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Oral history interview with Raimonds Staprans, 1997 August 14-September 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Raimonds Staprans on August 14, 1997. The interview took place in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[Tape 1, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, conducting an interview with painter and playwright, Raimonds Staprans. It's session one. The interview is being conducted by Paul Karlstrom at his home in San Francisco. The date is August 14, 1997, and this is tape one, side A.

Okay, we've dispatched that now, Raimonds, and what I'm looking forward to doing, over the course of these interviews, two or three sessions, whatever they may be, is get a better understanding of you, your own story, and your multifaceted talents, I guess I should say. We think of you around here as a painter, but I know that there's going to be more to your activity than that. We'll get into that a little bit later. You have been in this country since, I believe, the late forties.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, '47, to be exact. I think I was one of the first immigrants to arrive after the war, and before the DP Program, Displaced Persons Program, even started. That was because my uncle was here from, say, 1905. He was a revolutionary, and he had to face either, let's say, being imprisoned by the Czar, or to emigrate to the United States, and so he did it illegally, and worked at various places, and finally became a chiropractor, and acquired some property and some money, and so he sponsored a trip to the United States, so I arrived here fairly early.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you have, then, an established family connection.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I had an established family connection, definitely, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I would be real interested in hearing more about your background before you came to this country, going back as far, perhaps, as you want, in terms of what you think is relevant, but trying to paint a picture, if you will, of really where you come from, what you come from, what was your family background, and your early experience, before coming here.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, that's probably, it's very difficult to say, and, you know, I've been trying to write it down myself, occasionally. The first experience, as a child, probably what I have, it is--no, I think first experience is that I saw a blimp, and that was one of those German zeppelins, coming to the country, and I saw it and I tried to draw it, and that's my first drawing, and I think it was preserved by my family. Now that they are dead, I still somewhere have this drawing. They brought it all the way over to the United States. My second impression is, since my father, he was a doctor, a physician, and we lived next to a hospital. Next to the hospital was also the local mortuary, hospital's mortuary, so all the patients who died, they were deposited there. From there on, there was a funeral procession, so they walked exactly past my window, and that's what I draw. So these were my subjects.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was this? We actually haven't determined where we are.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Ah, that's right, yeah. Well, I have to be simple. I was born in '26, in Riga, Latvia, and at that time it was an independent nation. We lived in the city, and my father, like I said before, he was a physician. He was a surgeon. My mother, she graduated and got a master's in German literature, and what she did, she taught in school, and mostly she did reviews of poetry and also some other literature. So that's what was happening during those days. I don't know, there are so many images from which--how to start? It's very difficult to say which are relevant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think that is a good way to go about it. Before that, so that we don't forget, but going back further, who were your ancestors, to the extent you know about them--grandparents, and then their parents? Who was the family?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, actually, probably, the family tree, if you go back, goes probably back several centuries, and they were all peasants, so to speak, peasants, or working on their farms, or their farms were owned by the Germans, and so there was an animosity. In a way, in the early nineteenth century, they were serfs. And then like all over Europe in the mid-nineteenth century, they were released, and they could farm

