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Oral history interview with Michael Mazur, 1993 Jan. 12-1995 Feb. 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Michael Mazur 1993-1995. The interview was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Tape 1; Side A
ROBERT BROWN: Can we begin with your background—family, childhood, things like that?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I was born in Manhattan in ’35 at Doctor’s Hospital. [laughs] Is that of great interest? I have few memories of it. Well, I grew up in New York in a middle-class family. My father ran a laundry business, my mother stayed home. I was relatively well off, compared to most people, probably very well off. Had a lot of advantages—very good schools. I went to the Lincoln School at Horace Mann and went up through the Horace Mann system, which at that time was excellent.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that a public school?

MICHAEL MAZUR: No, it’s private. In terms of the typical artist’s story, I grew up advantaged.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you very outgoing?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes, I was outgoing. I think to understand why I became an artist, you have to understand that I was probably trained at a very early stage by two accidents. We had a nanny, a woman who helped in the house, who lived, really, in my room for many years. She was talented at many things, very organized. I believe she took courses at the Art Students League or at some art school. In order for her to set up still lifes and draw from them herself, she would include me in them. So when I was seven, eight years old, I actually started drawing. It seemed very natural. I pulled out the drawings a few years ago and I was a little shocked by how advanced I was, obviously from her teaching. I obviously took the lessons she was teaching and just learned them myself.

ROBERT BROWN: You powers of observation were pretty pronounced.

MICHAEL MAZUR: I would say that I was visually trained from early on. As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be an artist. So that was an odd for people in my group. Most kids were slated to go into Wall Street or become lawyers or doctors or academics.

ROBERT BROWN: What about art classes at the school?

MICHAEL MAZUR: In my school there was no art training at all. In fact, I lobbied for art training when I was about 14. I made some noises the school trying to get an artist. I doubt that it was a result of my lobbying, but Horace Mann did hire an art teacher in my junior or senior year. By that time I had been studying downtown in Greenwich Village with an artist by the name of Alan Ulman, who taught me Saturday mornings. I helped him so stuff around his studio. I was hanging out in the Village in 1949-50, in that period. I was beginning to see the life of an artist, and enjoying it. Meanwhile I was playing football in high school, dating, and doing everything else as my friends. The point is that I was one of the few people who had that ambition, but there were others. We had an club that included Ed Koren, an artist and pretty well-known cartoonist himself; Henry Geldzahler was in that club and became the curator at the Metropolitan, and another guy by the name of Charlie Graff, but I don’t know what happened to him. There were four of us. Ed and I were co-editors of the literary magazine, and both of us did illustrations for it. Being New York, there was a lot of opportunity to look at great art. I had done that since my early teens, probably much earlier that I can remember. Sometimes my parents took me, but I was drawn to the museums. I have a vivid memory of going to the Metropolitan when it was much fustier—the overall feeling was about as different as one could image. The rooms full of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian, in the early ’40, felt dusty and old. That probably isn’t true, but my memory is of a rather different place than it is now. Of course I went to the old Guggenheim, before it was built, over on Fifth Avenue.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find the collection of considerable interest?

MICHAEL MAZUR: All those collections quite interested me. There were times when I didn’t quite understand what I was looking at. I still don’t, sometimes. I was drawn to them all. I remember going to the Modern [pause] and very often being perplexed why I was not reacting more strongly to this or to that. I do remember a life as a thinking young artist, aware of my teacher’s work, aware while I was working with him of his, sort of, relationship to Picasso. The first work I did with him was a Picassoesque image, heavily impastoed. I remember the impact of

Picasso on us, just before the turn, on figurative art in the late ‘40s.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this then a topic of discussion?

MICHAEL MAZUR: There was constant talk. In ’48, ’49, ’50 there was a lot of critical dialogue about abstraction and figuration. Matisse and Picasso were still the strongest influences on people, as we knew then of Gorky and others. Picasso’s unwillingness to become purely abstract—don’t forget the great late abstract cutouts of Matisse, and there is some question to how abstract they are, were in ’48, ’46-’48. These figures were very much alive. I remember going to a Picasso show in Paris in 1953. These were things I was thinking about then. I’m 57 now, so I would have been at the youngest age of that later generation that in fact this issue was common to. I remember reading, by the time I was in college in ’54, these long, drawn-out battles between various critics and artists, and the magazine It Is. And Tom Hess’s work in Art News. There was a lot of dialogue. I must say that by even the mid-‘50s, I found very boring. I had experienced it, much younger. I thought we had gone past the issues of abstraction and figuration. I read Ortega y Gasset on the *Dehumanization of Art* in ’56, ’57, and people like Herbert Read, and became a pluralist fairly early. I lived with competing elements and did not find the differences so striking. Obviously, I was trained as a figurative person and pretty much stayed that way.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you see there was a great deal of the one in the other?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I absolutely have no doubt that they co-exist, both as process and as product.

ROBERT BROWN: How would a very young man find Alan Ullman as a mentor?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Alan was not a famous artist. No one knows who he is.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he not a teacher of Betty Parsons?

MICHAEL MAZUR: He was just a friend of my parents, to whom they were patrons. He was looking for some cash. I had already studied, well, later, I studied with another teacher in New York, just after him, who is much better known: Morris Davidson. He had a school on 57th near the League. I was the youngest member of his class for about a year, till I got very bored. He was a teacher who did not leave much to the imagination. He set up a still life and stuck colored papers to the back of the still life, so any question about what colors you should put in was all taken care of. Well, I painted two or three of those paintings, and they seemed largely irrelevant. I didn’t continue. I must say I had a funny shock. Now I live in the summer in Provincetown, and I went up to the old Hawthorne School and also the old Hofmann school, up on an estate above Miller Hill. There was the building that these men had used, an old barn. I went into it. There was a sign in the corner, which said: “Morris Davidson School of Art” Nobody had moved that sign since it had been his school in the late ‘60s. The racks for his students were still sitting there. He spent a lot of time in Provincetown, but I hadn’t seen his name in years and years. These were pre-college teachers for me, people I studied with while I was still in high school.

ROBERT BROWN: What direction did Davidson take when you had him as a teacher?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I remember very little of what he said. I think I mostly reacted to being in a class with older adults, who were pretty much copying this still life with all the color behind them. It seemed a misguided effort from the beginning. I have vivid memories, in a Proustian sense, of that period. I remember going downtown, and the thrill of coming out at Astor Place. Ullman’s studio was in the old sailor’s Snug Harbor buildings, across from the old Wannamaker’s in New York. The streets were completely different from now. I remember how quiet they were on Saturdays. And spending time at his house, artier than any house I had grown up in—lots of fabric, works of older art. He taught at Little Red Schoolhouse, which in those days was a very left-leaning school. Downtown was a whole different set of attitudes, than uptown. I remember my first cups of coffee with cream, steaming from an old deli across from Wannamaker’s. Just going up the stairs to the loft, the scrapped paint on the floor, the ethos or circumstance of being a young artist. In Morris’ class, climbing the stairs up to a studio on 57th, and then going to the Automat. I remembered these things as part of the life of an artist. The mattress in the corner on a box spring with a couple of magazines. Living a life of art: that had as much to do with getting me into it as anything else.

ROBERT BROWN: But this was not self-conscious?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I had no idea about whether I could make money or fame. There was something romantic about the life of an artist that touched me, the otherness of what I still think is a very humdrum existence of people in the professions. Every day was sincerely different. I loved that. It must have provoked some kind of longing in me. Also I didn’t particularly enjoy conversations or the life of well-off people. I liked the sense of struggle that I experienced trying to make things work in the mind or on the page. With or without money a wealth of things could come to an artist. Being well off was an accident of fate, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there parental opposition?

MICHAEL MAZUR: There was a great deal of indulgence. It's very common American-Jewish experience that my grandfather came from Russia in the wave of Jewish immigration in the 1870-'80s, struggled, did all the things that Jews did. Worked very hard, worked his way through college as an usher in a Yiddish theater downtown that showed early movies. Found himself working for a laundry business and started doing well. He moved my father, first from downtown New York, over to Jersey, then to Hoboken, up to Englewood, and finally when my father was a young man, growing up in a fair amount of advantage, struggling over whether to be a violinist, going to law school, or going into business with his father. Because of the Depression he had to settle for working for his father, with the hope that his son, in turn, would somehow be freed from this necessity, and wanting for him that he would go into a profession or into teaching, which was his ideal.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you an only child?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I was an only child. That, of course, is a whole other part of it. So I followed, the next generation, the person who had choices. My grandfather and father didn't have choices. I think my father and mother were delighted about my direction. My father was worried that I would not make a living. He wanted me to become an architect. They thought that would ensure a living, but as we look back on it, not necessarily a sure thing. [laughs] The earliest training I had after those high school experiences was to go an work in an architectural office, during the summer off from college in 1954, working for Kahn and Jacobs in New York. I was what they now would call an intern, a glorified go-for. I saw closely the life of New York City firm-oriented architects. Had the thrill and peculiar honor of delivering the first small finished bronze model of the Seagram's Building to Mies Van Der Roe. My biggest hero was Frank Lloyd Wright. I was brought into Mies'office and introduced to him. I was never a great fan of the International School; glass boxes didn't mean a great deal to me at the time. It didn't appeal to me at the time but now when I look back on it I am sort of impressed that I had that opportunity. Still, I spent lots of time measuring an old brewery on Staten Island, crawling under tile floors, smelling hops, and measuring that for a renewal project the firm was doing. It was an interesting experience that made me decide not to do something. I saw most of the glory going to the front office, relatively untalented men, although Ely Jacque Kahn was an exception, but he was already fairly old. Ironically he lived in the same building that I grew up in. His partner was an architect, I don't know how good, but I looked in the back rooms at the young guys who were feeding these men, and I could not identify with it, it seems too regimented for me. Each were doing a detail. There were managers, some very good whose names were not on the masthead. I grew up, maybe because of my only childhood, as an individualist, absolutely self-oriented, a person who had to be in control. I spent a lot of time playing in my room alone. For better or worse, teamwork or being a small cog in a big wheel did not appeal to me. That colored the way I chose to live my life. During college I went on a little bit to test myself as an architect, and that didn't work very well either. In courses I took everyone would say I was more interested in the murals than in the rooms themselves. I turned towards thoughts of just being a painter.

ROBERT BROWN: When you were teenager taking painting classes, becoming aware of the artist's life, you saw that it could be individualistic?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Don't forget it was a much smaller art world, dominated by a few well-known men. When I was growing up there were probably not more than a hundred galleries in New York, and very few devoted to contemporary art. I was in high school pretty much the height of the 10th Street period. Unfortunately I couldn't experience it. I knew, down the street, de Kooning, Mercedes Matter, Guston, others were having drawing groups. The great hero was, sort of, Giacometti, Picasso. We were not at that time the stalwart centerfold for world art. France was just ending its leadership. A major turning point, after the war, was the heating up of the Cold War. Picasso and Matisse were in their late, though not declining years. The School of Paris that was supposed to substitute for Picasso and Matisse people like Lorjou and Pinion, who were already tired, rather decadent modernists. Giacometti was alone in Paris as the great artist and Miro was still in Spain. There had been a weakening in Europe and we were ripe for taking over. Quite frankly I think it became a political issue. The American Scene painters had reached their greatest reputations just before the war, and just after the war. They were left-leaning, often Jewish, followers of the Mexican muralists. Like Soyer and others they were still dealing with the effects of the Depression. Ben Shahn's reputation was made on his Sacco-Vanzetti pictures. Social issues became important and I think the rise or the beginning of a large group of émigré Europeans in this country, more advanced in their attitudes about art, and looking for an American scene that would reflect that. Plus people like the American-born Pollock and Motherwell were neutral in subject matter. As much as people railed against abstraction, I think the powers that were at the time prefered a neutral subject matter . . .

ROBERT BROWN: To a left-leaning one?

MICHAEL MAZUR: . . . to a left-leaning one. And we could be sold around the world as an optimistic, bright, modern country. I had conversations with people of that period, and I wrote a piece about Soyer, saying that the early days of abstraction were very much politically appropriate. In fact, Alfred Barr at the Modern began to look

down on the figurative painters of the late ‘40s, shoving them out, so to speak. There may well have been, and certainly according to Soyer was, a feeling about their Socialist roots, and even some nascent McCarthyism. One year you had all these people who were the modern artists, then suddenly the next year they are not there anymore.

ROBERT BROWN: They are not. Somebody else is.

MICHAEL MAZUR: That’s right. *Life* magazine discovered Jackson Pollock and now the ballgame was in a big park.

ROBERT BROWN: You mention de Kooning. When did you realize his significance?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I never knew any of them. I realized it later.

ROBERT BROWN: Lots of them were teaching.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Lots of them were teaching but I wasn’t in those schools. When I went to college my teachers were members of another school. Certainly, when I worked with Baskin for three years at Amherst, when I went over to Northampton to study with him—Leonard was on the younger side of that older generation. He wasn’t on the young side of the new generation. He railed against abstraction and contemporary American modernism. With Baskin, I had a reactionary situation. Had to deal with the fact I was being trained as a figurative artist, subtly. I was happy with what I was learning, and never had great longings to become part of that newer generation. In a way, I was retardaire but not anxious about it. I had to find my own way through all this, and that is the subject of my life’s work.

ROBERT BROWN: Did this ever cause blockage?

MICHAEL MAZUR: It didn’t in the early days and I am still perfectly happy with my choice. When I say the word choice, that does not mean the work stood still and stayed in one location. I was happy with the choice of dealing with content, not the form of the art. Basically, content drove my engine, but the form always interested me, in terms of its relationship to the content. In one way or another, the influences of form-makers—I think that’s the best way of talking about them, not as abstract or figurative—form-making, the facture of making paintings or drawings or prints, that has interested me and had its influence on me throughout all the work. I never lack a feeling of happiness that I got well trained, even from those early, early years. Just as my father gave me choices, my training and my teachers gave me choices. I know a lot of people who don’t have much choice. Theirs may a simpler decision about what to do. I think the complexity of the decision of what I have to do on a daily basis becomes part of the exciting struggle of using your capabilities.

ROBERT BROWN: The choice, or was it yours, to go to a New England college, Amherst, small, gentile, but I gather rather rigorous. Do you recall how that came about?

MICHAEL MAZUR: It’s rather simple and rather dumb. It goes along with my story. My father wanted me to go to Harvard, he told me in later years. He did not make a big point of my going to Harvard. He only told me later.

ROBERT BROWN: That was the academic pinnacle?

