Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Robert Cremean, 1996 September 5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Cremean on September 5, 1996. The interview took place in Tomales, California, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Robert Cremean whose work is -- he's probably best known for his sculpture, but we'll hear about other forums as well. The interview is being conducted at Bob's studio at home in a very beautiful, rural setting in Tomales in northern California. The date is September 5, 1996. This is a first session, Tape 1, Side A, and the interviewer for the archives is Paul Karlstrom. So that's by way of introducing our tape. Now I would like to just say a few words to provide kind of a context for this interview. We've been talking already about how it might develop. You have a very interesting situation and you'll be talking about this. It's not for me to say this, but you've had a career that certainly I became familiar with, your work in the early mid-sixties in the Los Angeles area, and so that, of course, is part of your story. You were exhibiting then. At some point, you, as far as I can tell and from talking with you, made a decision, or maybe a series of decisions to, in effect, withdraw from the art world, and eventually, that got you to this beautiful place where we're sitting now, which is a terrific [inaudible]. It's a wonderful place for a retreat and, you know, you're not all that far from San Francisco, but my sense is that you made some choices that you're pretty content being here, and whatever interaction you have with the art world is on your own terms up to a point. This is what I think we'll come to in this interview, but the other interesting thing is that it seems you can only control that so much and that there have been some individuals recently who have taken it upon themselves to serve as your Boswells to come out with a, I think even a CD rom and perhaps a print publication, I'm not sure, about you, but without, I guess, your cooperation, and in terms of the final result, really creating some distortions and -- is that so?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, yeah. You know, it wasn't just unauthorized. It was totally against my wishes. I mean I told this person not to do it, that I did not want --

PAUL KARLSTROM: You should identify the publication.

ROBERT CREMEAN: All right. The publication is put out by a man named George Blair who was in charge of the catalogue resume, plus the two writers for it. One is the person who introduced it who was -- Edward Lucie [sic] Smith --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah, Edward Lucie Smith.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Edward Lucie Smith, and the writer was a man named C.L. Wysuph.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you spell that, Wysuph?

ROBERT CREMEAN: W-Y-S-U-P-H, I think. Now --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Go ahead.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well I -- the thing that became difficult about it was is that C.L. Wysuph is the appraiser for George Blair's, you know, mammoth collection that he was able to get because I was trying to develop another way for artists to be seen to develop, you know, on their own level. I mean the thing that was being developed at the, you know, the small Fresno Art Museum is an opportunity both for the community to watch an artist develop and they can see the past work, see the future work because of being able to see the present work. It was to form kind of a complex where there were not just objects brought in, an accumulation of works, but to -- from that -- how do I say this; but by having an artist there, speaking, being represented, following this course of his activity, is that then they would see other works with a much broader, much more faceted way of looking at them. They wouldn't just be seeing an object brought in with a price tag on it and already some sort of definition either through critics or through a position within the contemporary society, but they would see it as what was his development, what was his path, what was his everything, so the thing became more than just an object and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or a commodity.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Or a commodity, yeah, a commodity, or something, you know. Who knows? I mean something is brought in, it's there by some authority, you know. No matter what you see and what museum you see it in, it's there by authority. It just didn't wander in by itself through the door.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: It's there for some reason and some reasons are better than others. And this was, I guess, because of my development, I realized that there are many artists that reach a point in their lives where they cannot be controlled by the system depending upon what that system is. It doesn't really matter. If that artist at some time or other, to follow his own development, has to leave the system that is given him to function within, he must leave it. Otherwise, he's a whore or he's working for a system rather than developing his own path, so my decision to leave was not a decision at all. It was just a natural process of following the evolution of my own work. There was nothing involved here with leaving anything. I mean there was just a diver -- a spreading of these two, you know. I was able at one point to be parallel to the system, to the art industry, so to speak, until the art industry became such an industry and I became much more, I suppose, defined as an artist to myself and to, you know, what I wanted to do, and they just were not parallel courses anymore, so we diverged. I mean they left me as much as I left them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well we will all revisit that whole history and then also, I think, hopefully we'll conclude our discussion with a detailed description of what finally that all led to which is the relationship with -- the agreement with --

ROBERT CREMEAN: With Fresno.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- with Fresno, but before we then move back in time, what is it -- describe the publication that has come out, and its title, if you would, describe the form it has taken and, briefly, what is bothersome about it? Because my sense is that it's, in your view, went really far afield, way off the mark in terms of --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well it's bad. It's badly done, to begin with. The writing is terrible. The photographs are terrible. It misrepresents me terribly, and for some other agenda, it's not -- it has nothing to do with -- it's a fake. I don't know how else to say this. It's a fake. It's like somebody saw that this was a way to achieve some purpose.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What would that purpose be? Books usually are supposed to serve their subject. It's okay if the author is then -- gets some career advancement, if you will.

ROBERT CREMEAN: No problem, I had no problem with that, but if you put out a bad work --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- it's objectionable no matter who puts it out or what the work is. It's objectionable to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is there -- are there points of information that you feel are inaccurate? Are there inaccuracies? Distortions?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Inaccuracies are all the way through it. The catalogue resume is just ridiculous. I mean there are -- it's just -- it's ridiculous. There are images repeated and named other things. The person has taken the liberty to rename them, you know, some of the works themselves simply because, you know, it suited his purpose, I suppose.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is Wysuph, right?

ROBERT CREMEAN: No. This would be Blair --

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- Blair who did the catalogue resume. Wysuph is another thing altogether. He did the whole text.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, like the narrative.

ROBERT CREMEAN: The narrative.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your story; he told your story?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, his ego, his ego is there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's look into this just a little bit because I think it's very germane to the point. It represents probably one of the reasons you felt really did have to separate yourself or you found yourself separated from this system because these books, this art cri -- you know, criticism or historical treatment, is, in this case, quite problematic and -- what do you think -- what seems to be this other agenda that these -- those who produced this book, what were they really after? Obviously not an accurate -- apparently not an accurate or complete portrayal of you and your work.

ROBERT CREMEAN: I don't think it was on purpose. No, I don't think so, but they're inept. I mean how -- what does one say? These were three men. I can't speak about Lucie Smith. I do not know him, but I do know, you know -- I did have --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well he's a pen for hire. I mean I know him and he writes.

ROBERT CREMEAN: So he -- this I do not know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. He is hired to do two things. I mean he's an accomplished, experienced writer. He has quite a reputation, has written many books, and is very smart. I know him personally and I even co-authored a book with him.

ROBERT CREMEAN: [Inaudible] Fletcher.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fletcher Benton, right. His name ended up on the spine and they described my part which is an equal contribution in terms of length as essayed by Paul Karlstrom.

ROBERT CREMEAN: I see.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That actually suited me fine, but this is what he does. He is engaged -- he's a freelance.

ROBERT CREMEAN: He makes his living; he makes his living writing books about art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And did he try to be in touch with you? The author works at a distance, you know, without even engaging the subject. May I ask that?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah. The interesting thing was that there came a point in this book -- I went along with the writing at first. Everything seemed to be -- I go, “It's going to be all right.” This is going to be a book. It wasn't going to be a CD rom when it was first presented. Blair, who is the patron of the Fresno Art Museum who was the moneyed part of buying this whole body of work for the museum, came up with this -- he said, “I want to do a book.” And speaking -- it's interesting speaking of the Fletcher Benton book. What he really wanted to do was to do a book like the book you were involved with, Fletcher Benton's book, which is a very beautiful book.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very handsome.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Very handsome book. There's something about the color. It's a very well done --

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's incredibly well produced.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes, and it's finely crafted in Fletcher's work. You know, there's no question about it. It speaks well for him and by him, however that came about. George Flaherty decided that he wanted to do a book. This is “I want to do a book,” and this was fine, you know, nothing wrong with somebody wanting to do a book. I would love to have a beautiful book like Fletcher Benton's book put out about my work, no question about that. Then the thing that happened was the person he hired to write the essay was the appraiser who appraised the body of work that he had bought from me for this agreement, the arrangement with the Fresno Art Museum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's Wysuph?

ROBERT CREMEAN: This is Wysuph who was an appraiser. Now this still is all right. I mean an appraiser, I'm sure, can be a very, very good writer. Who knows? I mean I don't know that. Oh, I had two or three or four, maybe even sessions with Wysuph and it began to dawn on me that this was not the person who should be writing my book. There was nothing. I mean there was no -- he was misinterpreting photographs of the work. I realized that he was looking at photographs. He wasn't interested enough to go look at the work, to find me in the work. He was looking at photographs and bringing me misinformation, and so it was a very bad thing. It's just that he was not who should be doing it, and this dawned on me. And then at that same afternoon that that dawned on me totally and completely that I will not be working with this man no matter what, George Blair arrived with the photographs that were to be in the book. Well he had made an arrangement with the photographer in Fresno who would do the work for free for his name, I suppose, to be used, you know, in the book.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And still all right; this is still all right if the photographs are good, but the photographs are very bad. They're lousy. They're flat. They totally -- they say nothing about the work at all. You know, one would think if one had the power to show a work of art, that one would show it in the best light possible. The photographs --

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Inaudible], right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, yeah. Photographs of most sculpture are very flattering, you know. You see the work and then you say, “Oh, my God,” you know. This is -- what is this? This is nothing, you know. There's no space here. Somebody put the space in the photograph, you know. Most photographs are flattering. Well these weren't. These were just so bad that --

PAUL KARLSTROM: There was no sensitivity on the part of the photographer?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Nothing, nothing, so here I had -- I was, you know, being asked to participate in something that very -- very likely had to do with conflict of interest. Blair is the trustee of the museum? He was putting out a book that had to do, you know, with his own collection. Part of it --

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's a big collector of yours anyway. Is that right?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Not before.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No?