independently, so they acquired the freedom to move wherever they wanted.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But did they stay pretty much in the same area, in Riga?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Around, yeah, I would say, Latvia. Really, as it is, it is a small country, compared to the United States. You could cross the country, let's say, four hours, at most, either way. Of course, it's about the size, it's larger than Belgium or Holland, but not that much larger, so it's really a small place. Most of the people worked on the farms, and that was also true for my grandparents, on both sides, my mother's and my father's side. On my father's side, I would say his grand-grandparents were farmers, and then my grandfather on my father's side, he became a schoolteacher, and then, of course, he was also a conductor of a choir or a chorus in the local Orthodox church. Then the story gets again involved. Why in the Greek Orthodox Church? Because the country was occupied by the Russian czars, and they want to eliminate all the minorities, so, in order to be able to work as a teacher or in some official capacity, you had to switch to Orthodox religion, you had to speak Russian and many kinds of official institutions are Russian, was the language to be, and all the local languages had to be eliminated. So it was things like the Russification. So he became a teacher and working also in the local church. Then Latvia acquired independence in 1918. That was the First World War. He entered into politics. He was a Social Democrat.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is still your paternal grandfather?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, that's my paternal grandfather. I'm trying to carry this line.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, this is good.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: There's just one line and then the other line, since we are going back. Then he moved to a small town called Talsi, and what happened was, then he became, I would say, also the principal of the local school, and then after a while was the mayor of the town. So he really had what you would call a political career, and he remained the mayor of the town until his retirement.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the name of that town again?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It was Talsi.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Will you spell that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: T-A-L-S-I. Talsi.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he had this political career. This is quite a move, then, from his background, peasant or serf background.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really quite upwardly mobile.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, I think it was really true of all the Latvians. Everyone has their roots in the farm, but in the nineteenth century, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was an upward movement, out of the farms, towards the city, toward education, toward culture, toward, I would say, political influence, economic influence, and, in a way, it's still continuing today. But like everyone, actually in any kind of a circle, there isn't a single Latvian who does not have his roots in the country, and, of course, it's been reflected in literature, and probably in poetry, etc. This is, I would say, this was about my grandfather, and how it was.

About my mother, in a way, it was a simpler way. Of course, her father was, I would say, a peasant, worked on a farm. He moved to the city, became a carpenter, worked in a factory. That was before World War I. And worked for six days, and twelve hours a day, and even sometimes on Sunday. So, that was a capitalist way to do it, and, of course, it resulted in some ways in the revolution of 1905. He had to work for very low wages.

Then came the war. As the Germans came in, Latvia was really like a corridor, where it was sort of a highway, where either the Western and the Eastern powers were moving back and forth, and that seems to be the Latvian history, which is probably, if you study history, it's very important, because I would say Napoleon went through Latvia and went back, and the Swedes, if they wanted to go, let's say, to attack Russians, they had to go through Latvia because that's the only way. Because south of it there are, I would say, woods and forests, and in the north of it there is water, and the Finnish, the Baltic Sea. So that's probably the only passable area. But that's entirely probably a different story.

So, during the First World War, as the Germans came in here, he had to flee to Russia, stayed there as a refugee, came back as Latvia gained independence, worked for a while in a farm, then went back to work as a carpenter in the factory, joined the Social Democrat party and took active part in it, in demonstrations, and he

gave some speeches, etc. During the independence, as a carpenter, at the age of sixty-one, contracted cancer of the stomach, which was very usual in those times, and died at the age of sixty-one. So that was probably a little bit too early.

So these are the two lines of my grandparents, either on my mother's and my father's side. Now, would you like to hear anything about my father, as he developed, and the mother?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, please, yes.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's relevant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about your grandmothers? Are their stories the same?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: The grandmothers are very similar. It is probably very involved. On my grandfather's side, the grandmother, she came actually from an extinct Finnish group that was living somewhere in Latvia. So, actually, so I am, I would say, three-fourths Latvian myself, and one-fourth Finnish, in origin. She also spoke both languages. When she married my grandfather, she was a simple country woman, and he was sort of educated, like he was a schoolteacher, and as he later became the principal of the school, he taught probably the Russian language, he taught history, he taught mathematics, etc.

So there was a marriage, but, I don't know, it was a marriage, there was really a great disparity between the educations, because she was a completely uneducated woman, and she bore him four children. But during the Second World War, when he went, he was fleeing as a refugee from the German invasion to Russia. He left his wife behind. After four years, when he returned to Latvia, he had already remarried, and came out with a younger, more beautiful, I would say, a different wife. So, I would say, there was really kind of a conflict, because he was still married to one woman and then he was married to another woman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He married this woman in Russia?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, he married this woman in Russia, and they came back. When he was around sixty, she was about thirty years younger than he was, of course. Then when they met, there back at their homes, there was this old, weathered peasant woman with teeth missing in the front, and withered, wrinkled face and white hair, which was falling out, and the wrinkled skin and the worked red hands. And there was this man with a very young woman in her thirties, being married, and behaving in really a romantic fashion. And that really lasted, probably, this conflict, until I left this country, and I was really impressed. Maybe that was one of the reasons, seeing them and all the family relations, why I really started writing, or became aware of writing, as such. So I think that was about on my father's side.