MICHAEL MAZUR: He was a little shocked when I went to him. At one point, because of my feeling for Astor Place, I entertained the idea of going to Cooper Union. He thought that was too far out, and put the kibosh on that. He wanted me to get a liberal education. Most of the students at Horace Mann went on to Ivy League schools. My father had gone to Columbia and through football he introduced me to the Ivy League. Being a kind of loner type, being one of 20 class members going to Harvard, Princeton, Yale, or Brown, did not appeal to me. A very smart and practical dean, Dean Wilson, came to my school, and sat me down in these interviews in the early part of my senior year. He said, “We’d like you to come to Amherst. We know we are going to take two or three people from your school. We think you’d be perfect and therefore you don’t have to take any further exams. That was how it went. I hated exams, and that so impressed me that somebody wanted me particularly, not one of 20 top people getting into a school. Probably I wanted to avoid competition, an interesting part of my personality that I am beginning to see: I am not desperately competitive. The offer was too juicy. He told me that had just finished building a big art facility—I remember him telling me how much it cost. I thought, “Gee, they’re spending so much money on an art facility. They must be serious.” Without seeing it, without knowing who was teaching, I signed up. My father seemed satisfied. I didn’t know much about it, though it changed my life as part of the flows that take you in a direction.

ROBERT BROWN: You were on your own.

MICHAEL MAZUR: I was far enough away from New York that I could get out of the society of my parents. Live my own life. I like the country. I spent my childhood years in New England, especially up in Maine. Boys camp and so forth. I was drawn to country life. I was one of the few students who decided to live outside a fraternity and live

in a social dormitory, mostly foreign students and a few misfits. I became a misfit at Amherst but I tempered it in my typical way by enjoying singing. I sang with a singing group that was to play an important part in my work in a funny way. On one hand, Joe College, on the other, this bohemian. I contributed work to the literary magazine and became co-editor, I think, at one point.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go there thinking that you would concentrate on art?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes, I went there with the idea I could concentrate on art. Anywhere I would have gone, I would have concentrated on art. I knew that as far back as 15, 16. It was a fixed notion in my mind as far as fourth grade. I could not stand being regimented, having to behave like other people. It cost me: I never related closely to my class. I had a few friends, most of which I've never kept in touch with. The training at Amherst was rigorous. English 1 was known, because it had been established by Rueben Brower at Harvard, as an early semiotics, a questioning of what one is talking about, what one is doing, where one is. I met a lot of literary people, poets and writers.

ROBERT BROWN: That's something we've hardly talked about, but evidently your literary interests were almost the equal of your visual interests. In high school as well.

MICHAEL MAZUR: I'm not a writer though I have written quite a bit and I did end up marrying a poet, and doing quite a bit of work on and off with literature. My thesis at college was very literary. I designed, edited, and illustrated a book that involved Malarme, Oscar Wilde, and Flaubert. I did combine illustrating their texts with the story of Salome and John the Baptist. I never did like that word—illustration—but I used it for want of a better word. I was always reading, but with a purpose, reading for information. Certainly my wife thinks I never read enough for the pure love of reading. My high school was enormously rigorous. We did seven hours of homework a night in the '50s. I did fairly well in college and probably would have been Phi Beta if I had not wandered over to the studio, and neglected reading. I was a high-B student and in those days at Amherst there were hardly any A students. I got a feeling of what it was like to be on a campus. I admired professors and studied with some good people.

ROBERT BROWN: Do some stick in your mind?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I studied with Alfred Kazin, whom I also babysat for. Also a sort of New York misfit up at Amherst and he didn't stay very long. I regret never having studied with Henry Steel Commanger, who was there. Forced to take rigorous science courses. Also I met Robert Frost, a big thing for me. He taught there for small periods of time, several weeks. And I heard him read many times. [James] Merrill was there, other poets would come in. Amherst was sensitive to poetry. Some of my early friends were poets. I think they attracted me. I responded to rigor and would get upset when I had to deal with faculty who were not very rigorous. That threw me over to Northampton to work with Baskin—the art department at Amherst was pretty bad in those days.

ROBERT BROWN: Not demanding?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Not demanding. I was especially attracted to that part of Baskin that was demanding. I was not attracted to him, overall. When it ended, I didn't keep in touch. Too negative and limited, for me. He was at his peak, but he was not as talented a man, or as great a humanist as he was portrayed as being. His work was governed by other ambitions. Let's just say I felt he was not a very strong draftsman or form-maker. His imagination was rather limited, possibly because of the things he avoided dealing with. His inventions became, in the worst sense of the word, illustrative. His images and symbols not longer held my attention. A lot of this has to do with a young man's desire to kill the father, to overcome the education, or to respond against it. There was a running battle between us about the way to do things. He was of the atelier system where he'd tell everybody what to do. Some students did, and probably did their best work as students, because he didn't leave them with enough self-critical sense to get out of what they did, to move on. My connection with him was a lesson in how to be a teacher. A balance has to be carefully made between a fear of limiting people, but also a fear of not educating them at the same time. You give as much information as you can and allow as much choice as you can. In the background is that overall rigor—that if you choose this, you do it as well as you can. I was grateful for the training I got. I learned a lot and it may have established the pattern of my work.

ROBERT BROWN: What things in particular did you learn from Baskin?

MICHAEL MAZUR: He established printmaking and drawing as a strong part, if not the strongest part of my work. A love of graphic arts. A love of black and white. An interest in a category of artists that, for better or worse,I call a Paul Sachs roundup of masters, from Piero to Leonardo, Rembrandt, Goya, Degas—that range right through Picasso. That line of great graphic artists, who were painters, but also masters of drawing and printmaking. That probably came through Baskin. And the things I collected from earliest on—I bought a Rouault when I was still in college in 1956. And Kollwitz. I was looking through Leonard's eyes. And he bought German expressionists—I'm talking about "Der Sturm" illustrations which cost $25 in those days. I probably bought from Leonard his criticism of weaker, decorative, abstract work. Yet today I see people like Matisse as much more powerful

through their decorative instincts, than I could have ever known how to look at then. I love the work of artists, including Pollock and certainly de Kooning, that Leonard would have hated. That was 35 years ago, the days we're talking about now. A lot of changes took place in my attitudes and in my work.

ROBERT BROWN: Baskin did express himself well, I believe.

MICHAEL MAZUR: He's articulate, wonderful collector, bibliophile, great designer of books—those are the areas he will be known for. But he fell short as an artist and he certainly fell short as a teacher.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you come to study with him? He taught at a neighboring college?

MICHAEL MAZUR: That was another gift. Because Amherst was so close to Smith and Mt. Holyhoke, they had a deal that you could takes courses in any of the schools. I got permission to do my thesis over there, partially because of the force that Leonard had in the area. He was extremely well known as a professional artist and was the local star. Somebody asking to study with him was not making an arbitrary request.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned that Amherst was somewhat "fraternity bound." Do you mean that it formalized conventional bonding?

MICHAEL MAZUR: The less I can say about it, the better! [laughs] I found the terms of fraternity bonding to be immature, childish even. I did not seek my friends in that way. I'm glad that system is gone, at least from Amherst and many other places.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you suppose the fraternity system was a relic kept there by inertia?

MICHAEL MAZUR: No, the '50s made bonds based on drinking, womanizing, they were sexist, they were racist, exclusionary—the whole idea of clubbiness--belonging to organizations that would somehow protect you. People cheating together! The positive side: people made friends. I think in any situation you are thrown with people and you end up finding your friends in that group. Clubs, always, have been a problem for me. I have never been a member of a club. For years I was asked to be in the National Academy of Design, and I hated the idea of academies. In fact, I am a member, but I take no part in it. Probably I should not be a member. Academies, by nature, are outmoded ways of doing things. They preserve the needs of people who need to belong to a club.

ROBERT BROWN: You finished at Amherst, having done this thesis with Baskin, your first instructor?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Actually the thesis was done after I took a year off from Amherst. I went to Italy, a formative year for me. I decided, again, because I had no real strong connections with my class, the idea of being seniors together did not make me sentimental. I got an opportunity. I'd always loved Europe and traveling. I wanted to spend more time and asked my parents if I could take a year off and spend my time in Florence.

ROBERT BROWN: You had previous knowledge?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I spent the summer of my freshmen year in college in a school in Southern France learning French, reading literature. I wasn't working very hard there, I was mostly playing around. I listened to jazz in Juan les Pins, and hung out with older people who formed my education. It was interesting, decadent experience. I had occasion to travel to Venice and live with a family for a while. I had started picking up Italian, and I got permission from the school to go. It functioned as a leave of absence. I thought I might like to study with Marino Marini, but realized it would be hard to get in his class. Milan was just another big city. Rome and Milan, other cities, did not attract me as much as Florence. Again this interest in a smaller place with rich history. I found a place in Florence and worked on my own for a year. Having worked with Baskin before that, I was looking at drawings in public collections, hanging about at the Uffizi and the Pitti Palace, seeing a lot of work, and learning to speak Italian.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do much copying?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Oh, yes. I lot of sketching from pictures, a lot of drawing from life. I needed a place to go to discover what it would be like to be alone in my so-called studio. Without anyone telling me what to do, could I succeed and not be bored and lonely. I did that for a year. I read all of *Remembrances of Things Past*, I read Van Gogh's letters. I had a free learning time, this experience, a good thing. The learning of Italian was important. Now I am doing illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*, for Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Because of my Italian, I read it in Italian when I got back to college and became desirous, all my life, of doing some work based on it.

ROBERT BROWN: You became familiar with a culture in history, open to you that you mastered.

MICHAEL MAZUR: I became very Europeanized.

ROBERT BROWN: By which you mean?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Well, my links to American popular culture were not that strong. In Venice in ’57, I heard Elvis for the first time. I wondered what was going on back there, but my Italian girlfriend loved Elvis. I heard Elvis from windows on the Grand Canal and I realized the power of American popular culture. At the same time, I did not care. My roots, in my work, are more European than American. In my early days, I was maybe too overwhelmed by what had been accomplished there.

ROBERT BROWN: You were overwhelmed?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Absolutely. It was an astounding experience. An ascendant American, like myself, when I went over there it was as if American art was a wasteland, compared to what had been accomplished there. I don’t doubt, had the twists and turns of life been a little different, I would have spent most of my life in Europe. I did come back, as I promised my parents I would, though I would have been tempted to stay on. I met the woman who was going to be with me. We got married soon after Amherst. We were kids. I cut the ties with Europe. She and I worked together on my thesis. I devoted myself to this strange yellow-book-era work. Then got signed up to go to Yale, and I didn’t go back to Europe, really, ever again. I spent a few months here and there. In terms of living in Europe, it didn’t happen. So that was the end of Amherst. I didn’t graduate with my class so those bridges were burned. I finished. My thesis was well-accepted and I said goodbye to Baskin. I met a young artist who was his assistant, George Lockwood, who became a close friend. He had gone to Yale and we were friendly in my senior year. He would figure in my life in my decision to come to Boston. That year, and the Italian year before it, were my watershed.

[Tape 1; side B]

ROBERT BROWN: We just talked about your years at Amherst and that very important year abroad in Italy, in ’57, before your graduated Amherst in ’58, having done a thesis under Leonard Baskin. Were you clear about your next step?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I had gone to Yale-Norfolk, the Yale summer school, the middle of my sophomore year, the same summer that I worked for Kahn and Jacobs. Summer of ’55. I became involved with artists who were looking to create professional careers. People chosen out of art school, if you got through the Norfolk routine, were often asked to apply to the graduate school. I was young and that summer was strange because I was in the midst of a torrent love affair, a woman I had met a year earlier. I was dashing down to New York to see her. I felt like the worst student there. There were young artists who later on made some reputation for themselves. They seemed exceedingly more sophisticated and better trained. It is probably testimony to my naiveté that I didn’t even remember the “visiting” artists. It went by in a haze. I had this big Chrysler New Yorker that I had gotten from my father. I was sort of a preppie driving an elegant car to New York on weekends. I felt I was hiding, looking at what other people were doing, unsure of what I should be doing. At Yale there was a strange form of neo-expressionism. Albers had begun to teach, Bill Bailey, Arnold Bittleman, who’s now dead, Emily Mason, others I can’t remember. All were working with a nature-landscape image that was oriented toward the making of marks. It had a feeling of Fauvist or post-Impressionist work. I went along with it because it was the first strong painting experience I had. I destroyed everything I made. I don’t think anything’s left from that summer. I started making etchings that summer, before I started with Baskin, so the whole thing was very new to me. I did the best I could. If I were a teacher and I saw myself that summer, it would have been not memorable, put it that way. One’s memory of oneself is always strange. A few years ago I ran into Emily Mason, saying much the same thing I’ve just said. She said, “Oh no. You were one of the stars.” I’m sure it had to do with what happened later, not what was there then. Perhaps I looked mysterious in my Chrysler New Yorker, bombing in and out, and taking everything rather lightly. Maybe that was interpreted as sort of cool. I did get an idea of the kind of people who were really becoming artists. It may sound strange to say it that way. But when you realize that you didn’t know any artists as a child, except Morris Davidson and Alan Ullman, who were teachers to me. You had no friends who were artists. You had never talked to another person about their work as an artist. I don’t remember talking to Ed Koren, who was drawing at the time, if we ever talked about our work as artists. We did our work for the literary magazine. But when you get into a serious art school situation, one becomes very aware of the drive and professionalism that I would see in spades with Leonard. That’s when I began to accept the kind of personalities who were going to become artists. The first time around, you are copying habits. If you were a ballplayer, you’d be trying out chewing tobacco, a novice-acolyte feeling. That prepared me for Yale and Yale got stuck in my head as an obvious next step.

ROBERT BROWN: You didn’t consider other schools?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I didn’t really. I was contacted, just like the Amherst experience, by Bernie Chaet. They were putting together a program and wanted people who were strong on the graphic arts. He had seen something I’d done, maybe my thesis or prints I’d done for Leonard. I was told personally to apply to Yale. All I had to do was apply, and that was that. I sent him some stuff from my Italian period, in which I had grown tremendously in terms of drawing.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you mainly sketching from life?

MICHAEL MAZUR: In Italy I was drawing from everything, everything. I went to the Academy in Florence and worked from the model in the mornings for one semester. I would go out into the hills with a Scottish friend, Bill Brown, my drawing buddy. He was a Paul Klee fan. Endless discussions about proto-cubist ideas. I tried it all. I copied from the library in Venice, I looked at master drawings and actually adopted for a while a wash technique based on 18th century artists. I worked in modes of Matisse and Picasso. I did what anyone my age should have done: try everything, always within the figurative context. I always stayed the other side of abstraction, and I took that as a clue.