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, no, nothing. No, this was all -- this all had to do with the arrangement with the museum and the whole thing, that we were going to -- this body of work, this huge body of work that was going to go to the museum and this body of work spans, well, from my be -- very beginning pieces, some of them, to, you know, to the very latest, and would go on. The museum would keep acquiring pieces as they came which meant that I could -- do you want to go back to this already? I mean talk about the agreement, or should we go on to Blair and the Wysuph?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean it doesn't hurt, actually, to lay it in, at least, and --

ROBERT CREMEAN: And then just keep threading it back.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, and then, you know, at the end if we need to wrap up more, but I -- it seems to me that that needs to be understood up front along with the book project.

ROBERT CREMEAN: All right. Let me go back to it then. My concern at the beginning was conflict of interest. He -- Blair had bought the pieces very, very reasonably because I wanted this to happen at Fresno. You know, this was my idea, the whole idea of the artist and the museum and in contrast to what was going on in the gallery scene and the other business, that this could be a very direct thing which, in effect, would eliminate that whole middle ground which was very, very choicy, you know, very dicey, and very conve -- you know, it's very suspect when money comes in like this. This is a way of eliminating money. My work would be off the market because of the arrangement and the whole thing. Well so, George Blair bought with the museum and with the whole arrangement this huge body of work. Then a shift happened after it happened where he had the work appraised. Well the work was appraised for 20 times his investment, 20 times, and which is still all right because I was still getting what I wanted. I would have the opportunity to have enough to work on and the whole thing, but then he hired the appraisal -- or the appraiser to do this, so immediately, you know, my antenna went up and, you know, something else is going on here, and particularly when I found out that the -- that Wysuph was not the person who should be writing the book. Now I'm not even criticizing Wysuph here. Wysuph may be able to work with another artist and put out a very fine essay. It just simply wasn't so with me. There was no possibility of a marriage there, none. And so anyway, the same -- that thing hit on one weekend really. I told Wysuph that I would -- there would be no more interviews, that this was not what I wanted, that George Blair -- this was after I saw the photographs, that George Blair was not capable of doing a book. He did not have the qualifications. He was just unqualified. He was going to do something he couldn't do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was this?

ROBERT CREMEAN: This would have been in September of 1994.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, well, two years ago.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Just about this time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, just about this time two years ago, yeah. Wait a minute. Was it ‘94 or ‘95? This is terrible.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Seems like it's been going on for --

PAUL KARLSTROM: It must be ‘94 because I mean usually to produce --

ROBERT CREMEAN: It had to have been. It had to have been ‘94. It was ‘94 because then there was -- yes, it was 1994.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Takes a while to produce.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then the book has been out now -- you've seen it, of course.

ROBERT CREMEAN: I have seen it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it came out when?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I don't know. Supposedly, it came out originally early this year. It had to have been ‘94. I'm sorry. It's just been ... a timeless place [laughing]... time. So anyway, it was -- that was done then. I told -- I never told George Blair, interestingly enough, that I would not be doing the book. I told Wysuph who was supposed to have been doing the book that I would not be doing the book with him. The book went on without me and against my wishes from that point on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which they knew?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wysuph knew it anyway.

ROBERT CREMEAN: So did Blair, both of them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: I mean it's been -- gone on. George Blair never mentioned that there had been any problem whatsoever. He just went on with the book. And then other things had happened, but just in terms of the book, George Blair, knowing that this was the situation, I had had a meeting at the museum in front of the controlling -- people who were in charge of the museum, I called this meeting and said, “I do not want this publication.” And they said, “Let George Blair finish the rom; let him finish his CD rom. If it is no good, you, of course, will have the opportunity to say it's no good, and if you say it is no good, this book -- this will not come out.” I was assured of this, and this was in February of 1995.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is by the trustees?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes. And I was assured of that fact and I sort of relaxed and sort of assumed that that would happen. Well, shortly after that meeting, I got -- received a phone call from George Blair saying that he wanted to bring Lucie -- would [sic] Lucie Smith by to meet me for -- so he could do this -- the introduction for this book. Well I said no, you know. “I cannot participate in this book,” you know. This -- what I had said -- what they said they were going to do by letting George Blair go ahead and do his book, I never agreed to with George that I would go -- that I would re-cooperate myself with -- re-affiliate myself with this book. So he called and said he wanted to bring him by and I said no, so Lucie Smith -- there was never a meeting with Lucie Smith. And I -- I don't know, you know. I can't imagine how that affected him. It probably -- do you know his ego? Would he have been affected negatively by this?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I would think --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Or rejection?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I would think he would find that -- I suppose he would wonder why, and part of it would be then what he was told by Blair, but my own view is that, again, there's a nice fee involved and Teddy would -- whatever pride might have been hurt on his part would have managed to deal with that and proceed to write

something which he very often does, like in a generic way, and sort of frankly -- I mean I don't want to be unkind on this at all, but, you know, he has -- he can write about sculpture in America. He can write about almost anything, and I think very often he can -- and just find ways to bring into a set piece the individual.

ROBERT CREMEAN: He has a setup kind of a thing. Well I don't know if he sets up other people's essays or his introductions like that, but his first -- the first sentence of that introduction when I finally saw it was, “Robert Cremean will probably not appreciate me for what I'm about to write.” And then he wrote -- he went on to write something that I certainly did not appreciate.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well what --

ROBERT CREMEAN: It was vindictive and angry.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well he -- tell me about this because I haven't read it --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- and I suppose I should, although I'm inclined not to, but this seems to be getting, then, right to the core, because something else then is going on. Why would Teddy -- Edward Lucie Smith take on a project that -- where he, for one reason or another, could not be positive about --

ROBERT CREMEAN: I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- about his subject?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I don't know, but the attack seemed to be that I had no business trying to control my own work. That was sort of the essence of this thing, that -- and besides that, that I thought of it, what was my work was, was definitely not what the work was about. And he went on to -- he didn't elaborate on that. He just more or less said that that's the way it was, that whatever I thought it was, that's not what it was, but he did not elaborate on this. I think this is -- the problem that has happened here is that a bunch of fools, I'm sorry, because it's a very foolish thing that they have done here, decided that they could do something that they were not prepared to do. I mean -- and they have put out a product that is very foolish, very badly done, and I won't even go into the distortion. I don't know, you know --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- the distortion of me or my work. I mean the distortion is in the hands -- is in the craft of the thing. It's so badly crafted that it's, you know, just doesn't stand. There's no way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, when we -- as we proceed with the interview, there'll be an opportunity, and it will happen naturally, to provide an alternative view of you and your work --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- and that will then be part of the record on this tape, but before we do that, I can't help but ask if you can briefly describe Lucie Smith's take, interpretation of your work and what would be your -- you said he misunderstood, he missed the point of the work. It's not what the interview was about. Can you, you know, just briefly elaborate on that? Is that possible? Is there any, you know, salient point where you would take issue?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well the salient point was -- first of all, he said that, that's the first thing. Then he did go on -- he was not assailing the work. He was assailing my position --

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- my attitude, by -- because I had -- was trying to control my work, I was not giving the work the opportunity to flow in an expected fashion. Now this -- and this, he's absolutely right, you know. I -- the work is my work. My life will soon be over. I mean these people that he wanted to have control over it early on were not given control of it. That's absolutely true. He's absolutely right in that. I have kept control and will keep control of my work as long as possible. It's mine. When I die, anybody can have at it. As long as I'm alive and my work is going on, I, of course, am going to mind it. It's the way it's put and where it's put. I am very angry about the way it's been treated in this CD rom that, you know -- two amateurs, probably drunks -- no, most certainly drunks I will say, have got hold of something that they had no business getting hold of and have worked it to their own means, and it is a very, very bad work, and it's an insult to me; it's an insult to my work, and it's an insult to what I feel art is, that they are deciding that the marketplace is the same thing as art, that the art market is art, that if you succeed in the art market, then, therefore, you are a success as an artist which is simply not the case. I mean that's not the way it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And I found this out pretty early on. They do not -- it is not the same thing, so here are two people who are involved in the other part, you know. Somebody would like very much to buy a work and just by somebody appraising it and realize that they have -- and it's worth twice the -- 20 times what they paid for it. That's very nice, but I feel -- you're asking what I think the justification for this take is? I think they have put out a product that they thing works to do -- to support the appraisal. That's what I think they have done, rather than to, you know, to illustrate the work or to empathize with the artist or to do something that progresses an idea about art. They have absolutely tried to constrict this to an attitude that is in the art market that has nothing to do with me or my work or whatever. So what they have done is -- you know, the thing I've -- that I object to, even when you said it, that there was a decision to leave, there was never a decision to leave, never. Am I making this clear at all? I mean everybody --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, yeah, and it will become more clear as we talk --

ROBERT CREMEAN: All right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- ‘cause we will trace the actual process --

ROBERT CREMEAN: All right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- and --

ROBERT CREMEAN: This will be good for me, too --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- because sometimes I want to, you know. I see something -- I hear this, hear that this is being
said --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- and I realize that they -- in order for Blair to be doing this at all, he has to have an excuse and the excuse is, I would not do it for myself, therefore, out of the goodness of his heart, having nothing to do with the appraisal, of course, he will do it for me, which means to throw me right back to the sharks is what he's trying to do, after all this time. It doesn't -- you know, this is --

PAUL KARLSTROM: What it sounds to me as if both Blair, the patron, the funding source for this arrangement, and the trustees of the institution have, in effect, reneged on the key element of the agreement --

ROBERT CREMEAN: I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- because --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Which was philosophical.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, and it seems to me that there's an enormous lack of understanding. Well, I shouldn't editorialize here.