Now, on my mother's side. My grandmother, also, she came from a farm. She came into the city, she raised her family, and that's all she did. She raised two daughters, one of them which was my mother. What I would say, she had a quite unremarkable, and, I would say, by and large, an uneventful and absolutely uninteresting and unremarkable life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, no.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: She was a great and warm person, but when you would really think of it, she really had nothing to say, except that she raised daughters, and she did the housekeeping, cooking, which is probably a lot. That's what, probably, my mother always reminded me, she said, "I wish I had a mother that was at least something or somebody, but she wasn't."

Now, how far are we? We've covered probably the--

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're to your parents.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Ah, now it's our parents. Since we are on my mother's side, probably my mother. All right. She was born in 1903, and she was in a family that was in Riga, and in the family of a carpenter and a carpenter's housewife. She also has a kid sister, and from then on, she went to the local school, and, of course, it was a Russian school, because there were hardly any Latvian schools available, because at that time there was this rule which was instituted by what you would call the Russian government, Monaheim, in the 1890s. Now, I am digressing into history. Latvian history is really complex. Which was proclaimed that all those minorities and that goes not for Baltic peoples, but for any minorities, they had to be Russified within fifty years. The local languages had to be eradicated, and everyone had to speak Russian.

So she spoke Latvian at home, and went to a Russian school, and, actually, I would say the regime was very strict, what she remembers. All the subjects were all in Russian, and even during the intermissions, if teachers caught somebody speaking Latvian, they were punished. They were punished with three slaps with a ruler on

the finger. Always three slaps with a ruler on the finger, if they were caught speaking Latvian with other Latvian children.

From then on, the Germans came in. She went with her parents. I would say she was fleeing as a refugee, deep into Russia, actually was evacuated, like the factories were evacuated. She had no choice, and so she was evacuated to St. Petersburg, and stayed there during the war, suffered terrible famine, and then after the war, returned back, in a provincial town which was called Cesis, and it was sort of like a Latvian minor cultural center, I would say. Quite a few of the Latvian, I would say, intelligentsia writers or painters came from that region. It was just coincidence. And there she entered, for the first time, a Latvian, I would say, high school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the name of this town?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It was called Cesis, and it is C-E-Z-I-S.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Thank you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It's certainly, I would say, in the way we're talking, it's really an unimportant place; it was just another place. From then on, and, of course, what she liked, she really excelled in most subjects. I must say she was very talented with most anything. She was talented in music, she was talented in literature, she even was talented in math, and she was talented and played in the school theater.

By graduating, she really didn't know what she was trying to do, but she wanted to study, so she went to Riga, the capital, where we had the only university at that time, and she finally decided to study German literature, and she got her bachelor's there and then she got her master's in German literature. Of course, probably her work, as she graduated, her thesis was on [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe, and the two plays, what he had played, which he had written about, I would say, about sixteenth, seventeenth century Spain. I must admit that at this point I can't remember those plays, what those plays were, and very few people remember. They know that Goethe wrote poetry, but nobody remembers that he wrote also a score of plays, which are, by this time, they are all largely forgotten, and only probably scholars remember them. In those plays, there were names like Raimondo and Armando, and so, for one reason that my name is Raimonds and the name of my other brother is Armando, or Armands. So it comes from this play, when she was doing her master's thesis in school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was she in school then? When was she in the university?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, in the university, starting in her early twenties, and off and on, and she graduated sometime in the early thirties. She got her master's in '31.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So she was going to school while she was raising you children?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right. She was going to school while she was raising us, and my father was practicing medicine. Then later, my mother, of course, like she was really probably interested in poetry, she started writing, first reviews and discussions of poetry in the local magazines. She did that up to the point, in a way, until the day she died, here in the United States. I think probably she died in 199--just a few years ago, I think it was 1993. I think the last review she wrote was somewhere around the mid-eighties.