[Tape 2; side A]

MICHAEL MAZUR: When I first got to New Haven I moved into a little apartment on Chapel Street, not far from the school. Aside from being in Italy, it was my first home of my own. Gail was coming down from Smith. We were planning to get married, and did that winter. We were sort of housekeeping together in the late ‘50s, and that had become quite common. From the year in Italy and the last year at Amherst, I grew up, understanding what was required. Yale was dominated by Albers, who would be there for another year. I was in a program designed for people strong in drawing and printmaking. Gabor Peterdi, who had to Yale some four or five years earlier.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he well known at that time?

MICHAEL MAZUR: At that time in printmaking, several constellations: One was around Baskin. One was around Lasansky in Iowa. One were Peterdi students around him at Yale. In American printmaking there were many others. There were people on the West Coast I didn’t even know of. But in print shows, the domination of teachers and students trained by Baskin, Peterdi, and Lasansky was quite major. I became aware of where one sent work to print shows. We sent out as students to many national shows around the country run by museums, juried by teachers who were taught by these teachers. One began to recognize the politics. In retrospect it looks like a small world. I’m not quite sure when Tamarind began, and ULAE had started later. Hayter’s workshop had been in decline, stopped in New York and moved back to Paris. There were very few professional print shops. There was very little publishing of prints. Almost all the prints one saw were published by the artists themselves. When I made a print I was pleased with, I would try to place it in shows. It was the beginning of a professional life, and Yale was very organized professionally, even then. Dealers would come up. I had my first show in New York in 1960 while I was at Yale. The gallery was called the Barone Gallery, and was owned by Jill Kornblee in partnership with a man by the name of Rail Glitesman, then Jill changed the name to the Jill Kornblee Gallery the next year. I stayed with Jill until ’66. That all started at Yale. Yale was beginning to function as a farm team for New York galleries. Of course it grew in the late ‘60s when it became known for having produced people like Chuck Close, Jennifer Bartlett, Bob Mangold, so many.

ROBERT BROWN: You had a sense of aiming at a career?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Absolutely. People at Yale were very career oriented. There was an awareness of who was doing well. Many visiting artists came through. There were great discussions of what was going on in the art world. Even though my program was geared to printmaking, I was pretty aware of what was happening. We had wonderful visits from Fairfield Porter. I was impressed by his urbanity and literary interests. He was a wonderful writer. Later on I discovered his reviews for the Nation, among the best I’ve ever read. At Yale I was married and had my son, Danny, and started to become an obsessive maker of things. We had a deal that every Thursday, my first year there, we would go down to Gabby’s house in Connecticut. There were about six of us. Dick Zeeman, Barbara Chase, Stephen Barbash, Ed Porter, a relative of Fairfield Porter, Bob Bermelin, who became a close friend of mine. Riva Stuart, an artist in the Boston area, was in that group. We fought all the time. Barbara Chase, who was black and very much an early feminist, was very angry. I remember Riva’s anger. We thrashed out male-female issues on those trips. We discussed politics and got rid of preppy attitudes, plus we had a lot of fun. We’d go down, bring our prints, have crits. Then Gaby’s wife, Marsha, would make an elaborate dinner, the best meal any of us would have all week. Some way of getting people out of school is the best way. Even now, when I occasionally teach, I sometimes wish I could simply have people come to me, rather than stay in the school setting, where we could interact more as people, less in a classroom setting.

ROBERT BROWN: That really did occur for you?

MICHAEL MAZUR: It really did occur for me.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Peterdi like as a critic?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Very different from Baskin. Gabor was Hungarian born and European trained. He had met Giacometti, Picasso, Miro, and was close friends with many people who made prints in Hayter’s workshop in Paris. I meant to say that Hayter was another major figure. Hayter, Peterdi, Baskin, Lasansky—those were the

stars of the small printmaking world.

ROBERT BROWN: It was small.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Very small. But Hayter's students were all over the world. And Lasansky's and Peterdi's students seemed to be all over America. There were fewer Baskin students because he was teaching at a woman's school and politics of printmaking made that difficult for his students. When Lerun came to Yale in '61, my last year, his presence for me was crucial. Albers and he fought the whole time. Baskin also came down to Yale in those years, and tried to rail against Yale and Albers. But, to answer your question, Gabor was the kind of teacher I wanted to become. Albers was extremely dominating as a teacher. He brought a Prussian authoritarianism. He developed through his Bauhaus years a teaching method. He was essentially teaching his method. He hated Abstract Expressionism, which had nothing to do with what he was interested in. In his German accent he said one painting was painted "mit a broom." He was down on emotional work, work that involved automatism. I learned his color course, but it was theory, outside of you. Once you understood, everyone could more or less do them as exercises. When I did learn at Yale was self-criticism. You became an editor, realizing what you wanted, what worked and what did not. The day you are living in was made important.

ROBERT BROWN: Did Peterdi fit in that mold as well?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Gabby was softer. He was a gentleman who was kind to his students. Unlike Baskin or Albers, he did not insult his students. He took from them what they came to him with, and he worked with it. In the fewest words I could say, that sums up my attitude about teaching. In fact I am using them because someone, this semester, was describing my teaching as that. I agree that the generosity of the teacher is not just to give one's own ideas, but to accept that which people bring to you. You say, "That's where they are this day." I ask myself, "Where can they go from there?"

ROBERT BROWN: This suggests that Peterdi gave you a lot of latitude?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Oh, a tremendous amount.

ROBERT BROWN: Would he suggest themes or do setups?

MICHAEL MAZUR: No, no setups. Just talk about what you brought in. What he liked about it, what he didn't like, what could be stronger, what's weak: he gave you a sense of being, essentially, a compatriot, a colleague of some sort in the same endeavor. When didn't have any dramatic or histrionic crits over work. The notion of pluralism was instilled at Yale, the fact that you had someone as powerful as a draftsman as Lebrun and have Albers and he exist in the same plane—they could fight with each other, but I could accept them both. But at Yale, if Albers saw you talking to Lebrun, he wouldn't talk to you. I was not his student but I heard many stories. You had to choose.

ROBERT BROWN: There was no higher referee?

MICHAEL MAZUR: No referee. In 1960, a turning year when Pop and figuration existed, ten years after the enormous influx of Abstract Expressionism, there was a lot of looking back and re-assessment. What had Pollock wrought? The art magazines were full of letters back and forth, one artist to another, vituperative editorials about Pop's relation to Abstract Expressionism. The Abstract-Expressionist camp, Rosenberg, Hess, were at war, literally, with the new pop sensibility. They could not see that Pop was coming out of Abstract Expressionism. I remember Oldenburg's Store in New York and the first Oldenburgs that were coming out as strange painterly objects, and which had a tremendous amount to do with Abstract Expressionism. Figuration versus abstraction, content versus abstraction—there was enormous argument and nothing like that has occurred since. At art school, you discussed it, argued, took sides. Not me.

ROBERT BROWN: This is a trait you mentioned earlier.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Years earlier Ed Koren and I had written a piece for the Horace Mann literary magazine. Years later he showed me a copy, in which he had taken the position against abstraction and modernism and I took the position for it. Even if I was not part of the modernist tradition, I was for it. I believed in the possibility of all of these things happening. What Albers, Lebrun, Chaet, Bill Bailey were teaching, at Yale—we had Porter, and Pop influences were beginning to come in.

ROBERT BROWN: What were some of those?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I began to think about Pop as more a performance or conceptual art. My first involvement with Warhol was hearing and reading about the Brillo boxes. Jill Kornblee, my dealer, was very much a dealer for the early Pop period—Alex Katz, early Warhol. I was nonplussed; I thought it was so cynical. Still do. The Happenings, Kaprow and Dine—Dine and I were the same age. They were coming out of art school and having

this kind of show and I was coming out of art school beginning to show the Mental Hospital material in ’63-’64. Without taking a position, I simply was interested in content and narrative. That fermenting moment was my formative art school experience.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Lebrun like as a teacher?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Born in Italy and still spoke with a heavy Italian accent. Came to this country in the ‘20s. I took his drawing class and admired his power as a draftsman, still do. Of all the people who affected me, Lebrun’s drawing was more key to my own drawing than anybody before or since. I don’t think I was a Lebrun student any more than I was a Baskin student, but they were influences that got into the work.

ROBERT BROWN: What are some examples?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Lebrun was mostly about treating the page as something to be filled with energy until it became a whole. There was an expressionistic struggle with the form in order to get it out on the page. Albers would establish building blocks in the first moments of the drawing. Each mark has a dialogue with the mark that comes before it. That was not what Lebrun was about. There was a great deal of searching and powerful combinations of tone and line. That comes out of 18th-century Italian drawing in which wash and line possessed this relationship, between a tonal area and a line area, where one was not subservient to the other. Tone didn’t fill in. There was never any filling in, never a demarcation of an area and just filling the area in. Everything remained fluid until the end. Tones could move. Lines could move.

ROBERT BROWN: Everything was energized?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Well, yes. The drawing came to an end when it had no where else to go. In de Kooning’s sense, drawings are abandoned, not finished. Yes, you could find something in one drawing, but you could not start another drawing from there. You started from scratch all over again. That notion stayed with me. I can make spare, contour drawings, still, the space being divided and moved around, was always there. But then he died. That was that for Lebrun.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you reconcile with starting from scratch and making progress each day?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Each day is simply what you’ve got to work with, the opposite of being further ahead. You are simply starting from scratch. Obviously there will be a continuum and the work will look like the same hand made it. But that is not the attitude you take as an artist. There is no Hegelian dialectic going on. Yesterday I did this, today I did that, now the combination will happen tomorrow. That was the Albers way. But there were people out there, like Hofmann, making major influences on young artists. Before I leave this art school topic, I want to mention an event important to me, the time I went to visit Naum Gabo. [several minute interruption, tape running, no speaking] To continue. I was called into the office and asked if I would help Naum Gabo make some etchings. I didn’t know much about his work and I was amazed that he was still alive—he was such a historical figure. He was living in Middlebury, Connecticut. I drove up there in the spring of ’61, my last semester at Yale. I did not have to do a written thesis. We worked toward making a body of work to put up for a show. We did have some liberal arts work. I studied with Nelson Wu and Scully.

[Tape 2; side B]

MICHAEL MAZUR: . . . I forgot who taught a wonderful Baroque course, Cressey, I think his name was. I probably had more time than I should have, if I had been a more modern father, taking care of my children and giving Gail more time off.

ROBERT BROWN: Was she writing at that point?

MICHAEL MAZUR: No, not yet, she was mothering. In any case, I went out to meet Gabo. He decided on the day we met that he would have to give me a test to see if I was esthetically aware enough to work with him. His has a wonderful house, quiet open, with a good-sized studio connected downstairs to where his kitchen is. Upstairs were his living quarters. His wife Miriam tended a wonderful garden. She was English. The height of his work was in the early teens of the century. He had lots of recent work, still working away. There was a big structure outside for outdoor pieces, working with an assistant, also from Yale, who worked with him for many hears. Gabo asked to look at his work and tell him what was happening in them. He had his works on turntables that he could rotate. He even had motorized paintings on the wall that turned, little round paintings. I stood there and went from piece to piece and we sat down and he said, “Now tell me what is happening.” These were abstract pieces about a world I knew not much about. Being the earnest person I was, I tried my best. It seemed to satisfy him. Maybe just trying was enough.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he a kindly, grandfatherly type?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Initially he was not at all frightening. He was very small, wiry, and bird-like—handsome and penetrating. We got along fine. After he gave me the test, he wife, who was very gracious and very British, brought out a tray with tea and cookies. We sat down. There was a big lazy Susan in the middle of the table. I started watching this lazy Susan going around and the relationship of having looked at the work and looking at the lazy Susan, I was confused, and felt the test was still going! This turning of things was all part of his work. They were looking at me because I was just looking at the spinning table, and not taking any food. Maybe the story is apocryphal to me now, but it seemed to me then to be all of a piece, this turning of things. I used the bathroom and there was a framed poem written by a relative of Sir Walter Raleigh: “The artist and his luckless wife, they lead a horrid, cluttered life, surrounded by the things he’s made that are not wanted by the trade.” On the wall were other reproductions. I got a sense of artists’ homes, the particular way people lived. The clutter of an artist’s house, the evidence, pictures on the floor, books. It made me feel warm to be in artists’ quarters, such a contrast to the way I grew up.

ROBERT BROWN: More formal?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Formal living room, formal dining room. I found that stifling. I worked with Gabo for about three months. Numbers of things happened. Visits were wonderful. Amazing stories for a young art student to hear. Russia, Berlin, England. Historic names that he would treat as simple acquaintances or friends. He came down to Yale and we went to the art museum. Every piece we came up to, Henry Moore—we came up to a shiny Arp and he said, “Oh I told Hans, why polish this metal? It’s a mirror—all I could see was my nose!” Henry Moore, he said, never knew how to do a head, so he made little bumps on the tops of his pieces. If was going to do a head, do a head; otherwise leave them out entirely, was his point. The real corker was when he told me he had a date for lunch with Mondrian and arrived to find Mondrian working on the floor with tape. “It’s time for lunch, Piet.” And Piet said, “I can’t go to lunch. This isn’t flat enough for me.” And Gabo said, “Oh, Piet, don’t be ridiculous. It’s flat enough.” I watched Gabo with trades people who would come in and how he treated them, remembering the distain in Baskin’s making people wait. Gabo was warm and interested in how they did their work, a natural interest in people. He showed me some monoprints that he was doing, with a strange history. I wrote a piece about this in the late ‘70s. It was the first monoprint material I had seen.

ROBERT BROWN: What intrigued you?

MICHAEL MAZUR: They were an eye-opener. He made these small abstract wood engravings, and then he would print them one at a time, printing them differently each time. We were not trained as printmakers to do that. The whole idea was to make a finished proof and copy the proof exactly. This was the first time I saw how spontaneity could enter the process.