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, go ahead, ‘cause --

ROBERT CREMEAN: This seems to then get right down to it, and it's like they say, “Yes, of course, this is a wonderful -- we're with you on this; let's participate together,” but basically, they don't like this. They can't perhaps conceive of this sort of idealistic experiment even though they were willing to cooperate, participate, and so the book, the publication, the CD rom are in effect, their way of -- you don't -- I guess what it comes down to is they don't see --

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]
[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing this interview with Bob Cremean, Robert Cremean. This is Tape 1, Side B, and I was cut off on the other side just before finishing a point. Let me see if I can resurrect it to just get back into our topic. But it does seem to me just on what you have said about this book project and the CD rom, which is obviously a great disappointment to you in many ways, and then beyond that, this agreement with the Fresno Art Museum which was the, as they would say, reification, when it materialized for you is a philosophical position, and then that is you and your work, that, in a sense, it seems as if they simply were not willing to -- are

not willing to respect your position on this whole -- on the issue, and that, in fact, it sounds as if, to me -- this is where I got cut off, as if they had decided they knew better what was good for you and your work. It wasn't that they didn't admire you as an artist, but that you were off track, that you weren't understanding what needed to be done, and so even though they had agreed with you to the terms of this experiment, they said, “But that's really not the way to do it.” Does that seem like a fair appraisal?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well it's -- yeah. It's a very fair appraisal. It also goes into the crux of the whole, you know, philosophical stance that I had having to do with small museums. Well, the problem -- I mean I'm -- the experiment is going now to -- is pointing out the flaw, really, is that there is not enough sophistication -- the idea is very sophisticated, but the people to carry it out, there is no sophistication. It is a provincial museum and they are behaving as provincial people which is very unfortunate, meaning that they gave the power to George Blair who seems to give the illusion or the appearance that he is knowledgeable, and in that situation, he is knowledgeable. But in terms of a broader thing, he's not knowledgeable at all, you know. Anybody who would think that the people that he chose to do this would put out what he wanted to have happen and to put it on an -- and advertise it and have part of it on the Internet, for instance, that's worldwide.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what is it, out on the worldwide web?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah. It's out on the worldwide web, so what he has taken, he has taken an amateur production and put it on the worldwide web because that technology exists. Now this is -- again, the idea is not bad, but the people are wrong. It's the people who are wrong. The technology is -- I would never question the technology. If I thought that these wonderful photographs were going out and anybody in the world could tap in and see this work in that form, that's something else again, but they're not. They're very bad photographs, so what is going out is a bad work for everybody to see, you know. If I did a bad work, it would never leave my studio. They have done up a totally bad work and have just shown it to everybody and I suppose because of where their expertise lies, they probably think it's good. This is the sad part and this is the flaw in the arrangement is that there isn't the knowledge; there isn't the desire; there isn't the expertise; there isn't the wonder, you know. They have -- they decided that they were going to make a product because in terms of the technology, a product could be made.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: All they had to do was make the product, feed it into the technology, and the same thing would happen for them that would happen for anybody else who uses the technology. The only problem is there's nothing there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well --

ROBERT CREMEAN: I mean it's a mess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. What you've described, of course, is one of the major critiques of the Internet itself --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- and this notion that in the world of a digital world is that the medium is the message. The problem is there's very little substance or content at all and this is sort of a cultural critique. You still have to have something of quality. You have to have it presented.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Absolutely. It's [inaudible] what they said at the very beginning of all this technologed garbage-in, garbage-out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And it is; it's garbage-in and they are spreading it all over.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It doesn't get corrected by sticking it out on the --

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, or by -- and the thing that is happening, of course, is that because they want it to be right and they can't see why it isn't right, that they will only listen to those people who tell them it is right, so that rather -- here, the garbage is going out all over the world if anybody wants to tap into it and they're keeping their own personal criticism of their product isolated to Fresno which means that somebody who would be in awe of the technology would automatically think that the product is a good product simply because it exists --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- which is a shame. I mean it's just -- and that, you know -- I am learning. I am, you know -- if this experiment were done somewhere else, it would be a different kind of contract written with the people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: There would be a whole different thing. I would not have given up as much of the control or the autonomy I had over this as I did. I gave it all up --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- you know, but they -- there was something there. I jumped at it too fast, and yet I would do it again, you know. Strangely enough, I would do it again even if I knew that it was not going to be perfect. The idea is good. The idea is needed, and there is something going on out there that I diverged from to do the work I'm doing now. It is not right. There is something very rotten going on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, while we're at this point, and I was going to try to kick it back now to really lay in a kind of chronology of you and your work, sort of a biographical background, you know, the human part of it, the story, but I think there's no point in avoiding what is central to all of this. And it seems to me this is a philosophy that you developed over time. We will turn to that and see how that developed, but, you know, here we are. You said the idea was good. You are disappointed in the way, in fact, it's worked out because --

ROBERT CREMEAN: It's working out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Don't put it in the past tense.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, okay, how it is working out.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you maintain that despite disappointments in how the form it has taken or is taking, nonetheless, the idea is good and it comes from a certain philosophy that you have. And why don't you just state that. Why don't we just get that down right now before going back to the earlier -- the idea is good is what you said.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes, the idea is good. The idea that one could form a direct contact with an audience is what is good about this, that it is not filtered, that it is not prescribed or proscribed. In some way, it lies outside of the community. It's like a community, say Fresno or any small community that has a museum, has a desire, wants something more than just the, you know, the day-to-day living, that they want this extra thing called art, you know, whether it's music or whatever, but there is some kind -- they want an adornment perhaps even, something that is -- that gives them a remove from their own, you know, day-by-day thing, some place to go and see something else. They open the door, you know. Any time a community puts -- establishes a museum or a cultural center or something, it opens the door that is bigger than themselves to the outside in someway. Well this is immediately open for anything to come in. The way small museums are being used pretty much now are -- a definition has been established for what a museum must be, and so when that door is open, usually there is somebody that comes in and says what they are to put on the walls for it to fit the definition that they want established. I mean they want a musuem. Well most people who do this don't know what a museum is, so they take on a definition. Now if it's a contemporary art museum, they take on the contemporary idea of the culture and the muse -- and the culture dictates what is to go in to that musuem if they want to call it a museum, okay. So that -- and this is a very, very -- you know, you used the word “reify” earlier which is a wonderful word, but the reaffication of a culture at this point is really -- is almost static. I mean if a mu -- whatever musuem, whatever level it's on, if it wants to call itself a museum and function within its form, then it must adhere to this concept; therefore, there are certain people that should be on the walls so that it becomes a collection of names. It becomes a collection of defining names for the processes to go on in the museum, whether they're children's exhibitions or whatever. There is a basis that gives these validation. So what happens is is that most of the smaller museums do not have the funds to get first-rate work, so they get second-rate work, but they still have a collection of names which means they fulfill the definition so that people can go -- and this is also -- which is fascinating. It's also so comfortable. This is a comforting thing that --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Makes it easy.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well, yes, and not just for the community, but for people coming in and out of communities, people who, you know, we'll say business people or whatever who are moving from place to place, can go into a museum and say, “Ah, yes, I saw one of his somewhere else, somewhere else, somewhere else,” so that it's being identified. They are put at ease. They are put -- it's very, very good for business. There are no challenges given. Everything is recognizable. There is a flattening sort of photographic quality to the culture the way it stands now. So you're right about Fresno, but what I was asking, or the philosophical thing that was getting proposed to them, was to make people uncomfortable, that they would come in and they would see something

that they had not seen everywhere else, that if they went to that museum, there would be a challenge given. They would have to see -- they would have to start asking questions rather than just sitting back and getting the answer that this place is fulfilling its function as a museum. And I think they were frightened. I think that they shied away and it did -- it frightened them. You know, for one thing, it's not very -- it doesn't fulfill a capitalistic function at all. It fulfills a very -- a function that has to do with art rather than some kind of a social thing. It really does, because if you go in and you see a body of work and you know that a community has decided that they are staking their identity on this one artist, means that this community is giving itself an identity that sets it apart from other places. Now a community that would know what this means would capitalize on that, using that word, and say, “Come here, we have something that no one else has. You can see this nowhere else,” you know. “We define ourselves; we know what art is because we are creating what art is. We are not accepting somebody else's definition of us.” And this, I suppose, this is either a great community or a very what, for somebody who is separating itself from something, but it doesn't have to be a separation. It can just take on a leading role rather than a following secondary role. And there is something kooky about Fresno, you know. It's taken a lot of abuse and, you know, being the armpit of the world and everything, and that fascinated me, too, you know, that there was something strong there, something very real, and something that just said, “Well, screw you,” you know. “We're Fresno. We exist here and we're a very powerful community.” And when I first went there, I found it to be very powerful and the people very real, and that attracted me a great deal and I wanted my work there. And something that's happened because of this other, it was like my God, you know, a strong -- you know, the giant got scared and became very, very small, and it's too bad. It's unfortunate.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you see any possibility to retrieve within this arrangement the idea, in other words, the philosophical point that you are trying to make?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well the thing goes on. I mean I am going on as if it is functioning. I'm doing exactly -- I have never faltered in what I feel that the arrangement is. No matter what Blair has done or the museum has backed away from, I'm going right on. As far as I'm concerned, my work will go on being shown there the way it has been shown there. All works, they will be given the opportunity to participate in them, whether it's by the director writing a forward in a book, whether it's by setting up with me something like the setup with Brighton Press when the book was done so that from the profits of my book, that the musuem would receive the books of the press, the archival editions of other artists of the press, which means that the artist is functioning not just in his work being there, but he's being -- but he's functioning in terms of the outside as well, so that whatever I would -- whatever would go out from me would come back to them in the works of other artists which was set up at Brighton Press. It was a beautiful arrangement. I mean they have a wonderful [inaudible] because of this book. They have a wonderful work with Snodgrass, the poet, and McGraw, the illustrator, you know, the artist in it, and they will have all of the Brighton Press archives because of this one arrangement, plus my book. Now this is great. This is something that they would not ever have had the funds to do, the inclination to go after, or the knowledge of. I mean books, fine art books, artist books, this is a whole realm that Fresno itself could build up and become the center of something there in the valley or in northern California that no other museum could touch if they, you know, said, “Yes, we have the courage; we have the desire; we have the passion to do this.” And there is only one thing standing in the way of this going on, and that's the museum's fear, their insecurity, and George Blair being the patron who needs -- I have never met anybody as hungry as this person, never. He will eat anything, anything. I mean anything that he can get hold of just disappears into this great maw.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wait a minute. Are you being literal or figurative here?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Figurative, figurative.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Figurative.

