particularly when you came back to America, when you went to museums? I mean were there any pieces that you felt a sort of particular attraction to?

M: I never used to look at sculptures.

CR: It was painting you were looking at?

M: Yes.

CR: That's very interesting. Did that also apply to the past? I mean you were not interested in- well, even [Auguste] Rodin?

M: No, not so much.

CR: As a matter of fact, don't you think that it's a fairly recent development that people are interested in sculpture as they are in painting?

M: Yes, that's right.

CR: Do you feel that the young, the very newcomers to the scene, are as close to painting as they used to be?

M: Do you mean the young students?

CR: Yes. I mean- you don't teach?

M: No.

CR: Isn't there a sort of tendency to favor sculptors rather than painting at present among the young upcoming group, shall we say? Or don't you see them very much?

M: No, I don't know what they're doing.

CR: Because you are too busy with your own, I can see.

M: Yes.

CR: When you first got to Janis it was actually in that particular show that he had put up of the New Realists? Or did you start immediately with a one-man show?

M: I started with a one-man show.

CR: What were the pieces? Now I'm trying to recall; it was in what? In 1964? 1965?

M: I don't remember. It was the show where *The Party* was.

CR: That was your first show at Janis?

M: Yes.

CR: I didn't realize that. That's funny. That's right! The car was at the Stable.

M: Yes.

CR: Yes, now I remember. Incidentally, what is your reaction to Pop Art in general? Because- well, most movements are always- they don't really apply to the people who seem to belong to it. I mean it's just that it's a convenience for the other people. But would you like to say a few things about what Pop Art represents to you? Or how close or how far from it you are yourself?

M: I really can't tell. I like Pop Art.

CR: Yes. I would think you would. Would you describe yourself as a Pop artist?

M: I don't know- maybe its better not to.

CR: Actually I think you always will be included in a Pop Art group. But personally I'm not sure that you really correspond to a Pop artist. I mean I think you'll always be included in it by definition. But it seems to me that the new Realism is perhaps a more general term in which you fit much more than the idea of Pop.

M Oh, yes.

CR: Incidentally, so much of the movement has gone into movies with Warhol, etcetera. What are your personal reactions to the movies?

M: Well, I like his movies very much, Andy's movies.

CR: Would you feel like branching out in such a visual art? Or is it just interesting for you from the outside point

of view? I mean or would you like to get involved in film making yourself?

M: No. At the moment I don't have any idea for a film.

CR: You're not interested in this at present?

M: No.

CR: I was very much interested in the kind of movement that is related to film in a way which I saw in that show of the Janis collection. I felt that the two Janis was really almost like a film. And I was wondering what made you make two for one, shall we say?

M: The Janis portrait?

CR: Yes.

M: I got the idea from a photograph of where he was standing next to [Jean] Arp. And then I replaced Arp with a sculpture of himself [Janis].

CR: I see. So he finally was standing next to himself instead of next to Arp?

M: Yes. It's supposed to be that he's standing next to a sculpture of himself.

CR: So that one is supposed to be the real one and the other one is an effigy?

M: Yes.

CR: There were quite a few people in front of it and I didn't get that close to follow the things well. But it was such a striking image, such a vivid image that I was very fascinated by it. How does that compare in time with, let's say, *The Party*? Did you do that after *The Party*?

M: Oh, yes.

CR: Yes, I felt it was a recent work.

M: Yes. It's my last piece.

CR: Well, that's very interesting. I felt this, and I didn't know anything about it. I'm quite sure you don't want to talk of any of the other people in the show. And I think I told you on the telephone how little I appreciated one of the other portraits. What makes you feel people the way you do? Is it because you are sympathetic to human beings in general? Or simply because it's a strictly visual plastic process?

M: Yes, it's more of a plastic-

CR: You don't feel any sympathy from the grasping of the eye or the grasping of faces? It has nothing to do with absorption of the face? It's really a volume?

M: Yes. No, but I have some feelings about it that I can't explain.

CR: That I understand. It comes out, as a matter of fact. You can see it very readily. I was also wondering about something quite different, and it has nothing to do with this. What in your development was your choice in reading? I'm sure you read everything. That's not what I mean. But there is a sort of a type of reading that is perhaps more personal than others. I mean some people are closer to, let's say, Proust; some people would be closer to Joyce. Do you feel that any one writer or poet has been meaningful to you?

M: Yes. The one that I was impressed with was Dostoevsky.

CR:*The Idiot* [1869]?

M: I like all his books.

CR: Every one?

M: Yes.

CR: That's interesting. And when did you discover Dostoevsky?

M: When I was sixteen my brother gave me a book.

CR: Do you remember which one it was?

M:*Crime and Punishment* [1866].

CR: That's funny. That's the one, one does start with, isn't it?

M: Yes.

CR: Though I don't know why. I think it's the hardest to get into really. And it's the one everybody reads first somehow. Well, in American literature do you read a lot?

M: I don't like to read. It bores me.

CR: You don't like to read except at that period of your life which is the thing. I think it's pretty general as a matter of fact that more and more people feel too involved visually to go into fiction. But there's not only fiction. I mean are you interested in- well, any particular aspect of philosophy or what not?

M: No. At the moment, no.

CR: What I was actually trying to get to is that in some strange way- although again you're working in the plastic aspect of it- but you do create types, and this creation of types is almost literary. And that's why I was curious to find out if in any way it tied up with literature, you see. But it's really through the plastic element only that you get this feeling?

M: Yes.