When she decided that she still could write, she said, "It is time, like a carpenter." Like my father. "It's time to hang up your hammer, so it's time to hang up my pen on the wall and it's time to quit." I think that she was around eighty-four or eighty-five, and so she stopped writing altogether, which she had really followed all my career, and probably all my knowledge about literature, or interest, I really got from her.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, in fact, simply put, you reaped the benefit of the family upward mobility in terms of education and opportunities, familiarity with art and culture, music and literature.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which has served you very well. Of course, during this time, your father obviously, as a doctor, who was cultivated and well educated. Where do visual arts fit into this? Was there interest in your home in painting, in the visual?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: In the visual arts, probably the only interest was--well, actually, it probably concerned my mother, but then you had to go back to my father, which is probably a completely different line, and he's an entirely different person. But probably, whatever I would say, my interest and talent in arts and my concern with arts, it really comes from my mother's side. I would say, definitely, from my mother's side only, because it's strange enough, now I know of my relatives from my mother's side. One of them, I would say, is probably a designer of [unclear], and another, probably one of my cousins, and they're all on my mother's side, now he's in television. Then, another cousin, which had come, he's in music and then another cousin that I have, he's in

theater. So, strangely enough, on my mother's side, every one of my cousins and my aunts or my uncles are somehow connected in some way with arts, in general. I would say whatever concern I get, it's from that, from the mother's side.

Now you ask this question, how do I come in contact with painting? Probably it was for the reason that my mother, she collected paintings. When she could, I would say, afford it, from an early age, she collected art. Of course, it was Latvian art, of course. I would say, our apartment, or the place where we lived, as far as I remember, there were paintings on every wall, like the wall spaces were really full.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this traditional art, folk art?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, no, it was traditional. It was traditional art, done by the local painters who had graduated from art schools.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? Basically contemporary artists?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I would say 100 percent contemporary. No, she wasn't interested like in nineteenth century, or collecting antique art. No, she was collecting contemporary art which was painted at that time, in Latvia. She really bought art at every occasion. I don't know, is it proper to make a digression?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure. Of course.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Okay. The digression is this, is that even now, as I went to Latvia, and it was about two months ago, it was the last time I was in Riga, I spent some of my time reclaiming two of the canvases, which was one of the huge canvases, about the size of the one you have behind you. It was even larger. A huge ornate frame. And it was, I would say--

PAUL KARLSTROM: Four by four, are you saying?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, something--

[Tape 1, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing the interview with Raimonds Staprans, this is tape one, side B. You were talking about your recent trip to Latvia, and actually reclaiming some--well, I guess you said some tools, but paintings.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I was claiming some paintings, and one was probably, I would say, a huge canvas of a seascape, which was done by a Latvian painter, what was called a "diploma" work. As you graduate from art school, then you, let's say, paint a certain painting, and it was called like diploma work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like academic.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, sort of. In a way, academic, but at that time I think it was fashionable to paint like what one would call realistic impressionism. It was impressionistic in the realistic vein, which was really popular in Europe, probably in around the teen, nineteen, I would say, nineteenth century teen years, and the twenties. Of course, since there was also another canvas, and so reclaimed it, you know, a collection. So that's a digression.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is important, because these were the kinds of works with which you were surrounded as you were growing up.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right, yeah. And the thing is, that anywhere where I looked, on the walls, there was always a painting. Not that I was really interested in painting, but there was no choice. Either I looked at one painting or I looked at the other. [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughter] Did you like them?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Very early, really, I determined that I liked some and I disliked others, and I don't know why, for some reason, but I found some more interesting, and then even at a very early age, I saw that I determined, I decided that some painters, I thought they were kind of clumsy and that some others were a little bit more elegant. I would say it was when I was about the age of eight, nine, or ten.