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, no. I've met gallery dealers who would fit the literal that would eat like -- that's right. I mean not just people and artists and art food ...

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is it your view then that there's a lack of spirit, of will, and that finally they, or at least he, doesn't have the conviction that's needed to really go through with this on the terms that have been agreed upon and that, in fact, he then needs to turn once again to the world -- publishing, to the world of our criticism, of biography, to, in effect, beyond that, the market and appraisals to justify or to validate you and your work and this decision they made?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Obviously. That's exactly what's happening. He is taking my work now, this big body of work, and hopefully the work to come, but they seem not to be that interested in that right now, to take that back to the marketplace, to validate it in some kind of a monetary thing that really this whole thing was against, I mean to begin with, so what they have done is that they have turned it back on itself. And what's happening now is like the sting of the scorpion. They're defeating -- they're going to defeat themselves just by stinging themselves. What they could have done was something very, very other [sic], just the opposite. But, you know, I've come to realize, too, Paul, is that what has happened is that I was asking them, and probably everybody

there, not just George Blair, to negate their own lives. I mean what do --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Do you see? I mean if a whole life or a whole attitude or a whole ‘intelliquy’[ph.sp.] of a society is to validate everything in monetary terms and you say no, you don't have to do that; you can do it this way. This is not the way you have to do it; we can do it this other way, which means you can have it. It has nothing to do with money. It has to do with passion, pride, and creativity. It doesn't have to do with validating it by going through a certain 12 steps, for instance, to get a famous artist out of it and to have it worth more than what you paid for; to profit, okay. The profit comes. There is no profit. The thing is a -- just a thing that you have. It's like a -- you pick up a leaf or a shell or a -- it's a natural sequence that a community or a society can have, a natural relationship that it can have with its artist if they weren't afraid of us. And at the same time, I know they have a right to be afraid of us because we're always threatening them. That's what we're supposed to do, but if this could be encompassed in some kind of a long relationship with us instead of a threat, you know, this terrible threat, so that I think what is happening with Blair at this time, I think he's scared shitless, so to speak, but he sees what has happened, that there isn't, you know, that this whole thing that could happen in Flo -- in -- I keep wanting to say Florence. Isn't that wonderful?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well, we almost see it that way, you know. It's funny, but -- that something could come out of this that is so beautiful for everybody, and to see it being denied by fear or even a fear that this would be a negation of their whole life. This man is 70 years old now, for him to embrace something like this in generosity and gratitude, that he could even have found it. And rather than due do that and say, “Gee,” you know, “I can see what this could mean, but what it means is is that it's going to negate everything I stand for.” That takes a lot of courage, doesn't it?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: I mean -- but some people are big enough, and, yeah, I'll tell you something. When I first met George Blair, I thought he was big enough. He gave me the feeling that he was big enough to do this and he is the smallest person with the biggest mouth and the biggest appetite I have ever met, and he is -- he will destroy. There's no question about it, if it's permitted, and the musuem isn't going to stop him because they, too, are threatened.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well besides, he is the patron, the funding source --

ROBERT CREMEAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- and the money will always --

ROBERT CREMEAN: And he's the energy there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And the money will always speak. I mean --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You see, in a sense, it seems almost as if -- disappointing and as unfortunate as this seems to be, at least at this moment, that, in fact, it is telling a story.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It is making a point finally by not being entirely successful.

ROBERT CREMEAN: This is for you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's flawed.

ROBERT CREMEAN: This is for you. No, really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: I mean you are the one who will benefit from failure. Do you know what I'm saying?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah. I --

ROBERT CREMEAN: By hearing the story, I mean if you want the story. By hearing the story, it is -- this is the

way -- and for me, too, because this is the way I will transfer my dream. My failure is being acted out, but my dream will not be filled, you know. For one thing, it's in my work. I mean this thing that I want or what I see is in my work and will always be in my work because it's a dream worth pursuing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well let's leave this important business for a while, okay, and we will certainly come back to it and maybe touch on it as we go through, but I now feel not only an obligation to this world history project here, but also a deep interest to understand a little bit how Robert Cremean evolved as an artist and how your ideas that finally led to you to this point, to this juncture, and the best way to do this is to begin to lay in kind of a biography, your own background, and where were you born and what about your family? Where do you come from?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Okay. I was born in Toledo, Ohio in 1932. I have two sisters, an older sister and a younger sister, so I was the sandwich; I was the meat of the sandwich, let me put it that way. Anyway, I did the -- all the usual things were done. I was popular in high school. I was the president of my senior class. I went on to college. I guess what I want to say is that I'm a nice person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A normal person.

ROBERT CREMEAN: A normal person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this an average or a middle-class family?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Very -- yeah. I would say -- and not -- certainly not upper middle class. We lived in a very standard -- just above blue collar, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did your father do?

ROBERT CREMEAN: My father, well, he worked for his father for a certain amount of years until he diverged. I mean he found that there was no possibility of working underneath my grandfather, so to speak.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the business?

ROBERT CREMEAN: The business was -- the first business was called Wine Railway Supply Company, and my grandfather was an inventor of sorts, plus being, you know, in the hierarchy of that company, and my father was hired to work for my grandfather and was kept as my grandfather's worker, you know. But then my father decided this was not what he wanted, so he went back to school in 1934, maybe two years after I was born, and went back and learned to do instrument design, tool design, the whole thing, and some very, very beautiful drawings came out of that, mechanical drawings and things, which I incorporated, by the way, a piece that I did later, a biographical piece. Anyway -- autobiographical piece. And he became -- eventually, he went from a foreman to a -- until he became a vice president in a company called [Bunning?] Brass and Bronze which made ball bearings. They became bigger during the war and all that. And he was dealing -- at that time, I remember in high school, he was the man who was doing the dealing for the company with the unions, and a very violent time, I remember, and I remember that his anger -- I kept siding -- and I don't even know why, but I kept siding with the union and I don't know why because there was absolutely no reason for me to do that at that time. I was a very comfortably set fellow.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now your father was negotiating for management?

ROBERT CREMEAN: For management. He was -- yeah. He was the manager. He would come back with these terrible tales of demonizing the, you know, demonizing these men who were functioning, trying to get, you know, higher wages for the union.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he was sympathetic to the situation of the workers?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes -- no, no, no, no, no, no, no, I'm sorry. He was not sympathetic to the workers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, he was -- excuse me. He was demonizing, yes, okay.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes, yes, he was demonizing the whole movement. He hated the union. Hated this, that, and the other, and, you know, there was violence. They were stoning cars and the whole thing, but my father was a very, very nice man and they liked him. His car was never stoned, and his car, of course, was some kind that no decent union man or anybody would stone which was an old Chrysler Airflow. Remember the Chrysler Airflow?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Who would throw a rock at a Chrysler Airflow? Anyway, that was all well and good and it was -- it was an interesting time so that I had at least a flavor of those times, but most of it was missed. I mean we

were very, very cushioned. The family itself was very hermetic. Very little came in. Time Magazine, Life Magazine, were dirty. They showed photographs that young people shouldn't see.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, yes. This was -- we were kept very, very --

PAUL KARLSTROM: I thought that was National Geographic.

ROBERT CREMEAN: No. Oh, well that would have, you know -- that was just totally --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Porno.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- oh no, no, no, no, you know, tits and asses, none of that, and very Presbyterian. It was a very, very --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Any interest in art?

ROBERT CREMEAN: No. You know, it's interesting -- not at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was not part of your --

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, no, no, no. It was Presbyterian.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Totally Presbyterian. Anything having to do with non-essential living, I don't know. Unless it was a personal attainment in some way, like you became better than you were or you made more money than you ever had, but, you know, I must say, I give them credit for that. Money was hardly ever mentioned in the family, hardly ever. Now whether this was good or whether this was bad, it was just simply not an item. It was not on the agenda. Money seemed not to have to do with anything. I mean I never felt pressured, but I had to pay for everything, too. I mean if I wanted --

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this was something of a Calvinist, almost puritanical.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, very, very, and I remember that if I wanted anything other than they felt they -- that I should have that would carry me into an area that they would not supply, you know, the basic food, clothing, the whole thing, was that they would get it for me, but I would pay them back, I mean so that I was constantly buying. Like if I wanted a bike then, I would have to pay for the bike, or if I wanted skates --

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you get that money?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Mowing lawns; shoveling snow. I worked for it. I worked for it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you ever have a paper route?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I never had a paper route. I was -- most of the [inaudible] you're much more responsible. They had me spotted early on, you know. No, you know, anything that was regimented in that way --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- they -- they would -- they didn't go for at all. They would -- I was discouraged from that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

ROBERT CREMEAN: They were wise; they were smart. I would not have done well at it. I did, though, you know, thinking -- that's very interesting. I did have one of those little paper routes, one of those little weekly --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Advertisers, yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- those give-out things, yeah, yeah. I did have that for a while. I did, yes, I did. How did I -- yeah, I did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did you -- you know, you said you went on, of course, to high school in Toledo. At what point did you encounter art or something called art, whatever form it may have taken? Was this in high school?