ROBERT BROWN: This would have been ‘61

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes, ’61. Ten years later, after Gabor died, I brought Barbara Shapiro and Cliff Ackley, two members of the print department at the MFA, on a trip to visit Gabo’s studio, and introduce them to this body of work. They bought one of these monoprints that had found its way into only one other collection in the country. That found its way to the Museum of Modern Art, which didn’t know how to describe what it was. After Gabo died, Miriam asked me to organize the work into portfolios. He had always wanted to do portfolios, documenting the work, which I did. Greg Heins, (now at the MFA) took photographs of all the prints and related things around the house. Miriam gave me remaining materials, the blocks, the rollers that were left over. The Tate is the repository now of all the original blocks and most of the prints that were not made into portfolios or sold. Out of the little relationship that began in art school, to build up (his reputation in this country) and help Miriam later on made me happy.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you say your time with Gabo was unusual for an art student?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes. It was the first time I collaborated with an older artist, better known. I say collaboration because Gabo didn’t know anything about etching and kept asking me questions and to do this or that. In the end he asked me to sign the plate for him. He showed me the work and asked me what I thought of it. Baskin would ask students to admire the work, but Gabo would ask about the upper-left hand corner. I was acting as a printer with an artist who shared his concerns. It affected the way I’ve worked with printers after that. I became conscious of them as artists in their own right. [phone interruption] In the second part of my last year at Yale, everyone is obsessed with getting a job. I had applied for a Fulbright, which I got, but didn’t accept because I needed the money and had a young family and we decided against traveling. I was prepared to teach and honestly didn’t think of anything else. Other students would want to go down to New York and try to make it. I was offered a job at RISD, replacing Herb Fink.

ROBERT BROWN: Studio teaching was not that elaborate—you didn’t have these 20-30 person departments at state universities.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Well there were art schools around the country and RISD was one of them. It was very

different to teach at RISD than at liberal arts colleges. It was really an art school. My first year I had responsibility for 165 students in drawing. Had to monitor three different people's drawing classes, plus teach my own. I had over 90 people in printmaking. I had a small class of my own of 25. I taught 27 hours a week. I could work on my own work on the presses. I didn't have a press of my own. From the beginning I always worked in my own class as an artist, doing my own work as well as (critiquing) theirs. I taught anatomy at RISD and made an anatomy book for them.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you worry that teaching might stunt your own growth as an artist?

MICHAEL MAZUR: No. I accepted what I had to do. I made $4500 for the year teaching 27 hours a week. That was a lot of money in 1962. You could live, as a family of three, for $5000 a year. It's astounding when you think about it. Three years later I had gotten a Guggenheim and was offered a job at Brandeis for $8400, a big step upward. That was 30 years ago. I quit RISD a couple times in disgust, when I was asked to restrict my teaching. I remember the horror of having to teach someone else's ideas. I was always brought back into the fold by someone like Gil Franklin (Later, he was CO-chair with me at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown). I got a lot of work done.

ROBERT BROWN: Was RISD narrow in some way?

MICHAEL MAZUR: It only hired its own former students. I was one of the few that was not a former student. I liked John Frazier. I thought the students were doing wonderful work. Bob Hamilton and Gil I liked very much. My second child was born in Rhode Island. I was exhibiting widely and had gotten to the point of having some small reputation. But some RISD faculty did not like ambition beyond Providence, Rhode Island. People who had shows in New York were frowned upon as being ostentatious. It was a sleepy town in those days. But it was the beginning of my work in a mental hospital. Did I describe this before?

ROBERT BROWN: No, you haven't. You mentioned Northampton briefly, but did not talk about it.

MICHAEL MAZUR: After going to the mental hospital in Northampton (MA), I wanted to pick up again after Yale. I joined a small group of people from Brown going out to a mental hospital in Howard, Rhode Island. Very quickly I wanted to organize a group with my own students. We started making regular trips, experimenting with art therapy, talking to doctors about the work mental patients were doing. I would come back from the morning hours and work from memory of the experience. I began a series of mental hospital images. I now could work from memory and make the space do what I wanted it to do. At RISD I worked totally on the mental hospital material. I showed some of the work in an exhibition at the Providence Art Club. Richard Brown Baker was one of the jurors, along with Agnes Mongan from the Fogg and Bill Lieberman at the Modern. They selected a print of mine for a prize. Lieberman bought several prints for the Modern. Mongan bought a drawing for the Fogg. These were my first major sales.

ROBERT BROWN: Under the proper auspices, even in sleepy Provindence, a career can be pulled together.

MICHAEL MAZUR: It was interesting that this work got a small audience. I applied for a Guggenheim and got it in '64. That's when I moved away from Providence, deciding to work only with mental hospital images as they would develop out of my memory. I spent my Guggenheim year living in Cambridge, almost around the corner from here on Arlington Street. I worked on the hospital material for about six years, all told. Produced a portfolio with George Lockwood at Impressions Workshop. We continued as close friends. The reason I came to Boston was to work with him. Gail had been born in Cambridge and always wanted to come back here. That was the beginning of her career as a writer. She began meeting writers and working with Robert Lowell and meeting a lot of writers who were staying here and teaching here. Her involvement was very demanding and it pretty much colored my life. My own ambition was great, and there were moments of breakout—two years in New York—but, for better or for worse, Cambridge was home. Maybe this is a good place to break. [tape shut off]

ROBERT BROWN: As early as the late '50s you had an interest in mental hospitals?

MICHAEL MAZUR: In terms of the mature work of that it goes from 1962 through 1966, including the time I was at RISD that ends in '64. I got my Guggenheim primarily based on the hospital work. I believe I did about 12 to 15 large scale prints, etchings, beginning in '62 and ending in the spring of '64. Those were prints that resulted by drawings made after the hospital visits, which we made as an art therapy group. I started some paintings that year of hospital subjects, but I never felt they developed.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you mean?

MICHAEL MAZUR: My graphic qualities were noted, but the problems of what a painting means and how it becomes made in the growth of the process are different from drawing and printmaking problems. I've said to students who were really interested in drawing, when they paint they are going to have to give up some of the controls they've learned in graphic media. It takes a long time to learn how to let a medium evolve out of its

own substance. Especially people who learn to draw in terms of contour develop controls for their drawing, which make their drawings predigested; rather you evolve out of the materials.

[Tape 3, Side A]

MICHAEL MAZUR: I was saying that printmaking developed into an enterprise much more technical than it needed to be. People substituted a concern about the technical brilliance of the print for the evolving of the image, the learning about the image. My way of working, certainly in monotype, is this business of pushing material around, working state after state so the material keeps evolving, on its own terms. It is said that good writers have to be good listeners. Artists have to be good watchers. They have to watch their work instead of pre-planning it. I feel that way. Whenever you work with materials that are resistant, which is true of printmaking more than it is of drawing, but certainly true of painting, you have to listen in a certain way; you have to watch what the materials are doing for you. They may not be doing exactly what you wanted them to do. But they may be telling you something about what they can do. People are trained as control freaks: establish the rules of the game, and then perform them. As if there were no intervening resistance. As if they could take the thing in their minds and put it full blown on a canvas. The fact is that materials imply collaboration. Unless you are willing to be sidetracked, and be a respondent to the wiles and sometimes surprises of the materials you are working with, you aren't flowing: you are just going in one direction. That works against people who want to control their drawing, and therefore their painting becomes a problem because the paint's moving all over the place. They can't develop a simple transition from drawing to painting. My experience with Albers was overwhelming at the beginning. Especially the color course. Everything got studied out, then produced. Albers' way was very effective for him.

ROBERT BROWN: It became formulaic?

MICHAEL MAZUR: It became formulaic. That did not work for me initially, and I put painting aside. I thought printmaking and drawing were enough to tackle, especially given the difficulties of the subject I was working on. I began, also, working in an underground way with the figure in sculpture with Bill Bailey, Irwin Houer, and a few other people. We hired a model and we literally modeled with clay. I did several reliefs and many wax pieces on my own. When I went up to Rhode Island, I continued working as a part-time sculptor with many of the same images I did from the hospital. Often I made several pieces about the hospital to draw from, to study situations.

ROBERT BROWN: What did the sculpture do for you?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Since I was working a lot from memory, I was able to construct situations. I built benches and put figures on them. I cast several of these. I had my own kiln in Cambridge when I came for my Guggenheim. I had my own studio and was painting, printmaking, and working in sculpture all at the same time. Probably I bit too much off. I was having difficulties as a painter and I knew that a printmaker was without a major medium. To be a printmaker, only, in the history of art, was to occupy a substratum of attention. There was and is a printmaking world that operates on the periphery of the art world. The major prints are made by people whose reputations are as sculptors or painters. Ironically, I may be known as a printmaker. Some of my historical mentors are models. Kathe Kollwitz will be known more as a printmaker than as a sculptor. Kollwitz was a sculptor. The impact of the medium you are best known for does not mean that you are not feeding yourself through other media. I do think, for a printmaker, it's vital to be fed from drawing, painting, or sculpture. Printmaking tends to be like a snake eating its own tail. After awhile, its technical issues take over. The demand of a print sometimes comes out of another medium, how to get some quality in a print that you can get in another medium. Monotype bridged the gap for me between the various media that interested me.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you please explain that?

MICHAEL MAZUR: We are going to talk a lot about more about monotype later on. It did not enter my consciousness until the last years of the '60s. To pre-figure that: monotype imitates painting because it has no matrix. You are pushing ink around a surface very much as you are pushing paint around a canvas. The ink does not dry while you are pushing it around and you can always get back to the whiteness of the page or the plate by the simple act of wiping the ink away. Qualities of printmaking always have imitated. Aquatint imitates wash drawings. Soft ground etching imitates charcoal. Engraving imitates pen drawing. Print media was discovered because a reproductive medium was needed, mirroring what the artist was doing in unique materials. I was very conscious that if I made a wash drawing I was more likely to work with aquatint. If I made a line drawing I was more likely to work with an engraver. By that time, my print knowledge was fairly sophisticated. I saw that it could be used to be imitative as well as a way of developing its own qualities. As I began to want to paint more and more again, if I going to have printmaking continue to be important to me, it was going to have to imitate things that became important to me about painting. So consequently the monotypes developed when I saw the Fogg show (Degas' monotypes) in 1968, the first monotypes I did see (Gabo's were "Monoprints"). It was their ability to feel like drawings or paintings, to have fluidity and immediacy. As soon as I stopped going to the hospital there was a more theoretical tinge to the work. It cooled, hardened, became more cubist oriented.

There were a lot of overlapping ideas. That year I completed a portfolio of lithographs that I had started at Impressions Workshop. I worked with Lockwood, starting in late ’62. That summer I went to teach at Yale-Norfolk—after having been a student there in ’55 I went back as a teacher in ‘63 and taught printmaking. It was a hot summer and George let the stones become affected by the heat. A lot of the ink spread in the stone and the proofs were totally unsatisfactory. By the time we finished we had worked on 40 stones to get 14 I could accept. The portfolio came out in ’65.

ROBERT BROWN: *The Images from a Locked Ward*?

MICHAEL MAZUR: *The Images from a Locked Ward*. We produced 75 portfolios. George drove as far as Chicago, up and down the East Coast, pushing these portfolios. I think he sold 14 or 15. They weren’t very expensive. There was a sense the edition would sell out, but I still have about 25 of them, almost 30 years later. But there were many more prints than in the portfolios. Some I liked even better.

ROBERT BROWN: All drawings done from the imagination?

MICHAEL MAZUR: These were all done from the imagination.

ROBERT BROWN: How was Lockwood to work with?

MICHAEL MAZUR: George was both wonderful and horrendous. He was the first artist-printer that I worked with, although I worked with many printers since. An artist-printer is a conflicted person, likely to bring their own taste and concerns to your work, more likely to try and shape and pattern it. There are arguments and disagreements. In the French tradition, the printer will make a quiet technical contribution, rather than an esthetic contribution. George was moody, very moody. You could go for weeks without hearing from him. He might simply stop if he was interested in something he was doing. Working on Lockwood time is the reason it took three years. No economies were involved. George would spend endless amounts of time producing a print. He was superb, an enormously inventive printmaker doing things no one else could do. Now his work might look crude, but it had impressive values. Once George carved a printer’s chop. If you look carefully at his chop, this little dragon, this most extraordinary carving. A printer’s chop is a positive/negative on each side of the stamp. Now people do this mechanically, send in a logo and the thing becomes photographically transferred. George carved by hand both the positive and negative of this printer’s chop so it would create this miniature bas relief of this dragon. To any project he would bring some small stupendous thing. After 1966, George wanted to do more work for himself. He began to resent you for taking his time. He prematurely died at age 41, massive heart attack. He operated under a great deal of stress. A terrible blow for me in ‘68. My father passed the next year. I was still in my early 30s. So that ’64 year was combined with all kinds of work, a range you would not believe and that got mostly thrown out or destroyed. I made pottery—a lot of high-fired boxes with figures. By ’65-66 I was out of the hospital work and going back to the model and working from the model.

ROBERT BROWN: The year ’64 sounds as if it were immensely fruitful.

MICHAEL MAZUR: A watershed year that made me realize as an artist, that I was a fiddler and a tryer and experimenter. I could not decide to do the same thing over again. I wanted to work in a free-form fashion. If I had an instinct to do some absurd thing that had nothing to do with what I was doing, I would try it. It’s risky business professionally to have too much variety in your work. Variety, one of my great strengths, is a great weakness in the art market. You have to be known for very few pieces that have advertising value. If someone has something that looks like that, someone else will want something that looks like that. The need for a gestalt, in any given time, is paramount: he does this or he does that. It was impossible for me to continue the hospital series past the time that I was actually involved in it. I had dealt specifically with the issue of madness and aberration, and now I was at a loss to know where to go next, unless I went back to basics. I always had a feeling for the model. I always wanted to work with the figure. A constant in my career is a going back to the model, after long periods of not working with the figure at all.

ROBERT BROWN: And this began again in ’65?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Well, the hospital images were all figures, but I went back to a model just to see how I would respond to the model, where my drawing would take me. Indeed, it was a kind of psychological return to the model, since it was not just a formal issue but involved a lot of consciousness of male/female role playing, especially in the Artist and the Model, the next portfolio that was created, the same number as the hospital prints—14. This time they were etching and cut plates. It was very cool and rather repressive set of images that dealt with a curious choreography between the artist and the model during the act of making art. During the time I was making sculpture, I started making what was then called a tableau vivante. I remember making a life-sized armature and assuming I knew what the model looked like. I began to build plaster onto this armature, before the model arrived. I assumed I could invent a model. I probably could have. But when the model actually disrobed, I found myself at that instant totally surprised by the actual fact, specific facts of this model. I proceeded to change everything, building a realistic approach to the model. At the same time, you have to

realize, George Segal was actually casting from his models. What I ended up with, after almost a year of work, was crude but lifelike. I began to model the figure after my own body. Then I began to put together a group of objects that could be stand-ins for studio-type objects. I created this whole tableau, including shadows of light across windows. It was not a finished tableau and was never exhibited, partially because my dealer at the time, Jill Kornblee, felt that Segal was doing it better. But for me it was very important because it set the stage for the kind of realism I wanted, a perceptual realism that was fairly far from the expressionism and invention of the hospital series. I went back to looking at things, studying them.