So I think we have probably exhausted anything that goes with the mother and I. Take it all together, comparing it, I got probably interest in painting, interest in literature, interest, I would say, in poetry, or in arts in general. And probably the second thing it was that probably my mother mostly associated also with artists and writers or poets at that time, and invited them to dinners. As a child, I was listening, of course, like in Europe, not like the children here, who think that at the age of three, they should be listened to. I could sit at the table, but I was

told not to speak, just to listen, and I think just by listening I really gained quite a lot, and really absorbed quite a lot of information which served me later, a little bit. So that was probably all I can say about my mother.

Now, from my mother, there's an entirely different line, lineage, and it's almost like night and day. Like my father--to start this, my other interest is in politics, in general, and that comes from my father. Coming from a father, I would say, he was also born in Talsi, in 1900, at the turn of the century, and like in the family of his teacher father and his peasant, very simple, I would say, very plain, maybe I would say, even ugly-looking housewife mother.

He went there to his grammar school, then he went to high school in a larger city, and at the age of fifteen, as he graduated probably from high school, he was also evacuated during the First World War, in Russia, where he became, in a way, sort of a revolutionary. At the age of fifteen, he joined the Socialist party, and went through all this turmoil in Russia, and gave Socialist speeches at the age of fifteen. He said he felt at the time, at the age of fifteen, you should be a grown-up man. You should have, at the age of fifteen--and that's what he said--a completely developed view of the world, like the Germans say, "[German phrase]," and you should know, at the age of fifteen, what you want. At the age of fifteen, you should know in which direction you should be going, which is, of course, completely different from what we think of today. Very easily, you add another fifteen years, when we look at our children.

So, at fifteen, he was travelling, a Socialist, around Russia and giving speeches and he would give speeches. He had such a conviction, as if he was a grown man, on any subject. Like he was giving speeches on marriage, he was giving lectures on marriage, on free love, and then he remembers one thing, that at one point, when he was giving a lecture on free love, and all the women were saying, "But my dear lecturer, don't you think you should wait another couple of years before you should lecture on free love?" And then he said, "I cannot imagine how insulted I felt." So he said, "That's really terrible," and that's really the kind of a man he was.

And then, of course, then when in all the turmoil in Russia, like the Social Democrats, they were also, at that time, in ways, they were arch enemies of the Communists, so also they joined, in a way, what they called more towards the [Leon] Trotsky movement. But that's probably an experience in itself which would probably fill a book. Really, his brother has already written about it, and there is a book on these experiences, and that's an entirely different matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that so? There's a book already published?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, yes. It was published. My father has a brother who's a journalist and he wrote a book.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In Latvia?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, in Latvia. He wrote those experiences. But again, I'm digressing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I think that's interesting. This is part of your background.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, that's part of the background. As you go along, you sort of digress in many directions. So he returned, probably at the age of nineteen, eighteen, he returned to Latvia. He joined, in a way, the Latvian Army, and then he fought the Germans in 1918, and then he volunteered, also, to the Eastern Front and fought the Communists, and he got kind of a cross for it, for the bravery. I don't know how brave he was, but apparently, in a way, he was brave. He had very few anxieties, compared to me.

Then when he was demobilized, of course, he was already sort of a member of the Socialist party. He was an acting member. He went around giving speeches, political speeches, on social democracy. He was elected to the City Council and, also, to probably the City Council of the capital, Riga, on the Social Democrat ticket, and then he was also elected, I would say, chairman of the Association of Physicians, and has a lot of other, probably, political posts, off and on.

Of course, as elections came, he was one of the main speakers, and he has really a gift for speaking. He can speak without notes, very coherently, for hours on end, has really probably a talent for which I really have great admiration, because I'm just the opposite. I have to have things written out, and unless they are written out, I cannot speak publicly at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you didn't inherit that particular--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, that particular--and probably I found it very fascinating, because on his election speeches, he took me along. Again, I was listening to the way he was giving speeches and the crowds were clapping and admiring and yelling. Among his compatriots and the party members, I'm not ashamed to say, really, he was regarded, he was said, "Now hear this man with a golden tongue." And of all the speakers, yes, he had, I would say, a golden tongue. He would speak on any subject, mostly political, and all the women would just

cry and break out in tears.