ROBERT CREMEAN: In high school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you -- were you able to take classes?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you develop an interest at that point or when?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I developed --

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]
[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Continuing an interview with Robert Cremean in Tomales, California. The date is September 5, 1996. Interviewer Paul Karlstrom. This is Tape 2, Side A. Let's see, we -- before our very nice lunch, we had begun to talk about your, you know, your background, early years in Toledo, your family situation, and I think we had gotten you to high school, and your first -- I don't know if it was your first encounter with art or the idea that making art is something that you could productively do, but at least you were taking some art courses. And maybe you could flesh that out a bit because certainly at some point, you decided that you could make a career; this is how you could conduct your life. Do you remember how that came about?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I remember certainly for the four years I was in high school, there was just a -- that one of the -- that was the basis -- certainly my interest in anything was art, but then, you know, there were a lot of social activities and messing around, and then when it came time to graduate, to go to college, I, of course, said that's what I wanted to do because that was the only interest I really had, and my parents gave me a year. They more or less said that I could go for a year, that they would --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Go to college?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, to college, so I went to a university in New York state, one of the state's schools called Alfred University.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: You know that?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, a very, very, you know, a very, very well thought of -- very, very good for ceramics.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, exactly.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well that's what happened was I wanted to be a sculptor and they settled on ceramics. You know, if I could do that, then they thought I could, you know, earn a living. Of course, their biggest fear, as any parents are that, you know, they're going to be stuck with the -- this kid for the rest of their lives, but I sort of knew that wasn't the way it was going to be. So I took the option and I went to Alfred University. I was there for two years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So they sprung for two years?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well the first year I did all right. I did very -- well, I did very well, and then they went for another year, and because they, you know, they had gone to the school and had talked to the people and everything and -- anyway, I did go for another year. It wasn't that I flunked out or --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: So I was there for two years. And then after my second year, that summer, that's when I made my move and I said well I'd like to go to Cranbrook [ph. sp.], Cranbrook Academy, for the summer, you know, just go up for a summer session, and they felt that was all right because I'd just be going for a summer session. So I went there and loved it. Do you know Cranbrook? Have you ever been there and know the campus?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I don't know it.

ROBERT CREMEAN: No? Well it's just -- you know, it's heaven. It really is. It's just like, you know, you're in heaven. It's just beautiful. It's a beautiful, quiet place to work. And so I was there for the summer, and then I was the -- the sculptor instructor was not there, but he came back before I left and he -- they fixed it so that I could get a working fellowship by being an assistant of the -- in the library, so once -- then this was relayed to my parents and they said, “Well,” you know, “you'd be working; you'd be paying half of your tuition,” this, that, and

the other, so they went with that, too. So I was on my way. I mean that was the end of it. The ceramic thing was behind a -- I'm sure that they were still very, very worried that I would, you know, bum on making a living. In fact, I know they were, but that's what I did anyway, and then that year went very, very well. And it was just really wonderful to just have studio time ‘cause that's what it was. I mean just studio time just like being a real sculptor. Anyway, well I was there for two years. I got a bachelor's degree, and then from the bachelor's degree, right after that, then I had got -- I got a Fullbright scholarship to Italy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Great.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, so right out of there -- so still, there they weren't having to worry. You know, there was always a year that they -- somebody else was taking care of me in some way or another. So I spent that year in Italy. Then I was given a full scholarship back to Cranbrook from that --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh really?

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- Fullbright, yeah. So I went back to Cranbrook on a full scholarship, so that meant they didn't -- they weren't paying any money for that either.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that was for an MFA or something?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, for an MFA. So I took -- I was there for that year, took an MFA, and then the head of the Art Department from UCLA came out and I was hired to go directly to California after that summer, you know, the summer to teach at UCLA, yeah, to take over the Sculpture Department.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that -- now was that before Oliver Andrews was --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, yeah. Oliver came after, yeah. I was there for a year and then -- well, actually, I recommended Oliver.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, for -- so -- and I don't even know how long Oliver was there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well he was there a long time --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Was he?

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- he -- I can't remember when he left, but -- I hope I don't get this story wrong. It seems to me he died, I think, in a skin -- scuba diving.

ROBERT CREMEAN: He drowned, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: He drowned somewhere, Catalina or something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And we have -- his papers are in the archives.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Really?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: That's interesting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So when was that -- just putting it into time then?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Getting to California?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. When were you on the Fullbright?

ROBERT CREMEAN: ‘54 and ‘55, and then back to Cranbrook for ‘55 and ‘56, and then to UCLA for ‘56 and ‘57. And that was a very, very rough year for me, teaching at UCLA. I was --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why was that?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I was 23 years old. I was teaching graduate students who were older than I who actually had much more training than I. I'd only had two years of actual university training or what would you call it, academic training of any sort, and the two years at Cranbrook were just sort of I was on my own, I mean just had my own,

you know, studio there and my own cubicle and did my own work so that there was, you know -- and to go then and teach what I knew. I knew nothing really, I mean except how to make my own work, how to draw my own drawings and how to sculpt my own sculpture. That was what I knew, and to try and transfer that, it was very hard for me because I don't relate that well to people where I am that giving. I don't know how else to say that, so I was having automobile accidents and, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was real stressful?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Bad, yeah. It was a very bad thing, and I resented them, you know, because I felt that I should be doing this work rather than, you know, that I should have the time to do this work, and so I was giving not just my time, but all this creative stuff to -- and, you know, and a good student will take as much as they can get.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well sure.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And they feed. And so I got through that year, barely, and left, and then I was offered a job at -- again the La Jolla Art Center which, at that time, I think Pat Malone or some Pat. I think his name was Pat Malone. Don Brewer was there. So anyway, I was -- then I was there for a year. and while I was at UCLA, I became part of the Paul Kantor Gallery --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- at that time. And for some reason, all of the work started to go fairly well so that when I left La Jolla, I was still with Paul Kantor and just decided this is it, you know, no more teaching. This is just not what I'm supposed to be doing. I mean I didn't feel well just
-- even a little bit of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even down in -- when you were working in La Jolla?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah. Even there, it just was something that I just knew that that's not how I was supposed to be spending that time. It's like reading the wrong books. You know how that feels? Or listening to the wrong music or talking to the wrong people. There was something off about it. It just didn't -- it didn't feel right. And I realized there because, you know, the salary was much less and the whole thing, that I needed very, very little to live on, so I decided that this was the time, you know. No more teaching and I wasn't going to get any other job, that I was just going to do what I was supposed to do and that was sculpture. So I moved back to San Francisco or moved up to San Francisco. I left the whole southern California scene altogether, except for the work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that?

ROBERT CREMEAN: That would have been in ‘58, 1958. So I came north and I had a friend that was up here named John Thomas. I don't know if you know John Thomas. He's a very good -- he and Arthur Holman. You know Arthur Holman's work?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. [I think] I've heard of him, yeah. I don't know the work.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Anyway, they were up here and I had known John from -- I met him on -- actually in Rome when I was down there and liked him a lot, and I also liked San Francisco a lot. There was something very beautiful --

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you had been before to San Francisco?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Just to visit because I'd come up to visit John Thomas and I just -- I loved the weather; I loved the fog; I loved everything about it, and I liked it a lot better than southern California. So I came north to San Francisco and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: In ‘58?

ROBERT CREMEAN: In ‘58, and then --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did you set yourself up?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I set myself up in Woodacre.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

ROBERT CREMEAN: I had, you know, very little money, but I had enough money to put like a down payment on property, so what I did was, I got the paper for Marin County ‘cause I like Marin County, and looked up -- I just went through and looked at the cost of houses and found something that I could afford and it was in Woodacre, and Woodacre was sort of a “Dog Patch” of Marin County.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of funky.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, very funky. I mean it was “Dog Patch”, and so I bought this little half-acre of land in Woodacre, built a house -- not built a house; the house was there, little summer place and made it livable for the winter, and then built a studio there and I lived there until 1963, so I was there from say ‘58, end of 1958, ‘til, oh, probably the end of 1963, I had this place, this studio where I worked.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Still showing with --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Paul Kantor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- Paul Kantor.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Up un[til] –yes. I left Kantor in 1960 and went to the Esther Robles' Gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, Esther.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And, you know, both galleries were interesting. Esther probably would have been considered a second-peer gallery at that time, I would imagine. There was Paul Kantor and Frank Pearls and they were right next door and -- who else?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was Felix [Landau] operating?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Felix? Yeah, Felix was there at that time, and, of course, right across the street from Esther, and they were very, very competitive at that time. Anyway, something -- I didn't -- I just -- you know, things started not feeling right with Paul, Paul Kantor, and then the Esther Robles's gallery was really, at that time, was an absolutely beautiful gallery, art, you know, several different rooms and I just started seeing my work there every time I would go over to La Cienega from Beverly Hills, and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: And besides, that was a time when -- I think that was about the time that La Cienega was emerging as --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, Felix was there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- a gallery.

ROBERT CREMEAN: He was right across the street and he was bringing in a lot of European sculpture at that time. He was showing more at that time and a lot of the Italian --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well in the Ferus Gallery.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Ferus was later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that a little bit later?

ROBERT CREMEAN: A little bit later than that, or if it was open, it was not --

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Inaudible]?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well ‘60, 1960.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's about right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Would have been just -- I think opening with Kienholz [ph. sp.] and Hopps. Wasn't it open with the two of them?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I forget the exact date, but I thought by ‘58 it was open.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe it was, maybe it was, but --

PAUL KARLSTROM: I just wondered if you had any memories of -- if you ever saw any shows there, ‘cause Esther

was --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- right practically next door, wasn't she?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Several doors down, maybe half a block down or something. Well it was about that time -- anyway, when I went to Esther, that's when the changes began to really -- when things really started happening there, particularly on La Cienega where the -- I mean it was really pro-active, the Ferus Gallery. It was not just a gallery that showed work, but it was culturally pro-active in terms of destroying people as well as creating their own. I mean they had -- they did the whole political number.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you mean, specifically?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well, there was a cultural intimidation that they did at that time that by putting the other galleries down and the artists in them were downgraded in order for them to become bigger, you know. It's a maneuver. You know what that is. It's very Procrustean, and it's very dangerous, and it's also very immature, but they did it. And they were also showing a very -- you know, a very worthy thing. I mean they had a beautiful -- oh, God, let me think of his name. Anyway, I'll come back to that, but anyway, it's not as if --

PAUL KARLSTROM: John Altoon [ph. sp.].