ROBERT BROWN: Once you saw specific qualities of a particular model, you were modeling her, right?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes. I didn't cast. That's what took an enormous amount of time and was a back and forth fight with changes that would take place. But it was about the instant of recognition of the particularity of the model. Much of the portfolio, the Artist and the Model, dealt with that. After that came a decade much more geared toward observation, and away from looser, expressive qualities. Probably, now, I feel those are more important, but at that time, you have to understand, I was doing my work at the height of the Pop revolution and at the beginning of what was to become a realist revival. I opted for the realist revival, because, simply, I am not a very ironic person. I'm not suited for popular culture. I don't see the world where deeper metaphors are embodied by lighter products. That was the genius of Oldenburg, Warhol, to be able to build a world of more complicated, conflicting attitudes based on materialism. I was looking to Europe at a time when American expressions were important precisely because they were American. In a global world, I think that's a disadvantage one has to work with. You are judged cruelly by the history of art if you are not characteristic of the culture you are living in. One has to accept, to some extent, that verdict.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it like to hear Jill Kornblee say, "Segal is doing this better"?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Infuriated me. I think she was right. Dealers have their own ways of being right. An artist has to understand that what's good for them in the studio is not necessarily good for them in the marketplace. I have learned to listen to one's dealer, but you can only do what you can do. You can listen but that does not mean you can translate it into your working process. My way has always been to do pretty much what I want without talking too much advice.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you judge her as a dealer? What was your relationship like?

MICHAEL MAZUR: She was my first dealer. She found me out of art school at Yale, which was beginning to become common, which is why Yale played such a major role in the '60s and early '70s. People kept going up to New Haven, grabbing talented people, and putting them on walls. A lot are better known than I. Chuck Close, Richard Serra, Jennifer Bartlett. The problem was, we were very young. It was the beginning of a change in the generational quality of American art. The Abstract Expressionists did not become well known under they were in their '40s, sometimes '50s. Their development was long. You saw them in their maturity. With the revolution into Pop art, Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Dine, and so forth were in their late '20s, early '30s when they became important. Jim Dine and I are the same age. We went to camp together for a short period of time—Jim seems to have found out. Youth became a part of the success of American artists because of their ability to speak for their generation. At that point, art became much more generational, a major drift to younger artists. That's all aside. The people I was looking at had avoided Pop and Abstract Expressionism; they were looking back and forward at realist tendencies. I was included in a major level in a group that came to the fore in the mid-'70s.

ROBERT BROWN: Who would you include in this group?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Bill Bailey, Kathy Murphy, Beckman, Gillespie, Jack Beal, Phil Pearstein. Things broke down. You had to take a stand. There were continuing Pop ideas, a conceptual movement, a continuation of painterly abstraction, and there was realism—a period of pluralism, as we later defined it. That was the issue that became important for me, but the subject matter kept shifting for me. The model was important, the landscape was important, anything that had to do with life in my studio was important. The objects of the studio, the model in the studio, the painter painting, the artist himself as self-portrait all could be seen. The other day I was thinking of the number of paintings that relate to the world of the studio. The hospital imagery was not going to be the last time I worked with stressful expressionistic imagery relating to a figurative narrative. I organized a show in the late '70s at MIT for Kathy Halbreich, which included Irving Petlin, Bob Berman, Mary Frank, and myself.

[Tape 3; side B]

MICHAEL MAZUR: In '66 at Brandeis began some of the big peace marches and continued to the Cambodia bombings in '72. I was active in an era fraught with problems. I co-founded the Artists Against Racism and the War in Boston, which was a response a year later to Angry Arts movement in New York. Several of us put that effort together. I made an installation called the "American Way Room." It involved a photographic floor that people walked on. It traveled and was still alive during the Cambodian bombing. Later it was shown at the

Philadelphia museum. In ’68 I was invited to the Tamarind Workshop in Los Angeles.

ROBERT BROWN: What was that like?

MICHAEL MAZUR: It was the beginning of my experience with professional print shops. Tamarind had been in existence for about 10 years by the time I was actually out there.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it more like a European shop?

MICHAEL MAZUR: No, it was more like what American shops would become, a prototype in development. A lot of money was pumped in by the Ford Foundation. When we got out there, there were two artists for a two-month period. For two months you worked with six printers. Two or three printers would be involved with you for the first month. For the second month there would be six printers, working full time printing what you were doing. Production was important; the emphasis was on the number of prints to be produced during that time, not necessarily on the quality. In a way, the artist was working for the printer. But it produced a generation of professional printers, the printers of note around the country. A farm team for the print workshop tradition in this country. Serges Logingo, who became the major printer for Gemini. Jean Milant, the printer publisher in California, Sirus Editions. Maurice Sanchez who printed for Morleau and now prints on Derriere-Le-Mirror Press in New York. On and on, lots of talented people who became good printers. They were very demanding, coming to you and saying you could print that in two other colors and we could add a third plate and do this and that. If you were young and inexperienced, as I was—just remember that George and I worked on 41 stones over a three-year period. Here we make 41 editions in a two-month period. At least seven copies of everything you did were in museum settings, Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles County Museum, Smithsonian, the National Gallery. These are all over the country to haunt you. At one point I tried to my Tamarind prints back, from collections, which I didn’t think were any good. No go. It might have been better for the artist if they had had more control over where these prints ended up. That’s the risk you take.

ROBERT BROWN: More control in the sense you would have worked with a dealer?

MICHAEL MAZUR: In retrospect, you would have dumped about half the production. Editing is important to the artist; in my case I think I was under-edited. There is not enough time between the making of the work and the selling of the work. Works now do not sit around the studio for years and get thought about. Now they are out when the paint is still drying. On the other hand, an artist should be judged on the best work they do, not their worst work.

ROBERT BROWN: You would have liked to do some of that editing yourself?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I would have liked to have been a better editor.

ROBERT BROWN: You moved to other dealers—Boris Mirsky and Alan Fink at Alpha.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Boris was an old-fashioned dealer and I had my first two shows in the Boston area with Boris. My first show with Alan was around that time. Boris’s first show was the hospital work; the second show was the sculpture pieces.

ROBERT BROWN: You call him old fashioned. Why?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I didn’t get to know him very well, but I found him a little intimidating, idiosyncratic, not a very good businessman but had a good eye. He was showing very much a Boston expressionist school. Baskin, Karl Zerbe, David Aronson, Bernie Chaet, Tovish. A variety of people within that group. Boris was a true lover of art and often the dealer and the lover of art are in conflict. He let things sell themselves and got bored with the business part.

ROBERT BROWN: You said you came to him through Alan Fink?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I knew Alan through Barbara Swan. Originally he was Boris’ assistant and accountant. When Alan wanted to start his own gallery, he wanted to take some of Boris’ artists. Alan came first to Tovish, then to me, came to our house, said he wanted to start his own gallery. Because I had been dealing with Alan the whole time I was with Boris, it was natural for me to accept his offer, though I felt rather guilty about it. Boris’ gallery was never quite the same after that. Bernie went with Alan, Tovish, myself. He lingered as a dealer after that, but never quite the same. I spent about eight or nine years with Alan, starting in ’67.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you compare Alan with your New York dealer, Jill Kornblee?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Alan was very savvy, but Jill was listening to Castelli, Ivan Karp, her mentors. She was acting, to some extent, as a farm team for Castelli. Dan Flavin showed with Jill before he showed with Castelli. She was showing Alex Katz and Rackshaw Downes, Janet Fish. She was a cool dealer, very into what was happening. As

she often said to me, she was built for the ‘60s, she was a ‘60s person. Alan was not a ‘60s person, he embodied a great deal of what Boris had taught him, very European oriented. He once told me, during a show I had with him, that I had better get used to the fact that no one was going to buy my work. After I left him and went with Harkus-Krakow, everything was sold within the first months that had been in that show. I realized people don’t buy work; they are sold work. The dealer has to love the idea of selling to people. You can’t wait till they decide or you wait forever. I wanted to make a career as an artist. I didn’t want to be a teacher all my life. It was very un-Boston to want to sell your work. Money was slightly dirty. New York aggressively went after sales. I was a New Yorker at heart but I liked living in Boston, despite the low market. By 1975 I was burned out from teaching. I had become something of a political entity at Brandeis because of the Vietnam war and I wanted to concentrate on my own career. I crunched some numbers and decided I could sell enough work, so I took the risk. I had gained some inheritance after my father died and I decided to go it alone. I had left Jill and was showing in New York with Terry Dintenfass. I did a series of work based on animals in the Stoneham Zoo, and that was a strange return to the hospital work via the world of animals, mostly monkeys. Combined with the incident at Walden Pond, that was the next major step in what had begun as the hospital work. What a landscape means to me at one point may be different from what it means at another point. It can be what it is or become a metaphor for something else. Jungles can be lush with an aspect of danger; the spikiness of forms can take on new meaning. My work in the ‘80s became much more imaginary, symbolic. By the time I did the pieces for MIT the landscapes were much more formal, an incredible, very exciting project.

ROBERT BROWN: [inaudible]

MICHAEL MAZUR: The year 1968 was year of tumult. It was hard to meet with classes. I don’t think people realize how invasive the anti-war movement was on the college campus. Demonstrations occurred almost weekly. The day an exhibition opened at Central Square, using photographs in sort of linoleum squares on the floors, Martin Luther King was shot. The exhibition became a kind of meeting place. ’68 was probably the most traumatic year of my life. I went out to California in June to do a project at Tamarind, which I think I described. Bobby Kennedy was assassinated while I was out there. I actually started a novel at this time, involving the murder of policeman. I’ve always wanted to connect with the world in a non-art way, make some difference. Movements by their nature are made up of small events.

[Tape 4; side A]

MICHAEL MAZUR: I got chicken pox. The only advantage was that I read *Ulysses*, which I had never read. It was the beginning of wanting to do a series of prints based on Dante’s Inferno. That finally came to fruition just this year. George Lockwood died in ’68 and I had lost track of him in the last year of his life. At that time, I planned to move back to New York. I had been two years without a gallery in New York. I had learned air-brush techniques and started doing photo-realist works based on the artist’s studio, a recurring interest of mine. The sense of place of an artist’s studio makes me feel immediately at home. The sound of a brush making a mark, so quietly, is extremely appealing to me. When a line is forced to move across a corner, and destroys the corner from certain distances, the line will shift at every point that one moves in relation to the corner, along the perspective. It can be controlled as an optical shift over the corner from one side to the other. Angles of tilt change. Everything was constantly moving unless you were at the dead, center, point. I did two pieces, Studio I and Studio II. In any case, I planned to move to New York and finish another environment I was working on. I took a leave of absence from Brandeis for two years. Another reason was to spend more time with my father who was not well. He died quite suddenly, but I had already made the plan to move, and that’s when I got chicken pox. My first paintings since Yale started as black and white images, as air brush, because it was a way of getting the tonal quality I was trying for in the prints. Painting for me was too much about marks and handwriting. I wanted it to become more neutral, almost photo-neutral. I worked against my natural hand.

ROBERT BROWN: You wanted the medium to disappear?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes. But of course it never disappears. It simply changes from one surface to another. I ultimately became very down on the kind of photo realism that developed in the ‘70s. Brainless finesse. Richard Estes was interesting, but others turned me off. Mine was a freehand use of the airbrush. In ’69 and ’70 I moved to New York and lived in the original Lord and Taylor at 901 Broadway at 20th Street, in the loft that Paul Manship had used at the end of his life. His monumental Teddy Roosevelt was standing in the middle of the loft.

ROBERT BROWN: Did it appeal to you that this was Manship’s studio?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Oh, yes, though I was not a great fan of his work. But I enjoyed the small animal pieces that were still there. The idea of moving out of Cambridge and into a studio loft was an adventure to me. 20-foot ceilings, tall 12 foot windows that looked out on the Empire State Building. But there was emptiness to the area, a different New York that I grew up in. It was 17 years since I lived in New York. There was a lot of illegal living in SoHo, which was just beginning. I did a lot of large buildings, airbrushed images, actually like sculptural forms on the floor. I became interested in how our eyes move through a picture. The problem with binocular vision is that

your sight has no edges, so you are giving up one piece of an object for another piece of another object. You focus is shifting all the time and you are putting a thing together out of fragments. I simulated this do a degree in the work.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it prismatic?

MICHAEL MAZUR: No, it wasn't prismatic. I would just draw chairs in relation to another chair, very simple. A glass of water on a table or looking out a window through a balcony to a bus on the street and down the street. The traveling of the eye through the work put this narrative together. I mentioned this issue of the particular moment, finding the reality of the model being so much different than the idealization that had gone into imagining it beforehand. The '70s in my work was a period of realism. By the early '70s realism had become an alternative movement to conceptual art and earthworks. It was the first major pluralistic movement. Previously in my lifetime each decade had been dominated by one or another movement. It was possible to get work looked at without the eyewash of one movement. There was no longer a war between figuration and abstraction. My work had to do with looking at mundane objects. When I returned from New York in '71 . . .

ROBERT BROWN: You were showing with Terry—what was she like?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Like a lot of dealers she was sort of flighty. The night that the show at Finch opened she was giddy and a little bit in her cups. She drank a lot. The next day she told me she had sold a painting last night. I asked her which one and how much and she told me a price that was about half the price we had agreed on. I complained and she said, "Well, I was sort of drunk, but it's done, it's gone." She was very nice in certain ways, tremendous loyalty to certain artists who would leave her and then return. I left her gallery in '78 and was with her about seven years.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you decide to return to Boston?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Well, I had a job I had to come back to. But I quit the job maybe four years later. Living in New England in Connecticut, Providence, and Cambridge had changed me. I wasn't an urban person anymore. I didn't like city life particularly. I liked having fewer manmade things around. I liked grass and trees more than cement. In New York there was an envelope around the creative life of the artist and the social life of the rich and I didn't like being so aware of that envelope. I prefer the company of artists, and even more so writers. I had made a place for myself in Boston and I valued that.

[Tape 4; side B]

MICHAEL MAZUR: There was a poetry life in New York, but when we came back Gail really found a way, running the Blacksmith House reading series. In Boston we both found a way to make a difference. I tire of the comparisons between Boston and New York. The regions of this country all have their special flavor. Being in the center of something is relatively short term, anyway. Ten years later nobody knows what all the fuss was about. The day to day struggle, the bad paintings, the victories, the hard ones—those are the satisfactions of your life and you can do it anywhere.