I know the last speech he gave, it's an emigré group, and I think that was about five years, before he contracted Alzheimer's. That was in '75. The last speech he gave is a group of emigré gatherings in San Francisco, to an audience of several hundred people. Somebody rose up and he said, "My God, hear this man with the golden tongue, and he still hasn't lost it." So, then my other line, from the arts, I was also connected, from my father's side, to politics, which I still have today. I don't know. Am I doing it too slowly?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Too much detail?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Maybe you can prompt me along.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'll tell you if I think that it's not interesting. It seems to me that this gives a very good, full picture of the environment in which you, the eventual artist, were coming up. When did your father have time to go to medical school? When did he become a doctor?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, he did that at the same time. He did his politics and the medicine--like he said, "The politics is my hobby, but my real occupation, it's the medical school." So he had been to medical school in '25, he finished in five years. Then he had his residence in surgery, and he also became a surgeon. He was a man, really, of immense energy, which I don't have and none of the others have.

What he did, he got up at six o'clock, he started operating at six o'clock in the morning. He did his operations 'til noon, he came home at noon, he had a nap, fifteen-minute nap, he fell deeply asleep for fifteen minutes, he got up, then he worked 'til about six o'clock, seven, then from seven 'til twelve, he did his politics. Either he did the party work, he went to bed at twelve. He never slept more than five hours, most of his younger years, I would say. Again, he had this energy level, which I really admired, and I wonder how come that I never got it. Although at certain times, my wife, Ilona, like she says, "Look at you. At certain times, you are indestructible." Indestructible, that I still can go for about two nights without sleep, and go for a couple of days before I collapse, and then I see most of my friends collapse a little bit sooner than I do. So I probably inherited some of it, although not all of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How many siblings do you have? How many children?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Children? I have two.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, no--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Siblings, you mean?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your brothers, sisters.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, I just have one brother.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just one brother. So there are two.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, there are two.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe your brother got all that energy.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. Some of it, some of it, yes. Coming back to it, he got some--actually, both of us got some of it, and some of it not. Also, his wife says he's, in a way, indestructible. He can get by in a few hours and work and--

PAUL KARLSTROM: What does he do? Is he into the arts?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, he's not in arts. He's in engineering and physics. Actually, I would say he has a very illustrious, in a way, an illustrious career. Can we digress, I would say, to his profession?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure. Is he here in this country?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: He's here now, and if you're around, you're probably--if you have a party, you'll probably meet him. Well, he really got, in a way, an international name, because he devised, with another, an American, they devised the first radar that could shoot to the moon and back. That was in the fifties, you know, when they

had the radar. But you could shoot only that far. Then at the University of California, where he was as a graduate student, in a way, he and those both two fellows, he and this Alan, all of sudden could develop, increase the range tenfold. It was just pure luck. Then increased tenfold, then in a way, as a publicity stunt, they aimed it at the moon, and it bounced back, back to Earth. So it was in all the papers. So, on the grounds of that, he quit. He got his Ph.D. in physics, and he was immediately gobbled up by Varian Associates, which is probably the largest radar manufacturer in the world, I would say. His radars are installed all over Europe. Actually, he produces radars, I would say, for the missiles, missile tracking and etc., and the radars are in probably every military establishment in NATO. So, in short, it's the largest manufacturing. And there he worked as a chief engineer, and as a manager, and now they're getting an associate. They are split up, and now the president and general manager of the split-off company, which is called Communications Company, which employs several thousand people here in the Silicon Valley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the first company called?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Varian Associates. So, compared to us artists, now he's, I would say, a really well-to-do person, with an income much larger than six figures, and dying to retire, but he's not retiring. He says, "As long as I'm making all this money, I hate to retire."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Seems reasonable.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Seems reasonable. So that's my brother, but again, I'm probably digressing and leaving out the father somewhere.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I don't think so. I suppose we ought to then take it back to prior to the emigration, prior to their coming over, those years. I seem to remember that even within Europe then, your family did some moving. You began a pattern of moving that eventually got you over here.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, that's true, yes. Well, I would say, I would still probably continue with my father and his political career, to know why I still have interest. As a sideline, I take some active interest in the Latvian politics, for politics in general.