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, no, no, no. Oh, my God, the Italian who was doing those wonderful metaphysical, very delicate -- starts with an “M”. Oh, does the little, you know, the drawings of pots and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, this is -- yeah. This is very good. That is Morandi.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Morandi, God, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah. Well, you gave my age [inaudible]. Anyway, yes, they did. I saw a beautiful Morandi show there. And a lot -- you know, and other people, they were, you know, supporting their own people with a very, very good international kind of thing going.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So Ferus Gallery, even then, was seen as a real player, a formidable presence in the gallery.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes, for good and for bad, it was. I mean certainly at the time for those of us who felt had a different metaphor for art, it was very threatening. It was very aggressive. There was something very -- and very -- like if you did not believe what they believed, you were out, I mean as simple as that. It was, you know -- and the New York thing was maneuvering in the same way. There was -- it was very narrow. It was a very narrow view and a -- it was said so strongly and so forthrightly that, you know, they took over. And fair enough. I mean what can you say? If it happens, it happens, but it was a hard time for artists who were not going in that direction or didn't want to go in that direction. I mean we were absolutely relegated to being a feat, passe, you know, and this is a little hard to take when you're 26 or 27 years old, you know, and your own career and your own vision is just beginning and it's very -- you know, you don't see it that way at all. So, again, there you begin to get this kind of schizophrenia, you know. The culture sets certain people up in a situation where they are -- where they're functioning in a split, with a split vision, so that it's -- you know, to point like that. And that, you know, I suppose, was the beginning, you know, of this thing that you mentioned earlier, my decision to do something. Well I guess this is what I would say is that it was not my decision to do it. There was a mutuality about this and it wasn't just I who was being, you know, being offered this kind of choice; either go with the culture or you're dead, baby. I mean that's -- it was as simple as that. And then at that point, I felt that I was choosing, that I was forced to choose. I was not going with the culture baby because the culture baby was not what I believed in. You know for one thing -- well I just don't think people are built that way. I don't think that's what we're made of, is this kind of baby/man, flattening kind of impersonality that happens for types or -- there's a kind of a looking through the persona rather than piercing it or looking -- dealing only with the persona rather than -- see, I think art is about piercing the persona, and I felt that what was happening at that time was creating a persona that was a cultural phenomena that had absolutely nothing to do with art, okay, so that the split happened, and more and more, you know. I suppose I went more and more my own way and the culture went its way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were doing sculpture, presumably, at the time. What was it like?

ROBERT CREMEAN: How I looked at it? What the reviews were?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well --

ROBERT CREMEAN: How other people -- well I -- there was this schizophrenia that was happening at that time because -- another thing happened was is that the other things were changing. So many things were changing at that time. For instance, Henry Seldis committed suicide. Henry Seldis was very, very avidly pro, to say my work; Jack Zajak; [James] McGarrell. Well you get the drift.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Kind of something that he felt was in line with something that he believed in. Well this whole thing began to shift on him as well. I mean the pressures that were on him, you know. He was being edged out. Wilson, William Wilson, was beginning to speak for the other voice ‘cause -- the persona voice of our -- and so -- and poor Henry ended up committing suicide. For what his reasons were, I do not know, but that's what happened. Henry was outed. You know, he was out. And I know that it was very, very difficult for him, very --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know any of the Ferus group, the creating persona artists?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I knew them as enemies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Naughty people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You didn't actually know any of them as individuals?

ROBERT CREMEAN: No. The thing was set up into an either/or situation. There was no way to know them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, yeah. This was war, Paul. I mean this is not --

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting ‘cause I never heard of it in quite that way.

ROBERT CREMEAN: You do not -- oh, let me tell you. And the -- and it was done in the -- sometimes the cruelest of ways, you know, a laugh here, a snide thing, so a paranoia began to develop. And it wasn't just with me. I saw it happening with Esther; I saw it happening with Felix; I saw it happening with -- anybody who was not buying the metaphor or buying into the metaphor and going along with it were given a very, very hard time. So -- I mean I'm not speaking just for myself; I'm speaking for a whole --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who were some of the artists that you may have known as colleagues that would have viewed the situation similarly, maybe felt some of this being in a pushed-out/pushed-aside?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well, John Thomas, for one. Whether you know his work now or not, that's -- perhaps that's part of the reason you don't know it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well there are lots of them. I could probably -- I've probably seen it. I certainly know the name, absolutely.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well he's in Hawaii now. Oh, God, I can't even remember, but whole -- you know, our, you know, whole gallery is full of artists who were working -- well, I'll tell you; I'll tell you. The major one who was directly attacked was Rico Lebrun.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well this is --

ROBERT CREMEAN: He was a direct attack, and Harold Warshaw.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, Howard.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Howard, excuse me. Well, there you go. You see, [inaudible] names. So that -- and particularly Rico. I mean he was absolutely --

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's a wonderful artist.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yes, indeed, but he was directly attacked by Hopps. I mean just saying that they were going to rid Los Angeles of the Rico Lebrun pall, p-a-l-l, you know, out, and so he was directly attacked. And, of course, those of us who -- there was any resemblance to Rico in any way, I mean, you know, any romantic, what they call, you know --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Romantic humanism.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Romantic humanism, I suppose you might call it that, I mean that was over with. That was just -- that was -- I mean the sites were -- the sites were put on us and we were shot down.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's really interesting because you don't hear -- this is really useful because you don't hear so much this story. The story continues to be told pretty much in terms of the Ferus Gallery.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Of the winners, the winners.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: The winners who won; and they did. They did win. There's no question about it. There's certainly no question in my mind. But, again, it's, you know, truth, time, they're very strange things. They are very durable and then, you know -- for some people, they work for them for a while, and some people sometimes it works against them. I think probably in the long run, and I hope this isn't a romantic hope, you know, on my part, but I think certain people, I mean anybody who could draw like Warshaw, you know, there's no business getting rid of that kind of thing. I mean --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well there's room for it all.

ROBERT CREMEAN: That's what I say, but this was not set up that way. This was -- and this was not an artistic revolution. It was a cultural revolution. There's no question in my mind, not at all. And, of course, you -- cultural revolutions, they're just, you know, there's no heart. I mean it's just -- it's all power.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now were you and -- well you can't speak for your friends, but were you particularly interested in any of the Ferus Gallery artists' works? In other words, did you encounter -- ‘cause they're all very -- actually very different, you know. There was not one shared esthetic, actually. Did any of them, well, strike your interest for what they were doing, or no?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well, see there we go again, because it's a different thing. They had a parallel agenda going. They had their own agenda which was the cultural overthrow or the cultural tip-over of Los Angeles, and this was also backed by a very, very, very, very fine shows of people that had nothing to do with this --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, but they --

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- like Morandi.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- would associate themselves?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Right, like Morandi and there is others, so that this -- the gallery itself had a double agenda, and it functioned very well. It was very clever. I mean there was no way really to deal with this. Also at that time, ArtForum happened.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Backing Ferus.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Absolutely, absolutely. And also, it came in, you know -- again, this marvelous, subversive way it was done. I mean it came in as, you know, supporting California art. I mean this is how it came. This was going to be the art, you know, the magazine for the West Coast. You know the interesting thing that happened was once Los Angeles succumbed to this, everybody went east. Everybody left. It was almost as if they came to annex, you know, to annex California. Hopps went to the Smithsonian.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well somewhere along the way, yes, that's right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: He ended up there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Blum -- Blum went to New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Eventually, yeah. The gallery [Blum Helman in NYC?].

ROBERT CREMEAN: The magazine went to New York, the publication, Art Forum went there, so that it was an odd thing that happened. It was -- again, I mean it was economization, really, to take the -- whatever was happening there -- is this too harsh?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no. This is good. This is very interesting.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Because it is. It's -- I mean those of us who were there for another reason --

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is an alternative voice. We like this.

ROBERT CREMEAN: All right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is revisionism.

ROBERT CREMEAN: All right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good, good revision.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Anyway, anyway, so the thing that happened was that this is the way some of us saw it, that there was a -- an actual traitoring from the inside as well as a, you know, an influx from the outside. And some of those people are just not very well liked. I don't think they're -- I think they're rotten shits, if you want to know. I mean Blum and Hopps and various of the others who were involved in this, it took something from California. It -- that they -- really is very, very objectionable to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about Henry -- Henry Hopkins who actually -- of course he went east for a while and then Texas, but then came back to San Francisco Modern. He'd been at L.A. County. He then went down to work with the Wiseman Foundation, and then -- now is director of -- well went to UCLA, was director of the Hammer Galleries. I guess I'm just asking did you feel he falls into that group in terms of taking, but then not giving back, taking something and leaving it?

ROBERT CREMEAN: No. I don't think he's of the same -- myself, I don't. I don't really know him and I think that he was, from what I know, of what I feel about Henry is that he is a functionary. I don't think that he's a power. I don't know how to say this. I don't mean this nastily or in any other way other than no, I do not think he was a prime energy in all of this. I do not feel that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of a bureaucrat?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Kind of, I would say; somebody who was there and probably functioned pretty well.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well a manager who actually gets things done.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Probably. I just -- see, I don't know because I'm not that culturally attuned to a lot of this. I haven't followed other --

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is about institutions, of course. You know what I'm saying?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, and you would know more than I where he was. I know that the ones that you mentioned, I know that what he had done that, but I never had any interest in Hopkins because I -- there was no reason for me to. I mean there wasn't any -- until later, something happened later where there was a contact with him, but that -- we can talk about that later if you like.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure. That's interesting. Let's -- I think what I'm going to do before we get a pause here is just turn this tape over, okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

[END TAPE 2, SIDE A]
[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing the interview with Robert Cremean. Tape 2, Side B now. Well, let's see, we were talking about the -- well I guess negative impacts from your perspective and experience of the legendary Ferus Gallery on the L.A. art scene and on those artists who were associated, affiliated with different -- with other galleries. It sounds to me as if it was pretty much an either/or situation. You're either with the Ferus people or you're against them, no room for alternate expressions.

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, none at all. It was very autocratic and very vicious.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think this came a lot from Kienholz? Because he was, you know, a major player in that, Hopps and Kienholz.