ROBERT BROWN: You made a decision.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes, to be ready to live with a decision was a big decision. In '75 I left Brandeis, took a risk and decided not to teach for a while. I love teaching but now I only teach part time because I am jealous of the amount of time I have in the studio. When I came back here I concentrated a lot on my own backyard: what was in my garden, flowers. I retreated from urban concerns in my ways that returning to Cambridge. I mean it's not the country. I decide, literally, to cultivate my own garden and became much more involved in gardening and the life of trees. By '77 I began to be aware again of urban crime. I was influenced by Jonestown. I don't know if I talked about the incident at Walden Pond. Let's take a little break . . . [click off recorder] Then I decided to do some work on the monkey cages at Stoneham Zoo, which were very depressed and reminded me of the mental hospital. Telling the story of captured animals became important. I curated a show at MIT called "Narrations" with a group of people who were interested in narrative painting, which took realism and went into older ideas about narration.

ROBERT BROWN: Kathy Halbreich at MIT was quite an effective curator.

MICHAEL MAZUR: She was marvelous. She was the one who asked me to do this. It was unusual to take an artist from the local area and ask him to curate a show. I like organizing things. When the stories came over the television about the mass suicides at Jonestown I became excited by those figures in the jungle. It put together two or three elements of my work. The idea of the woods as a place where things could happen. In Weston I did many pastels at the reservoir. Then I painted several small studies of paintings at Fresh Pond here in Cambridge. Pastel had the quality of mixing my drawing interest with my painting interest. I have always like holding a piece of chalk in my hand, very direct, more so than painting for me. Painting, I've had trouble just relating to the

marks I've made in the same natural way I do with pastel. I sometimes work with pastels with my eyes closed because the feeling of movement in my hands is enough. The Jonestown images connected me with Bruegal and in '75 I actually went to study Bruegal's work in Vienna, to celebrate my own 40th birthday. Tried to find as many Breugals as I could. Went to East Berlin, to Rotterdam. Bruegel was important to me—this issue of the way figures work in neutral environments in the countryside, the way in which these narratives were built up in a single format where natural and man interacted in a strange amoral way. The Jonestown paintings were like a Bruegel to me, like the massacre of the innocents. At Fresh Pond I had seen street kids, not joggers, running through the woods, screaming, and playing a little rough. That began to feel like chaos in the woods. In '55 in Lake Placid, New York, I had been in a posse going after two cop killers. Famous case. I was working in a hotel during the summer driving a cab. We had been deputized. Available young men were deputized to go and search out the woods. This was crazy because these men were armed and dangerous. We didn't have guns. We were vulnerable and I was scared out of my mind. It turns out these guys were nowhere near—I think they were discovered in Denver. The experience of moving through a woods in a frightening search stuck with me. Most of my work comes out of my life, subjects that I know something about that are not necessarily fashionable. The Jonestown images of people running through the woods were concocted as an imaginary scene, a la Bruegel out of elements of people who might have some reason to be in a location where something has gone wrong. I finished that project with a painting that took about a year called *The Incident at Walden Pond*. This body of work was my contribution to the narration show at MIT. I wrote a letter to each of the artists and asked them to describe what narration meant to them. We kept the letter form, the interview form, for the catalogue. My work ended up being a triptych, through at one point it had four panels. It had a figure on the ground and I chose my own self as the person who discovered the body and pointed at the perpetrator who ran through the central canvas. On the left side were several joggers who were just beginning to have certain levels of knowledge or understanding of what's going on. I divided the canvas into essentially three activities. Discovery: discovery of the body. The artist's panel is an opportunity for the artist to create the circumstances for a work of art. By pointing: the artist points to something in his own paint, when in fact he is the one who dreamt it. The first part is about the discovery and the imaginative act. The central part has two figures, the perpetrator running, followed by another figure running after. That was the action part. That central panel is where imagination took the place of discovery. The third panel was interpretive: outside people are looking to separate their imaginative side from the action side and trying to determine their reactions. They are static, arrested in a waiting state, deciding what to do. Dreams/Action/Passive: here is the division of the three canvases. In the distance throughout the whole canvas is Walden Pond, the water the runners are running around. You can see the swim area. Here was an historical site for being alone. Here we meditate on Thoreau. This incident broke that established relationship, making it contemporary. At the same time, the site became an emblem for the purest relation of man to nature. So it becomes this contrast. That was a major painting for me. It still is. Now it's in the collection of Pennsylvania Academy.

ROBERT BROWN: About 1979?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes, it finished the '70s with that painting. I showed it in 1980 in New York at Robert Miller, who I had begun showing with after I left Terry Dintenfass. Bob was just beginning his gallery, but it was a high-water mark for me because his shows were widely seen. That sort of takes us into the '80s. [break]

ROBERT BROWN: We last talked about your going to the Robert Miller gallery. I wanted to ask about your service on various boards and committees and you talked about your anti-war activity. By the mid-'70s you were on the board of the Artists Foundation in Boston. Did you begin much earlier?

MICHAEL MAZUR: The Artists Foundation had been in existence less than five years when I joined it. It was a creature of the state because the Mass Council on the Arts and Humanities was unable to give individual grants directly to artists. No money could be given to an individual by the state, so the Artists Foundation was formed to fill that purpose, a straw operation that the state funded completely.

ROBERT BROWN: There was no conflict of interest. It was simply a legal thing.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Simply a legal thing. I joined it at a time of change when we had a new director and the Mass Council was about to get a new director, who would re-think the relation between the Mass Council and the Artists Foundation. The advice that she had been given by council was that something was, if not illegal, too much of a perception that this was a loophole in the law, and the Artists Foundation could no longer function as it had. Ann Hawley began to plan the destruction of the relation between the Foundation and the Council. The artists funding program was very well administered.

ROBERT BROWN: As well as having an appreciable effect on artists.

MICHAEL MAZUR: I thought so. I believe in helping artists. A lot of other artists feel that artists should survive by a Darwinian process. I remember the grants I won and the awards that meant a lot to me, financially, but also, now when artists are so un-respected and un-aided, should they get recognition or acknowledgment of their

function within the community, it means more than money. At any rate, our director resigned very quickly and disappeared in a mysterious way. My job seems to have been to figure out a way, as I do from time to time, to raise money to hire a new director. We negotiated a three-year period in which we would gradually become independent, then we were told we had three months to do it.

ROBERT BROWN: Anne Hawley had final say in this?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes. There were tremendous tensions between the two organizations. We had to scramble. On the board we had Jim Ackerman, George Abrams, very helpful people and a good board. I've never wanted to be on a board where I didn't understand what work I had to do, then I would do the work. Later when I became a council member I saw a different type of board, more honorary. There were probably a half dozen of us—I would have to go back to my files to see who those people were. I started a thing called the 150 Fund, a blind auction that we held at the Federal Reserve Bank. We raised enough money to pay a new director, named Carter, who had extensive training in private business though he may not have been as sensitive to the arts as one might have wanted. He was a hard worker and pulled us into just the position we needed—being relatively independent. But it's always been my understanding that the Artists Foundation existed to dispense money from the state into fellowship programs. If Anne had wanted to pull that program out of the foundation, as she tried to do when I was on the council, it would have sunk the foundation. So there was this constant tension.

ROBERT BROWN: What was she like to work with?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I used to meet with her quite regularly, as a member of the foundation.

ROBERT BROWN: In 1980 you became a member of the arts council, I believe.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Right. My membership had to do with an intention of Anne's to shift the emphasis from the foundation to the arts council. I somewhat suspected that I was asked to be on the arts council because I was very active in the foundation. I would have to give that up! At one point she tried to take the artist fellowship program away from the foundation, and I opted to keep it. At that time no one but the foundation was in a position to administer this program. A tremendous of experience had been built up. It would have been a waste of money and time to transfer these resources to another organization, with another mission, and put on their backs another activity for which they are not trained.

ROBERT BROWN: She wasn't proposing to put the foundation under the council?

MICHAEL MAZUR: The foundation, de facto, was under the council. Even though it was independent, all of its money came from the state through the council. So it was shaky legally. I don't actually know if it exists anymore.

[Tape 5; side A]

MICHAEL MAZUR: Two major things happened when I was on the council. One: the joining of the council and the lottery commission, a strange and ineffective move by the state, creating two competing organizations that were totally inappropriate to have them together. Anne fought that. The other thing was the development of several programs. The New Works Program I was fairly involved in, helping to create and lobbying to create laws in the Commonwealth that protected works of art owned by the public. There were only two artists on the council, one, P. J. Anderson was a musician. The two of us sort of functioned as a reality checks with the other members, who were by and large political appointments. When you see how political appointments are made, you see they are there to rubber stamp the staff's view. I do think the president of the council was an effective man, but Anne was a powerhouse.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you respect her judgment?

MICHAEL MAZUR: She was driven to make Massachusetts sexier, if I can use that term, as being an art place. She wondered why we could not be more like L.A. A desperate chauvinism is good up to a point, except that sometimes it would skew decisions toward areas of publicity rather than substance. Anne's visual art experience was limited. All things considered, Anne was a very effective political director of the council. She knew how to talk to legislators. She had the ear of Billy Bulger, who was extremely important. She had great enthusiasm that could get exasperating because it would become monomaniac. I don't know if artists realized how hard they were working, but what they did was very meaningful to the Commonwealth. It was a little uncomfortable for me to wear this hat, but I like to be helpful if I can. Better it be an artist who has a hands-on idea of what's going on. At Brandeis, because I had become a member of the faculty senate, I was used to some aspect of these things, but I was never very good at negotiation. I can remember screaming, angry meetings. Some people had a very genteel way of infighting, so it was a lot of fun even though sometimes I wondered what I was doing there. I didn't mention that Michael Harper, a poet, was also on the board at that time, so there were three of us. Anne could have made it all political appointee yes-people, but she didn't. But the blood got thin after Anne left.

ROBERT BROWN: Finances were plummeting.

MICHAEL MAZUR: More money was spent on marching bands than for painting or sculpture. The arts lottery had no peer review or basic standard of judgment about why one organization deserved money over another. It became a token thing. But the early years, the beginning of the ‘80s, the money to art councils was flowing, more than ever before. Then the censorship issues came in and it weakened. There was the constant question of quality and elitism issues, and having politicians object to particular artists. Political, which had been so out in the ‘50s, now became so strong as to be ridiculous.

ROBERT BROWN: You also served on a committee for graphic acquisitions at the Library of Congress.

MICHAEL MAZUR: I served for 10 years. I was appointed just about the time I got off the council. That is a committee is which two artists judge, essentially, the acquisition of fine prints, with a bequest that was left by Joseph Premel, a printmaker and artist. Cannily, he felt that artists could be the best judges of art, not curators or commercial people. You also wanted their bias to be fully exercised. It was one of the smartest bequests I ever heard of. By that act of making artists, not scholars, being the judge, he could keep a liveliness going between generations. I replaced Jim Dine and then I helped Yvonne Jacquette to serve on it, the first woman ever.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you go about acquiring work?

MICHAEL MAZUR: We never did the work in Washington. If we wanted something and there was money we could get it. The one stipulation was that works had to be done within the last hundred years; the artist had to be alive and active within one hundred years of the date of the work. When I joined in 1983, we could buy work from 1883. Because monotype was one of the weakest areas, I naturally wanted monotypes to be brought in. Now the collections may comprise 100,000 prints, one of the greatest in the country picked over the last 70 years or so. Someday an exhibition can be done of the Permel collection to see how individual committee people selected work and what the work was that they selected and how did it affect the period in which they lived.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you make your choices?

MICHAEL MAZUR: We worked as a team, three of us, the chief of the division and the two artists. We looked at work in galleries, deciding, rather arbitrarily, on what was available. Most recently the art fairs, especially the New York Print Fair, is a more convenient way of doing it. We can see 30 or 40 dealers at once, and make selections, but that too has its arbitrary aspect. We began to be concerned with buying underrepresented artists, ethnically, communities in this country that were underrepresented or it could mean specific artists whom we felt were important enough to warrant a much larger holding in the Library of Congress. Diebenkorn, Leon Golub, a few others who I was interesting in expanding their representation. In the last two selections we have concentrated on women and minorities.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you expect in time they will be able to proceed in a more neutral fashion?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Neutrality is one thing, but the jury system works so well because we operate within the idea of trying to go with people who have, as a whole, as a gender or race, not been collected. In time, everybody will be in the swim. When you decide to tell dealers you are interested in certain work, suddenly work appears that would not have appeared before. The question comes up: is art becoming better by being more democratic? The part of me that was educated in the ‘50s would say no. But the question refreshes the bloodstream of the art world—to bring in people with different cultural backgrounds, each with their own aspect of symbolism. Certainly the last 10 years have been remarkable for the number of women artists who have emerged.

ROBERT BROWN: You are pretty convinced there was an absolute prejudice against showing them?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Absolutely. It wasn’t even a question of prejudice—it was a fact as it was with other minorities. But I’ve often felt the most talented were women. I don’t claim to be beyond the gender limitations of my sex, but when I first came into contact with women artists at Yale, I found my equals. I’ve very glad Yvonnne is at the Library. I feel very good about her choices going ahead. I love looking at the history of printmaking, and making decisions about what I think is good. Given the charge we gave ourselves politically, we made relatively few compromises with quality.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel you got a skewed sampling by going to dealers and art fairs?

MICHAEL MAZUR: You get a random sampling no matter what you do. If you announce a general advertisement to the world that everything you are going to look at should be sent to a particular place, that also would be random, picking up on those people motivated to send you something. The purpose is to collect work that we like, using our bias as a way of expressing our generation. That is the wonderful about that bequest.

ROBERT BROWN: What role would the chiefs of the print divisions play?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I only worked with one chief of divisions. When Stephen ? came in, he was supportive and efficient.

ROBERT BROWN: He had been a museum administrator?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes, he was wonderful as a facilitator, but it could have been otherwise with someone with an ax to grind. There is a show there, somewhere, to examine the choices made by Peterdi, Dine, others.

ROBERT BROWN: Why don't we pause for a bit from your involvements, very willing as they were about various committees and boards. Only to some degree have we talked about monprints. Let's explore a little more your role in their revival. Perhaps we could ponder the matter now. By the late '70s you returned to monoprints with a new purpose.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Have I referred to the whole impact of the Fogg show? That was the spark. I had just been out of art school seven years when I saw that exhibition. I think I was aware that I need a spontaneous approach to printmaking. As much as I liked the technical aspects, I wanted to find a way to move myself more quickly through my interests. I didn't begin painting, after art school, until 1971 or so. I stopped painting while I was making prints. I felt tremendous need to connect my interest in painting to printmaking. I was not satisfied with their division. Monotypes seemed the way to get the flow going between the act of painting and drawing and the act of making prints: a revelation.