CR: Now, again this has nothing to do with you personally; it's just in general: what do you feel is the evolution of the scene in New York? We've seen so many triumphs, I mean there's been the period where nobody had a right to paint who was not an abstract expressionist. Then came the time when nobody had the right to say something who was not far from or close to a Pop artist. Now what do you feel is the general tendency? Because you sort of feel that through galleries which really reflect the public. Because basically the galleries cater to a certain extent to the demand. So what do you feel in general- and again I'm not trying to be particular in any way- personally I feel there is a great sort of confusion in the art world at present. I mean, it pulls and turns in every direction.

M: Yes.

CR: Do you feel the same way?

M: Yes, I don't know what the trend is anymore.

CR: It's impossible to know.

M: It's too confusing.

CR: It's interesting. I have exactly that feeling. Now do you think it might be because at some point there has been too much emphasis on things that were perhaps not that important? That it comes from a general fatigue? I mean I don't go to shows with the same excitement that I used to. I used to wait for a certain show and make sure that I wouldn't miss it. Well, I still try to go and see it. But- well, if I miss it I don't find it quite as--

M: Oh, yes.

CR: I thought it was because I didn't have to write A Letter From New York at present and maybe the professional reason was that. But it seems to me I have a lot of curiosity and interest, and perhaps compassionate interest, and I'm surprised I'm not being more hungry for things.

M: Yes. I don't know what it means either.

CR: Do you have the same feelings too?

M: Yes. About everything. I don't even want to go to the movies.

CR: It's very strange.

M: It's not only art.

CR: No, it's not only art. There's a sort of general- it's like a letdown in vitality, which is very strange. Which I can account for because I'm growing older. But I still don't feel that it's age that's doing it because I feel quite

excited by, incidentally, by these interviews. And I've had many now. And there's a pulsation about it which keeps me very, very interested and fascinated. But I don't feel the need, as you just said, to go even to the movies. Do you think it could be- do you ever look at television?

M: Yes, and I look at television every night.

CR: Yes. Well, I do too. I don't know- I was wondering if perhaps this was not that kind of substitute to a great deal because the eyes have to be kept going. And you're involved; I mean some of those things you see are quite interesting. And it takes care of a certain amount of that curiosity, and perhaps a very immediate one. I don't know, I look at television also, but I don't look at it with passion. I look at it as something there. Now do you think that it's perhaps for something completely different and that we don't analyze well, and that could be simply because transportation has become more difficult?

M: You have to find a taxi.

CR: That's right. But you don't find taxis when you want to.

M: Yes.

CR: Maybe it's a general laziness when it comes to the effort of going from one place to another; maybe too many mobs. In the hierarchy of interests what would you say- when you are not working at your work- is the kind of thing that does bring to you a sort of relaxation?

M: Lately, looking at television.

CR: I think it's true of most artists, you know.

M: Yes. I never used to.

CR: But it does bring a sort of detachment. What it does probably is it pulls you out of yourself for a while, and that's rest.

M: For instance, the other day someone took me to the ballet. And I've always loved the ballet. And then I saw all these people sitting in the theatre looking at this little square with people moving inside of the square. And I thought what an imposition that somebody has to make me sit here hour after hour looking at something in front of me. And I didn't like it anymore.

CR: This brings a point which is perhaps the time element. Do you think that it might be possible that for the artist or anybody else, and possibly when you feel that you don't have that many years in front of you to really grasp what you want to grasp, you get awfully conscious of time? And maybe that is the thing that bothers you when you spend a certain amount of forced sitting hours.

M: Yes.

CR: Because I have that at parties, too. I don't mind a cocktail party because you can go in and out. But dinners I find quite a problem.

M: Yes. Art shows are not so bad because you can walk into the gallery and if you don't like it you walk out.

CR: That's right. But concerts, and I do like music, and I haven't been to a concert for years- I mean, yes, I've been taken quite often, but I haven't bought a ticket; in other words, I don't go toward it. And I think that that in itself is also that element. But it's impossible also that we experience so many things in this city, you can see so much, do so much, that you can get to be rather difficult about the quality of what you do see. Maybe the ballets were not up to the standards that they might have been?

M: Yes, it wasn't a very good ballet anyway.

CR: You see that's what I think it is.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

CR: We never started to talk from then on. The interview was over and we were never able to do it again. Perhaps it would be a good idea for us to just state here a few biographical data, a few words which appear, for instance, in the catalogue of the Helen and Robert Benjamin Collection as seen here at the University. It reads as follows: "Born in Paris, France, 1930, Marisol studied at the *Academie desBeaux-Arts*, Paris, 1949. Art Students League, New York 1950 with Kuniyoshi. Hofmann School in New York 1951-1954. New School for Social Research, New York, 1951-1954. First one-man exhibition Leo Castelli, 1957. Exhibitions include:

- "Festival of the Two Worlds," Spoleto, Italy, 1958
- "Human In Art," Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1958
- "The Art of Assemblage," Museum of Modern Art, New York, Circulated 1961-1962
- "Americans" Museum of Modern Art, Circulated 1963-1964
- "Painting and Sculpture of a Decade," 1954-1964
- "Tate Gallery," London, 1964
- "New Realism," The Hague, 1964

Now in a recent folder which I have received recently announcing a show of the Tenth Rhode Island Art Festival there are four jurors; Dory Ashton, art critic; Will Barnett, painter, teacher; Bates Lowry, teacher and editor; and then comes Marisol Escobar. I notice there a slight difference, "Received an award from the Academy of Achievement in San Diego, California." In one-man shows the Stable Gallery and Sidney Janis Gallery are cited. In the group shows they are about the same. In the collections Brandeis; Albright Gallery, Buffalo; Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum are also cited. Has done covers for *Time* magazine. Heads of State exhibition at Sidney Janis Gallery; (and of course this was this season). And appeared on an NBC television editorial. In other words, this is the short biography as of 1968 that would sum up Marisol's achievements.

[END]

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