ROBERT CREMEAN: I would say probably the two of them, yeah. I mean that's what I would say. Certainly Hopps

went on with it whether, you know -- I don't know -- well it was very interesting because I had a traveling show that went through California at one point through the Arts Commission and it ended up back at Barnstill [sic] with our friend, Josine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, Josine wasn't -- was she there?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, that was bef -- probably before, yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, that was before. I forget who was there; I forget who was there. Anyway, somehow it came that the timing of my large Barnstill show, my show at Barnstill, happened exactly -- the opening was the same night as the fabled Kienholz show at the county --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, L.A. County, yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And it was strange because Henry Seldis took a stand at that point.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh really?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, yes, [inaudible].

PAUL KARLSTROM: What are you saying?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well it was very pro me and very anti-Kienholz.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, and I guess that was the end of both of us. I mean I, at least, didn't commit suicide later on, but he really, I suppose, took whatever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That must have been what, ‘64 or ‘65? ‘65?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Probably ‘65, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why did it seem to have to be, though? It's unfortunate that your openings were on the same night. That's kind of bad planning.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Or good planning.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well --

ROBERT CREMEAN: It depends on --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, it could be, but why did it have to be this either/or? I mean it just shaped up that way. It had to be either Kienholz --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, it did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- and not you, or you and not Kienholz.

ROBERT CREMEAN: People were actually saying, “Which one are you going to? Which opening are you going to?” You know, it was that kind of thing. It was very odd.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Too bad you didn't have a backseat dodge so you could get all that publicity. So presumably, without putting words in your mouth, through all this experience, you're becoming more and more disenchanted with the apparatus --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well the apparatus --

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- of showing art and selling art.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, and not just, you know, not just that, but I began to see that it really -- I mean how little it had to do with art, at least what I -- you know, my definition for it was, that it really is -- it is cultural. I mean it's -- that these people -- Hopps is not, and I would say probably even Kienholz is not an artist. They're culture makers. I mean they are involved with creating cultures or cultural attitudes, cultural metaphors, cultural norms. And this is all right. This is, you know -- I have nothing against that, so that if you're involved in changing a culture, it is either/or. You can't have two cultures running parallel if you want something from them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: You just simply can't, so that what happens is either/or. The one -- the people who are threatening to your way of thinking, you get rid of them. And, you know, the ends justify the means. This was also a very, very political time, if you remember, and, you know, there was all sorts of stuff going on at this time. And this is the way people did things. This is the way people still do things. If you want change, you can't have two things going on at the same time. You have to occupy the moment. If you want to dominate it, you have to occupy it and, therefore, you can't -- you know, two people or two ideas cannot occupy the same channel at the same time. It just doesn't work. And out went Rico Lebrun and out went Robert Cremean; out went Zajak; out went this whole thing, this whole humanistic thing. And up was erected this persona called culture. And something else that's interesting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of avant garde, too.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well, in the name of, you know, in the name of -- and it's interesting who they took, you know, that they took Duchamp.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, as the patron saint.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Of culture, not of art, so that the thing that began to be fascinating -- also, other things began to change. The commissions began to change. This is when the changes began to, you know, the -- where the galleries began taking more and more percentage. The artists began to be downgraded because it was the statement that was wanted, not the artists' vision, you know. If they were driving out -- again, this is me, but if the vision was -- if there is only one vision, then you get people to do the vision. You don't buy or associate the vision to the culture. You have to adjust the artist. You pick any artist -- any gallery can get any artist they want if they already know what they want to have in the gallery. That's the way it works. And so the thing was happening, and as soon as this began to happen, as soon as the culture began to shift that way, then the artists began to take less and less. They began to give up more and more. You know, I started out with Paul Kantor at 33 1/3%. That was my commission, or that was his commission for showing my work. Now it's what, 50%?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Probably, yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: At least.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Depends on the gallery and the artist, I suppose,
but --

ROBERT CREMEAN: I think standard --

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- I think 50% is --

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- now and standard then was like 33 1/3, so if you figure out -- and plus, you know, there was the sharing of the expenses, you know, the shipping and the catalogue and all that kind of thing with 33 1/3% to the gallery. Now it's like 50/50 on the, you know -- for most, and I'm sure some are more, but now it's 50/50 and the artist pays, so what has happened? Why is the artist -- what has happened culturally where the artist's work has been downgraded and the gallery's work has been upgraded?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Overhead maybe.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well that's what they --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well the artist has overhead.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that's what they would say.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well I know, but that's not -- it's not that. The culture values that more than it values the artist. Well it's a simple thing. There's no other way of looking at it. It's on paper. It's in contracts, so that the artist, when he -- a young artist, when he wants a gallery, he has to sign a contract where he acknowledges that the gallery is either worth as much as he is or more. I mean immediately, he is conforming to something that -- whether he believes in it or not, and at that point, he, too, has a choice. Does he want to go along with that? I don't. I couldn't because I don't believe that's true. I don't think the person -- and this began -- you know, quickly, brief thing back to Blair and that business. Blair believes that's probably true, you know, that the art market is the same as art, you know. They're the same work; they're the same thing. Well for me, they're not. They're just simply not. And I think that the artist has been -- has had a lot taken away from him and I think that he has given up a lot that he should never have given up, and I think a lot of them are gutless artists, that they

want something for themselves, you know, that they want that car to drive around in rather than to give something, you know, to -- there again, that's me, I guess, but there is something -- you know, there's choices. They're -- every single move you make, there's a choice, and every single move you make, you're making a statement. And as I say, that, you know, the more I was driven out, the more I wanted out so that there was no choice, that I chose to leave something. There was a divergence of metaphor, you know, and I really -- it's too bad because if one says -- or the thing that is being given out or even assumed that I became reclusive or that I decided to do something, no more than I decided to grow old, you know. I haven't decide -- this is not a conscious decision on my part. All I have to do is look at photographs of myself when I was younger. I would never have made this choice. Would you?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I don't know. I'm enjoying this stage in my life.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Oh I'm enjoying, but I'm enjoying --

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know what you mean.

ROBERT CREMEAN: You know, yeah -- but anyway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think if this -- yeah, I know what you mean. What was the last gallery then that you were associated with? When was that?

ROBERT CREMEAN: The last gallery was -- well --

PAUL KARLSTROM: There was Esther and then --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah. I went -- I was with Esther, and then I went to Meckler. Esther decided to fold her tent on La Cienega, and I still wanted to be active in terms of the gallery scene, so I went to Adam Meckler. It was Jody Scully at the time, and then it became Adam Meckler. And I was there for -- I had three shows with Adam and it was through Adam Meckler that I was introduced to Robert Barrett who was the director of the Fresno Art Museum, so that's how that connection was made. I went, you know -- was through Adam Meckler, but in the meantime, I also had -- I had two shows and was shown briefly with Ruth Braunstein [ph. sp.] --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- in San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. Let's see, when would this be? When did you show with Ruth?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Ruth? I had a New York show with Ruth in ‘77, I think it was, and then a San Francisco exhibition with her, I think, in ‘77 or ‘78. I'm not sure when it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so what about Meckler, what was the time frame?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Meckler, I was with Adam until -- the last show I had at Adam Meckler's was in 1983.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, okay, and how many years? Just to give some idea. I forget when Esther closed.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Probably five years maybe, all together. Something like that; three shows --

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was probably --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well ‘7 -- no, more -- no, no, more. I would say probably eight years. Something like that, just, you know, just off the -- the first show was in ‘78, I think. Yeah, the first show was in ‘78.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then you were there until ‘83?

ROBERT CREMEAN: ‘83 or ‘84. The last show was in ‘83, and then I probably kind of piddled out of there, wasn't even an actual departure, but probably piddled out in ‘84, just kind of --

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that then, a little over ten years ago was -- is this correct, that was your last involvement with a commercial gallery?

ROBERT CREMEAN: That was -- the last like any solid affiliation would have been with Adam Meckler. I have since then had -- I -- like Ruth Braunstein had a show like something called “From the Sixties to the Nineties” like that showing --

PAUL KARLSTROM: A group show.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, like a group show, and I --

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's --

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- had something in that, but nothing -- no affiliation, nothing where there was a setup where I was working with a gallery dealer for whatever purpose, nothing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think if you had sought other representation, you might have been successful?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well --

PAUL KARLSTROM: You say that this sort of happened to you, but I'm just wondering if you then even made an attempt to connect with another -- better dealer?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well, you know, there -- no, I did not make another attempt. I never say -- went to another dealer or called a dealer or got an agent to go to --

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

ROBERT CREMEAN: That sort of didn't happen. I just sort of -- I think by that time, it was over.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's what I was wondering.