ROBERT BROWN: How did the feeling come about?

MICHAEL MAZUR: The fact is that with the monotype, everything exists on the plate. There is no a very technical issue involved. You are simply making an image directly with brushes and other mark-making tools, or erasing tools, onto a plate and running it through the press. You can get elaborate, but getting too elaborate defeats the purpose. You lose spontaneity and get into stencils. To mimic the tradition is pointless. I wanted to keep it simple and learn to push ink around on a plate, just like learning to push paint. The difference is that paint, perhaps with the exception of the première coup, the first shot at a painting, dries and subsequent layering of paint hide those first moves, where the painting becomes an elaborate history of its own making and it which a great deal is subsumed in the lower layering. The more a painter paints, the more the history is erased. With a monotype, as with a drawing, which has the same kind of intimacy—very often you have not worked on that image for more than an hour. If you put it once through the press it is a pure record of activity for that period of time. Even though you are working on a plate, you can move the ink around. Sometimes when a second print is pulled, revealing the ghosts, sometimes it also reveals what happened underneath the print. A close reading of a series of monotypes can give you a good idea of how the thing was made. Monotypes made me think deeply about surfaces, and how magically it transports ideas, compared to the content of the work or its formal issues. Over the years the issues of abstraction, issues of politics, these pale compared to the issue of sensibility and surface. I don't feel this is hyper-elitist. I feel it is like language: language determines content. Two or three people can talk or write about the same subject, but their very subtle choices of language will skew and determine what they really mean. Poets and writers spend their life trying to distinguish between one word and another word, in terms of effecting an indication of their belief. Painters also deal with surfaces as the carrier of their ideas. Style is the atom, but then nucleus of the atom is surface. It's touch. A painter who wants a glossy finish is aiming for a certain response to the painting that a painter who leaves it raw and matte. Before the MOMA Picasso show there was an uproar when they wanted to varnish some of Picasso's cubist paintings, thinking they could protect them better. But the varnishing of the paintings warmed them up, made them more romantic! With Morris Louis who wanted to keep surface down, we have to ask, what was the attitude behind the stain, this attempt to marry it with the stuff of the canvas. Process can enter dramatically into the content of work. You lose the point if you this about process as a technical issue. Monotype, for me, was a way of marrying spontaneous process, so that instead of working for weeks on an edition print, I could make eight or 10 different images, moving ahead and saving time, to the point where . . .

[Tape 5; side B]

ROBERT BROWN: Is there a jump you can describe?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Right now I am engaged in a big breakthrough in my work. A lot of it happens through the angioplasty I went through recently. For the first time in my life I am making non-figurative art. Monotype took me years to bear the fruit of its freedom.

ROBERT BROWN: Extremely fluent, you feel?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I can do anything I want, in and out. I consider people who make monotypes to not be in a separate profession. The best prints are made by the best artists. Images are still in the heart and mind of the

artists; they are not linked to the craft of one medium. My greatest ambition is to be seen as an artist and not as a practitioner of monotype, drawing, or painting. That classification takes away the meaning of the work, even though I championed the medium for many years.

ROBERT BROWN: Initially, curators slot you for public convenience, and then it carries the public's mind.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Right. I am not monotypic. People have to understand that before the late 19th century there were no edition prints, saving Canelletto. Each print was a unique image, so every print was a monotype. There were always experiments in the history of printmaking. Lithographs were often one of a kind. This is just another phase of the experimental print. Subtle changes in the look of an object are keys to the ambition of the artist. Art is restless; an inability to stay with one thing so long that it goes dead. A range of people in the profession of selling art mirrors the range of people in the whole population. Thieves have their slice. Saints exist, and I've had both. A dealer like Barbara Krakow, my dealer for 15 years, has never once told me to do something. I've shown her things she does not like but I can feel she believes in the work's growth. Her business is to educate the collector but she never intervenes in the artist's process. She can like or dislike work. That's true of many of the people I've dealt with. A career is the journey of your ambition, just as the cells keep dying and changing so do esthetic attitudes. We become different people at later moments of our lives. The art-gene is constantly mutating despite core sensibilities that follow through. There is a history to that mutation and the great fun of it does not know where it's going. That may be a good point on which to end.

ROBERT BROWN: This is June 17, 1993 in the Barbara Krakow Gallery in Boston.

[break in conversation]

ROBERT BROWN: Today we are going to talk today about the paintings right here, a series called Branching.

MICHAEL MAZUR: That's why I'm still here with Barbara. She and Portia changed the art life in Boston, brought a broader focus to a provincial community. I met them around '64 and saw they showed artists beyond the Boston area. That's the way to go. It's nice to be a booster, but you must show work in a context. I don't think Boston has had a movement; this town has not maintained a group of artists that could maintain themselves as the San Francisco Bay artists did for a short period of time.

ROBERT BROWN: There is an ease and spontaneity of awareness of each other.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Except when an area presents itself, in a cumulative way, as defining an issue.

ROBERT BROWN: You have been rooted in Boston, but also grown.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Oh sure. At the risk of seeing myself historical, I think it was the Buddhist scholar Watts who said talking about oneself is like biting your own teeth. I don't know. At my core I paint the life I experience, whether it was a mental ward, my own backyard, or Walden Pond. The things I painted stay constant. Its how I painted them that change.

ROBERT BROWN: Is it characteristic of a given period, for you that that's the way it is? No putting aside, no coming back to?

MICHAEL MAZUR: There are times when I'll paint a quirky study, something I'm not prepared yet to do, and I might put it aside, thinking someday I'll understand what the painting means. These paintings came quickly, less than three months. I came into the gallery on March 28 with nothing for the show, except for a substitute, more historical show I might have done. The fact is I began working on these branching paintings. It was clear these were going to succeed and Barbara came in and said you are going to have a show. It was an explosion and that is really why I brought you here [to the gallery].

ROBERT BROWN: Although the work deals with natural forms, it differs from your earlier work with nature.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Except for the linearity of it. Other artists have said to me, "Well, it's your line, your sense of form." It called branching and it's about connections. A lot came out of a small drawing I did after undergoing angioplasty in late January. I watched the ballooning of the artery on a video monitor while I was being operated on. About a week later in the studio I thought I would paint, not what that looked like, but paint something to do with it as a record. Connecting, whether they are branches or arteries, trees or tree limbs, a weave of underwater forms or cloud forms, this kind of kind of connecting, passing through, is a metamorphosis, a moving on. It was a natural way of talking about my feelings at this time. Not all are images of the body. They may have to do with cleavages in rocks of the interior of a forest. This new work goes back to a more primitive relationship with nature. I can't explain it more than that.

ROBERT BROWN: *Ice Glen* or *Grotto*, your titles . . .

MICHAEL MAZUR: The titles came after the paintings were finished. *Ice Glen* is essentially white on black. It looks like a lightning storm or icy drippings along a rock face. It's a wintry picture and the title, *Ice Glen*, comes from a walk you can take behind the high school in Stockbridge, Mass., a mile-long gorge that is called the *Ice Glen*. After I finished painting it I wanted that word ice in there. Originally I was going to title them *Branching One, Two, Three, Four*, and so on. But always forget, in my Stoneham Zoo series, which is number 21 or number 10. If I took the risk of talking titles that clearly gelled the general image, I would always remember the picture. So it helps. Sometimes I nickname paintings to myself. This time I saw no sense in not doing it. They are overtly interested in the kind of feeling states that suggested by words like ice glen or grotto or red branching or arterial or willow. I can't imagine these paintings before I paint them.

ROBERT BROWN: Your sketchbooks seem to be on a different parallel.

MICHAEL MAZUR: They can be on their own, but they can't be an exact study. They conform to the activity of abstract painting, they move along as they themselves require. In this case they are not tethered to a previous idea. If I had been in the middle of *Ice Glen* and wanted to add colors to it or overlay the whole thing with another color entirely, I would do that, but it would no longer be *Ice Glen*. It would be another painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you say in part there is an automatic, gesture element?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Some of it is automatic. In the past few years I would find I would actually close my eyes as I was getting close to the paper, close to the image. I wanted not to control; I wanted it to come out of me without being imposed by me. This embodied my whole attitude about how to live. Automatic is a word that has many meanings but it's really related to Dada experiments. The idea was to make no attempt to control, and the first marks can seem arbitrary but very often subsequent markings all seem to have a natural purpose. A great discovery for me was when I could know when it was right or when it wasn't right. [Voices of others in gallery background] Changes going on the painting were governed by me, not accidentally.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this experience occurring with a frequency or intensity?

MICHAEL MAZUR: My big concern about abstraction is that I would have no way of controlling the quality, deciding if one was better than another. I did not know. When I allowed myself to simply respond, as I believe I was training myself to do in the beginning of the monotypes. I never make preparatory drawings for monotypes and the whole Dante series came out of one after another of the same image. My preparation was to begin with some kind of arbitrary making, marking system, figurative or not, then to begin to refine it, down, responding to each move I made. I can tell you when a painting of mine is unfinished. Eventually there comes a moment when it is finished. Even if that moment lasts over two or three days when it's being looked at, judged sometimes for weeks to see if it stays in a particular state, then moves ahead. Another painting may benefit from considerations of one painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Is your rate of production increased?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I'm productive, but never before in painting like this. These are the first paintings I have not struggled with in the way I struggled in the past when painting. For the first time I prefer making paintings to making prints. [laughs] I'm not repudiating earlier paintings.

ROBERT BROWN: Some of your strokes are controlled; others executed very quickly and allowed to drip. Avalanche has a wonderful tension between man's control and the force of nature.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Avalanche was another title that came out of the experience of the paint. There were several states, a lot more color in the original that became a white-out and the black lines got thinned and softer. Like a winter storm, it was bleaching out. There is a gradation from deep space to just the canvas plane, where things are being pushed back, rejected, incorporated. One or two lines will be very much on the surface and help create this ambiguous space, very deep and very shallow at the same time. But strokes are very natural for me, almost like drawing. If it gets too descriptive, I pull back and try to destroy some of the description.

ROBERT BROWN: To preserve the ambiguity?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Yes. From early on I was obsessed about how to tell certain stories. In the mid-'70s I took the figure out of the work and people asked why. In those pieces I didn't want the concentration on what people were doing because then everything else would become background to that understanding. People look to recognize figures. If they grasp what a figure is doing, everything else is background. So you lose the gaze of the viewer, who starts staring at where on the canvas the figure is. Figure composition becomes a way of moving the eye around the canvas. By tilting horizons, by creating fragments, the whole feel of the canvas could come into play.

ROBERT BROWN: That is something you want: to have the whole form be active, not concentrated on a detail.

MICHAEL MAZUR: No centimeter should be considered background. That means that my attention has to be on every part of the canvas. Everything I do affects everything else. Once a composition has been established in a painting there is a tendency to paint those sections up to certain levels of finish. Except, now some parts of the painting are more important that other parts. By taking out the circumstances of the painting, you make the viewer participate, make them reach, make them make the connections.

ROBERT BROWN: I see one on the wall with warm colors coming through its darker shadows.

MICHAEL MAZUR: That's the *Grotto*. I had been thinking about limiting the base color to one hue and painting it very a very limited palette. It helps me quite a bit. It allows me to concentrate on the feeling-state of a limited number of colors, and it helps me to draw the paintings, essentially. The color relationships in the paintings are very very close color relationships. That was on my mind. This time, two years ago, telling Therese Oulton, visiting from England, that I couldn't quite understand something I was envisioning involving linear material in a field of one or two colors. When I was in the midst of painting these paintings, I suddenly realized I had said that to her. I essentially predicted, so it isn't as if it comes as a miracle from nowhere. There is a way it is predicted, both in the work and in the thinking about the work.

ROBERT BROWN: Of course the previous position is not conscious, is it?

MICHAEL MAZUR: It invades one's cells and you can't go back.

ROBERT BROWN: Back to *Grotto*, it does not appear to me to have an overall base color. Highlighted areas come out of a yellow spectrum and others in grays or darks.

MICHAEL MAZUR: Partly because it was done over a gray-yellow painting. I had done a group of dark, almost nihilistic paintings about easels. This was a painting of a subject I called *Cairne*, essentially a rock pile with an easel coming out of it. It was all in grays and yellows, thickly painted. At one point I came in and got rid of the easel and threw some pastel into the sky area and I left it. It hardened up over the summer, and the winter when I was working on the Dante material. When I came back, it was a surface and I put black on the whole painting as it existed, and started to sand the yellows and grays through the blacks, once the black had dried down, to literally open it up. It got this striated, scraped, and textural. One had a sort of white lightning mark and it began to grow into a network of lines, and began to have its origins on the outside of its margins.

[Tape 6; side A]

MICHAEL MAZUR: It started to look like a loose grid, a weaving. There are these hints you notice but to my mind it has an overall tone, compared to others I've done.

ROBERT BROWN: *Red Branching* has a thin white veil at the bottom and the top.

MICHAEL MAZUR: It was painted off the stretcher and when it got stretched the edges didn't conform to the stretcher. I was left with a relatively hard white border, both at the top and bottom. Instead of filling those areas with paint, I was interested that it happened as a phenomenon. I soften it just a bit and made certain connections to the border, but basically left the mis-measured part of the painting alone. It made me want work with other paintings where I didn't want everything to go to the edges. It wasn't a strategy I plan to do again and again. It provides a break in the hotness of a painting and gives a way to move more gently into that space that quite forbidding. In a way, it is a kind of easing.

ROBERT BROWN: Otherwise, it's a very vivid painting, an object that would be hard to get to.

MICHAEL MAZUR: In this case the edge simply cried out for a different treatment. Its no secret to me that Brice Marden and the Dibenkorn in the Ocean Park series have been on the edge of my mind. When Marden began to show his woven images at Mary Boone, they clicked for me. I owe some permission to him, just as I owe permission to just about everybody I've ever been interested in. [laughs] But this was different because this was a contemporary abstract painter. Now I see that he is absolutely clear about the kind of spaces that he is interested in, which are not to move too far into the canvas. I'm interested in a much deeper space. In his case the weaving can occur inches away, much more connected to Mondrian's grids. In my case they can occur miles away, in terms of the illusion. I am holding onto the illusion in these works. Even though they are very abstract, I think they are illusory.