ROBERT CREMEAN: It was something -- it was a -- it was something -- a way of doing -- of working, a way of being an artist. It just simply didn't work for me anymore. I saw no purpose. You know, if you really think about it, how debilitating it is to an artist to have a gallery, if you think about what it actually does, it's really kind of horrifying. It unravels him. He is constantly being unraveled and separated from his work, from his production, from his oove [sic]. It's like, you know, it's like being skinned alive in a sense, slowly, just these raveling -- this unraveling, and the works are taken; they are shown at this, you know -- they move from the studio. They go to a commercial marketplace. Then all the parasitic industries descend on this thing, and things are eaten. You know, the artist is eaten. The works are dispersed. It's a kind of death every time, and the works go off into, you know, you know not where, really, what they're sitting next to, you know. It's a very odd idea about art, you know, and it's so prevalent. It's the only thing that we've got, but it is a way of controlling art and artists that I just simply -- I began to realize that this was not the way it's supposed to be, and then I began to think that well what is the way it's supposed to be? Well the way it's supposed to be is Shart. Shart is the way art is supposed to be where artists' work. The work goes into a place where something is being built, you know, that is culturally significant. The work is there. His abilities are there. His soul is there. Everything is building something very, very real, you know, that his work is made real by being part of something real. And the thing that happened, I suppose, after -- with Fresno is here was the museum, an edifice, a building, you know, people who seemed to want the work. I was told, you know, “Anytime a body of work is ready, we will show it,” you know. “We want your work; we want to see it.” Well that's nice. That's really nice to know that, that you can go and you can do your own work, have your own vision, proceed according to some idea that you have, and that that work will be shared. That's very nice, and it's shared without, you know, the need to sell, that, in effect, it's already been sold. I don't know how to say that. Nobody has to buy it. Nobody has to justify it. It's simply is justified by its moving from the studio to the place and being shown, so that -- and then this whole thing began to build. Well I have an outlet. I have a place where I can show. I have a -- you know, that I don't have to do this gallery thing. I don't have to unravel, be unraveled, that all my work will go to one place. It'll be like Shart, you know. I will live my life and see all my beginning work there as well as my last work. When I take my last breath, I will know that I still exist in this place, you know, through the work. It was a good thing. It began to develop and I began to think more and more about it, and then this whole thing about the arrangement began to form. You know, how could this be done? Does it have any meaning? Does it have significance to other people? Could it happen in just -- in other places other than Fresno? Could it -- is it an alternative to this destructive thing that is -- that seemed, or seems to me, at least, to be going on now? Is this controlling art by unraveling the artist constantly, not ever letting his work settle enough to be seen? You know, only -- the only thing that is going out about the work is an interpretation of it which means the control of the vision is in the hands of somebody else, always, always in the hands of somebody else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about -- you had a big show at -- that Tom Garver did --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- at the DeYoung and, let me guess, in ‘76 perhaps?

ROBERT CREMEAN: It was ‘76.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was it?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Um-hum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow!

ROBERT CREMEAN: Yeah, pretty good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I remember that very well ‘cause my office was there. Our offices were established there right around the corner of DeYoung. It was very impressive with these long row of large figures. What was the series?

ROBERT CREMEAN: It was called “Vatican Corridor.”

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: But “Vatican Corridor” was the second in a series of like almost 11 years of work called “The Narcissist Pantology,” so that that showed that the Garver show or the -- I shouldn't call it -- let's see, there we go, the Garver Show; that's my show, goddamn it. Anyway, there were two sculptures in that show; one was a marble -- four-piece marble carving of four torsos, and then there's the long corridor, 20 slaps of wood.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And is part of what again is the?

ROBERT CREMEAN: Called “The Narcissist Pantology”

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- so that after the “Corridor,” there was a -- and these were all based on geometric figures like --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, in different degrees, it seemed to me, of abstraction. Is that correct?

ROBERT CREMEAN: The “Corridor?”

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well, they all had to do with time, so was actually -- the images were done in terms of time so that the “Corridor” covered an expanse of, say, when -- from my seventeenth year to my forty-seventh year, but the thir -- but the last one, I mean I was like 44 when I did it, so that the last arch was kind of a projection into the future. So it's an actual autobiography, and using then the body parts to signify, they become symbols for personality things or how one deals with life, you know, like -- and very simple, I mean like likes the mobility. When I left Ohio, you know, and when -- so it was when they leave, the matter of when you begin changing from who you are to what you are, when you begun creating yourself, so that these transpositions were made across from one side to the other side. Anyway, it's -- and it was a wonderful thing to work on. I mean it was just huge. It was this, you know -- it was in the studio. Each one of those things is like eight feet tall, and it was just a tremendous -- and also, there was a preparatory study so that there was a whole intellectual kind of study of the whole thing, and that has gone on. It was from that -- actually from that point on that the work has gone. I mean if it's never gone on -- and this is where the actual separation happened, was -- you know, you can't expect a gallery to wait for 10 years for a show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And these -- each of these works were two years. I was spending two full years on each of these massive sort of things, like there were 21 works in the next piece after “Vatican Corridor” which is called “Glances of the Queen.” There are 21 pieces in that one. The next piece had six very, very large, like studio benches called Sanctuary, and that -- there, again, you know, two more years of really, you know, dedicated work. There wasn't time to do anything else. The last piece was a very, very large work of -- you know, that was like 18 feet long with nine life-size figures and a very, very long perdella with a whole historical kind of transposition of biography, an autobiography under that, so these things were -- these were operas, you know. These were not ditties. These were not songs. These were -- you know, I was making major, operatic, you know, weighty kind of things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was the -- excuse me.

ROBERT CREMEAN: No, go ahead.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was the DeYoung -- at that point, though, obviously, you felt happy working with a curator within a museum situation. That never changed, presumably, and this was not a commercial endeavor; it was not a gallery thing, and so --

ROBERT CREMEAN: No. Well, also, you know, once -- you know, the museum is not a commercial thing. If the museum says to you, “We want to have a show of your work,” it's over with, that's it. I mean there are no -- there's nothing beyond that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: There's no agenda other than the show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: They're not going to say to you, “Well, now I think you probably shouldn't,” you know, “show the genitals quite so clearly because we won't be able to sell this.”

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: You know, “this person doesn't like male genitalia, so you're not going to get in that collection, that's for sure,” or “this show is not going to travel anywhere because of this.” Well, so -- but if the museum says, “We will have this show,” that means that they want it, genitalia and all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: They don't want you to cover them or to do anything else --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- about them. They want what you're showing, and that's what happened with Tom Garver. That's what happened with any museum show I've ever had, and I've had a lot of museum shows, more museum shows than I've had gallery shows, so that -- and it's always been difficult, you know. I don't get along with a lot of curators either because they may want to light them --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: -- in such a way that I feel is flattening them. This happened down in Newport. You know, I went down to see the same show that was -- that Garver had at the DeYoung and I saw it in Newport, and the way it was shown, the wood looked like cardboard. So you go in and you say, “Now wait a minute,” you know, “I realize this is what you're doing and this is how you see the work, but do you really think wood should look like cardboard?” So you change the lighting. It's still your work, after all, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right. No, that's right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And I know there's a lot of people that don't think that's true, but it is. It's still my work. This is why I'm so angry about this goddamn CD rom. It's my work they're doing it to. I mean why would I accept a bad haircut or a -- or something done to me personally? I mean they had -- they are, you know -- if you go in and you see your work poorly given, whether it's on a rom or in a gallery or in a museum or anything, you have a right to say something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course.

ROBERT CREMEAN: And whether that makes you difficult or not, well, fuck that, you know, so it makes you difficult, you know. It's too short, you know. We have so little time,
and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you moved -- no. You moved here to this wonderful place.

ROBERT CREMEAN: 1963.

PAUL KARLSTROM: 1963, oh boy, 33 years ago, and you had met your friend, Robert.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Robert, in the spring, and we moved here in the -- I met Robert in the winter months of ‘63 and moved here in the winter months of ‘63, so I left Woodacre, the studio in Woodacre, and moved to Tomales in 1963, and we've been here ever since, except for a couple of trips to Europe.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it seems to have suited you very well, but it also then, of course, it is a perfect setup for those who choose to view you in the way you've chosen to conduct your activity as an artist in terms of retreat or being a recluse withdrawal.

ROBERT CREMEAN: If you look at it, the way things were diverging, I was diverging from my cultural change, not

from art. I have never diverged from art. I have never changed my direction. Not from the beginning have I changed direction. Now if a divergence had occurred, it was because what I was after was here. It wasn't there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ROBERT CREMEAN: That's the only reason I'm here, and if the cultural divergence was happening that I felt was anti-art, which I do, and I come here, obviously, I'm after something here that has to do with art, right? And I think it is. I think there's something in this valley, and to be an artist in this valley has proven to me that art is essential to nature, you know, that this place needs me as much as I need it or it wouldn't exist. I see this place. I acknowledge its presence. I have married it. I'm in love with it, and I feel the same back from it, and this, in a way, convinces me that art is something that isn't cultural. It's something else. It's something --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Spiritual.

ROBERT CREMEAN: Well, it's spiritual, but it's also practical. If you don't see nature, then it's not there, so that -- and if you have everything the way the culture is going -- and I see it philosophically. I don't see it -- I don't go out and copy trees and then show it to people and say, “This is what trees are.” It's not that -- it's not instructive that way. It's an act that is so primal, you know, that it goes back to me. By being here, I understand the beginnings of art, before there were galleries, before there were critics, before there was this terrible need to become a celebrity, all of this stuff, you know. This has nothing to do with art. This has to do with culture, and to have lived here for 33 years and each year to have the same wonderful affair with this and it never lets up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you -- what is the name of this valley?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I don't think it has a name.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It has no name?

ROBERT CREMEAN: No. It's the “Valley of No Name.”

PAUL KARLSTROM: “Valley of No Name.” Do you think of yourself at all as -- in the most -- in the broadest sense of the term, a landscape artist? By that, I mean --

ROBERT CREMEAN: Good term.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- responding to nature, to the landscape around you, whatever form your work takes. Do you see a connection?

ROBERT CREMEAN: I don't see it that way. When I first moved here in ‘63, in the spring of that year, you know, I was working along, just moved the work out of the studio in Woodacre and put the work here in the barn and, you know, turned it into a studio there, was working happily away. Everything was just fine. I just changed places. We had -- the grass was growing very long in the upper field and there were some large steers, you know, the neighbor's steers, and I said to him, “Would you mind if I opened the fence and let them come in and just --.” “Oh great,” you know, “this is wonderful,” because, you know, they're always looking for food. I went up there and I was below because it was on the hillside and the steers were above me just kind of munching away, and I opened the fence and nine of them came piling through that opening and I felt -- as they went by, I got smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller until I felt that in front of this power, you know, this rippling muscularity of these things, you know, this strength, and I felt very humbled right there. And then I went down the studio and I just looked at the stuff and I said, “This will not do. This doesn't cut it, ”you know. “I don't belong here. I simply -- I don't belong here. I have no business being here.” And I don't feel that way now, I don't. I feel that – [off tape/end of cassette]

END OF INTERVIEW

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