ROBERT BROWN: You say you are indebted to other artists?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I do because I am. Every artist whose work I see, one way or another, tells me something, and I love it when someone at a show tells me the work makes them want to go back and paint. Artists speak to each other over centuries, tickling and provoking us. I've been dragged kicking and screaming into modernism. [loud noise of gallery activity]

[break]

ROBERT BROWN: It's February 3, 1995, in Cambridge. We last talked in the Barbara Krakow Gallery in Boston on the occasion of your branching show in June, '93. Maybe we can start talking about your next show.

MICHAEL MAZUR: The new show starts next week. There was an intervening show last March in New York, so this is the third show in this body of work. The addition of new marks, stroking not so much linear but much more tonal This work could be called a translation of a late 13th century Chinese painter, Chao-Meng-fu, who did a painting in the collection of Princeton University, called the *Mind-Landscape of Chao-Meng-fu*. I had never seen this in real life, a mistake and strength. I'd seen it in reproduction and tried to use elements of the painting that interested me, calligraphy and spaces, patterns, take it apart—I don't dare use the word deconstruct—and put it back together again without respect Chinese landscape space or Western perspective. For me it became an investigation into my emotional level. Now invention, for me, feels internalized as a means of continuing, like the ideas that surround landscape. The DeCordova is doing an exhibition in a couple of years called Branching.

ROBERT BROWN: When you speak of a working process as internalized, do you mean freedom or flowing you had never experienced before?

MICHAEL MAZUR: My heart problems started me thinking that attention to pre-formulated ideas, to working out a problem before solving it to some extent, created stress. The experience in a studio can be a stressful time, not to say it is an unhappy or unwanted time. It's simply fact that some invisible stress causes problems down the line. As part of my curing, I investigated how to deal with that stress. By working in a linear, overlapping and linear building, I was able to put aside pre-formations of what I wanted to do and to live in the present of the painting, entirely. The painting could stop at any point. It had no finish that was pre-determined. Also, I no longer worked in a sketchbook. Planning, recording work, came almost to a halt, since there was nothing to draw. But for 30 years I had sketchbooks that would pre-design work. These works have tree-like forms but what I did was detach limbs from trunks and not have marking that refer to the vertical, but only in passing, and having this looping of branches. I come just to the point where the forms might relate to a particular landscape or tree, then pull away.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned Brice Mardin and Richard Diebenkorn. Is that now overlaid?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I think so by the addition of new material. Brice himself is, I've noticed, going to a more figurative line, taking his weaving and putting it into a figure format, especially in drawings. With Diebenkorn there is a transparency that is part of my work. As an artist, it's as if you step off a cliff and you don't have to fall. You have the freedom to walk back to the cliff. The trip between figuration and non-figuration is not similar to the Mondrian experience of going from nature and never returning. Our contemporary freedom is move freely among these issues, and this segues into the Dante work.

ROBERT BROWN: When did you begin that project?

MICHAEL MAZUR: In the summer of '92. That was clear figurative work. When I go once a week to do the evenings at Harvard that I do from the model, I'm doing figurative work, even though I might be doing abstract work in the studio. Now that we see de Kooning more clearly from his retrospectives, we see he never truly left the figure. If there is a model of an artist moving between abstraction and figuration, it is de Kooning. But let's get to the Dante. I started that after Ecco Press decided to do an edition of the *Inferno* with each canto translated by a different poet. I heard Seamus Heaney read his version of *Canto One.* In the winter of '92 I heard my friend Robert Pinsky read at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Robert read two cantos that night. Sat there rather overcome. Since college I'd been looking for an opportunity to illustrate the Inferno, which I had read in college. I had read it in Italian and made a set of beginning illustrations in my senior year in college. I asked Robert if he planned to do the whole Inferno and he said he was not sure but that he thought he would. I said I would do a set of illustrations on spec. He sent me his translations, faxed them to me. I read them, cut out passages, did illustrations, sometimes just from my own knowledge and look at his translations later. He would come over, we'd discuss. This went on until about a third of the illustrations were completed. Then Jonathan Galassi at Farrar, Strauss saw them and thought it would be a great idea to publish them together. All the illustrations were finished just before the angioplasty—by the way I feel great now. I did not go through the book in order. I simply picked cantos I had images for. Made a large chart so I would have a sense of deadline and what cantos to do and when to address them. I did a series of studies all the same size as the page of the book. So there was no sketchbook. I did all the studies in monotype in case one of the studies was the one I wanted to use. What often happens, if you separate study material from final work, the study material may at times be more powerful but if you've done it in a different medium you can't meld it into a final work. So by doing it all in one medium, when I might five works in a day and one of those works will lead me on the next day's work. I amassed maybe two hundred studies that were not used for the book.

ROBERT BROWN: One could almost say you had internalized the *Inferno*.

MICHAEL MAZUR: I don't think to the same extent. I can speak Italian conversationally, but one does not think in Italian or remember in Italian. As soon as the images are expressed in English, Robert's English, they get into your head. The images I developed in '68 were none of them important enough for me to keep. There are only six and they are sort of ironic. Around that time I'd gotten interested in the modern *Ulysses*, Joyce's. I had this idea of doing the travels of Dante like the travels of Bloom, in one day. The time in Dante is very compacted. I had to develop new imagery from a different standpoint. Robert's translation is absolutely without irony, with no attempt to make it topical or do anything than make it believable. And there was an attempt on my part to say, this is how it must have looked. In the kind of dialogue that artists and writers have with the past makes all art contemporary. But art exists in the moment of being seen or read. In real time it exists in the mind of the viewer. There was a time when I considered using the Auschwitz gates for the gates of hell, but then I realized it was a perversion. Auschwitz was a hell for the innocent. Dante's was a hell for the guilty.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these your most ambitious illustrations?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Absolutely. Certainly from the point of view of time taken and the numbers of people who see this book, a trade book. Most artists book are not trade books. The have short print runs and are very expensive. The disadvantage of making a very beautiful book is that very few people see it, unless the book is reprinted as a trade edition as a paperback that costs less than $20. I own a book of Lebrun's illustrations, but they do not proceed canto by canto. Rauschenberg also illustrations but never a complete set and more in the mood of the Inferno and not related to specific events. Relating each image chronologically and working my way through the *Cantos* was a great opportunity.

ROBERT BROWN: Is there a plan to do the other two books of the *Divine Comedy*?

MICHAEL MAZUR: It is an awesome idea. I don't know. I have no plan to illustrate any other books.

ROBERT BROWN: Can we speak about your role as a teacher and mentor in Provincetown?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I'm not first generation Provincetown by any means. The years people write about are from the '40s through the mid-'60s. I didn't discover Provincetown for myself until the mid-'80s. I had lived mostly in the Upper Cape, the area closest to the beginning of the Cape Cod Canal. That is where I had done the Wakeby series we talked about. By the mid-'80s, Gail and I were going down to Provincetown to see friends, an hour long trip. We were isolated in Mashpee, but we wanted more contact with people. Probably I was ready for other visual images than the lake, where I had worked for about five years.

[Tape 6; side B]

MICHAEL MAZUR: There were several people involved with the Fine Arts Work Center, which was started in '68 by a generation who had spent a lot of time in Provincetown including Stanley Kunitz, Robert Motherwell, Jack Tworkov, Myron Stout, Jim Forsberg, Richard Florsheim. These people felt that the old Days Lumberyard, which had provided for studios for artists, an unbroken lineage. We decided to spend more time down there and bought a house in '89. It the beginning it was just social. In 1990 my friend Mary Frank came down and asked if any presses were available. I didn't know of any presses. Motherwell was still alive and had his own press—by the way later he gave his press to the Work Center. I investigated and suggested to the director that maybe we could be a press down here, and maybe bring a master printer. There was conversation for a couple of years, then decided to go forward. We started what became the New Provincetown Print Project. The reason it was new was that there had been a tradition in Provincetown of white-line wood cuts known as the Provincetown Print, popularized by Blanche Lazzell and others and which were re-discovered in the late '70s. Our project links with the old. The Provincetown Prints were monoprints and for five years we invited four artists each year, many who did not know much about unique printmaking. They learned things and I learned things.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you decide upon the people you worked with?

MICHAEL MAZUR: There was no method. It was basically people, interesting to me as artists, whom I would like to work with and whom I thought would get something out of working with Bob Townsend, a master printer who was the printer for the Wakeby project and others I've done. We had to prepare for these two week visits and work quickly toward a result. George McNeil had been making prints on his own for years, using a photo reproduction machine to make prints in house. They were scrubby, he had hundreds of these lithos, but he didn't know what a monotype was. Working with each artist was a journey. George had a little box in which he estimated he worked with 81 colors. I said, was it 81, not 79, not 85? Nope, 81. To prove it he had a little box of cards in which each color was sampled and numbered. When we were in his studio in Brooklyn I noticed he had racks and racks of paint, more than I had seen in any artist's studio. When you were working with him, sure enough, you would get stuck for a color. He would close his eyes, go to his box, put his hand in, pull out a card, and that was his color. He worked by chance, sort of conducting himself while he worked as if he were a musician. He would get a rhythm in his arm as if he were listening to music even though no music was playing. He would conduct with one hand and draw with the other. He was getting his rhythm right into his body. Every

artist is unique. I spent a week with John Walker, who was not satisfied with what he did, though they were perfectly powerful things. He was looking for something new. I didn't want to get too involved with John, who had made many prints in many workshops and knows full well what he wants. I used to work with the artists one or two times during the residency, becoming the printer for them one day a week when Bob wasn't there. I didn't know if John wanted to work with me. One day John came up to me with his English/Aussie accent and said, "C'mon mate, teach me the magic you know." I showed him how I would go about doing this thing—in fact that print up there is a collaboration of a print the two of us did together. We both signed it. He went off, drank Australian red wine, then the next week he did beautiful prints. A while later I got a call, "Mike, Mike, it's John! I need your help! I want to know how we did that magic we did up in the summer in Provincetown!" I told him it was very easy. We did this, that, and the other thing. I reminded him how we went about it. That happened often with artists. Yvonne Jacquette went out in a plane, which she does, to survey the landscape over Provincetown. Two weeks later she was in a workshop in Maine and they called to find out how she had done certain things.

ROBERT BROWN: Maybe you can say what the printer brings to the artist.

MICHAEL MAZUR: It's in my nature to look for different ways of doing things, and freshening my own studio practice. There's a thing I do where I lay ink on a plate and take turps and draw with the turps directly on the place. The solvent eats through the ink and I take a roller and pick it up. It immediately creates textures and accidental effects that you can respond to. It's a way of responding. Things like this in the monotype changed the way I painted. In Yvonne's case, Bob and I worked out a method of transferring pastel, which she liked to work with, on to both wood and metal plates. She had done pastel monotypes, which are really transfer from paper to paper. When Jacqueline Humphries came for a week she was getting a little bit bored. She had a simple approach of laying in spots of colors. By using transparencies we found a way not to lose the purity of her color touch. She was getting bored with it. I noticed she had several paintings that had dried on wooden backing, pieces of plywood. The paint had dried in such a way that it had built edges. I asked her if she wanted to use her own painting as a plate, as the thing we are going to run through the press. I said it was already like a collograph—she had already built up textures. You are working on something very familiar to you. She developed a whole body of work that she never would have been able to predict before she came to the Work Center. Later I saw a show in New York that was based on the prints we had done in Provincetown. That's what I wanted from the experience, capturing a creative idea. The artists who knew more about the media—Mary Frank, Nathan Oliveira—were probably less innovative because they knew so much and fell back on their standard studio practice. When I go to a print shop I want to know what they can do for me that I haven't been able to do. Now I'm interested in silkscreen because the new edition I'm going to do is going to be flatter and more patterned. I did a banner for the Chestnut Mall, 58 feet long and about 12 feet high, and they have it up now. In the process of doing the banner, I had to become very flat in the studies, because you don't do a banner with a lot of transparencies. I never had worked that flatly before. I made some gouache studies and that led on to some paintings. When you try for a different thing or you asked to do something, whatever it is, if it's going to be valuable it should be something you add to your creative repertoire. The flatness provoked color linoleum cuts, the first time I've done that, and I'd like to see what silkscreen can do for me. As a result of working with Humphries, a year or two later, I made my own collographs. My own print for the New Provincetown Print Project that was based on working on pre-textured wood. I am going to less involved in that project now that it's being turned over to another person, a former fellow at the Work Center. I don't have the time to continue, especially since I did all the selling. Each summer we had 10 portfolios and I had this strange hat on when I went to sell them, not as an artist but as a publisher. You see things as a publisher that you don't see as an artist. I understand the demands of publishing a lot better now.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you begrudge the time you spent as an administrator?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I do not enjoy administration very much. I loved all the time I spent with the artists in making the work. After that, it gets to be drudgery. I know why I'm an artist and not a dealer.

ROBERT BROWN: From an early age, your life has lots of interacting concerns.

MICHAEL MAZUR: I don't like to sit still. I'm looking constantly for new experiences. I like changing my work. Since this health kick I've been on, I have more energy than I have certainly had in the last few years. I'm gregarious enough to want to be with people and work out problems. I work for the Work Center in others capacities—I'm on their visual committee and board of directors. This year I'm working on a Boston benefit. That ties in with the work I did for the nuclear freeze and the artists against racism and the war, a form of activism. I'm cyclical, like a turtle going out and into the world. Right now it seems everything is happening at once. Next year, I'm approaching 60. I'm teaching at Harvard as well. As they say in music, a stretto, where all the different parts of the fugue start to back up on each other. My spirit is important. If I get worried, tense, or uptight, then I have to cut back.

ROBERT BROWN: What are your duties at Harvard?

MICHAEL MAZUR: I teach part time, two days a week, a printmaking workshop and I enjoy it. I set it up so that every time I teach I can learn things. It is a different course, invented as we go along. This year, as a result of collaborations at the Work Center, I decided to teach that way with my students. In the first semester I took the position of the master printer and planned out their activity, taking whatever they brought me and moving it from point A to point C, L, or point P. They could bring anything and it had a future. They were going to learn about the thing that they brought. I judged them by whether they took it or not, not by whether they mastered a gamut of techniques. Could they use what I suggested and take it as far as they could? That's how I based my grade.

ROBERT BROWN: When you feel crowded you back away?

MICHAEL MAZUR: Well, I was somewhat taken aback by the success of the Dante book, and the traveling around on its behalf. The Dantes are coming to BU next fall and that will keep me busy.

END OF INTERVIEW

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