Well, from then on, in 1934, then when putsch, I would say, and a dictatorship evolved in Latvia in 1934 and it was a momentous event. It used to be a democracy, but like in many of the European countries, it was taken over by some local dictator. So, since he was a Social Democrat, of course, in a way, he was persecuted. He wasn't thrown exactly in the jail, although he should have, but he had some influential friends, and then he didn't, but he was probably thrown out of all his posts, and he was thrown out of his hospital.

So what he did, he founded a private clinic of his own, and, strangely enough, I would say, from the economic point of view, monetary point of view, he did very well. Then the Soviets came in and then, of course, his clinic was nationalized. We had sort of a beach house; it was taken over by the Soviets. So he worked as a physician at a hospital, simple physician. Then after a while, like during Hitler's offensive into Russia, the Germans came in. As a Social Democrat, in a way, he was slightly persecuted, and he really should have been arrested, but he also had some influential friends among the local Germans, which kept him out of the jail. So he worked quietly and privately as a physician until '44, when the Russians came back in and we decided it was time to move to the West.

There was this western movement of all the Eastern Bloc peoples, including Ukrainians, the Baltic people, the Poles, the Romanians, the Czechs, and the Hungarians and everyone, and the Eastern Germans, too. So we all landed in Germany, and then he landed in the United States and got his license and worked as a doctor, first as a surgeon, and then we really coaxed him into switching his fields, so he became a psychiatrist, for the reason is, he said, "Surgery, it is really a very consuming profession, physically speaking." And at that time, he said very few surgeons live longer than fifty, fifty-five. They get heart attacks or high blood pressure, or something. And when you look back, it's really true. So we really coaxed him into changing his fields, and he started studying psychiatry, and went into psychiatry. He became, rather, I would say, so on a small scale, a rather reputable psychiatrist, which went just fine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was, what, in the fifties?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, that was in the fifties and in the sixties. At the same time, he was also instrumental in the local Latvian politics and he was also in Social Democrat politics in Germany. So from his side, I acquired the interest in politics. And what about arts? I would say I always said that he had no feeling for arts in general, absolutely none whatsoever. He wanted to be associated with arts, but he didn't have the eye. Like he would say, he was a-musical, a-artistic, nonartistic. I don't know, there must be a proper word for it. He really just knew it really wasn't in him.

It was really a strange combination, really a great contrast between my mother and my father. But in a way,

they got along reasonably well, because in a way, they complemented each other. But also because my father wanted always to associate with artists, and he always said that he had a very low opinion of his profession. He says, "When you really talk to doctors, they are limited. Most of them, they are stupid." And I quote him directly. To become a doctor, all you have to have, what he has, a really, a well-padded behind. You sit, and you memorize, you work in a very narrow field, you really don't have to have any imagination at all, and you have to have--let's say, they are very dull people.

So what he did in his spare time, he really didn't associate too much with his colleagues. He also associated with artists, with actors. He liked actors. And with writers and poets and so, actually, like I said, because my mother and my father really went along, in our house probably there were not too many medical people, but mostly people connected with arts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: At what point did you begin to notice, to really pay attention to the fact that these were the kinds of people that your parents generally were having over to the home? Or did you just take this for granted, or did you notice that these were creative people--writers and artists, and these sorts?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, what I noticed probably was that they were more interesting to listen to. Definitely, they were more interesting than some of the doctors. Of course, my father, he had to also throw some parties for his colleagues, and then I would always sit in and listen to them. I would say, at that time, I would say, I also, probably a good thing I acquired, somehow absorbed some medical knowledge and interest in medicine. Being hypochondriac by nature, I even probably read some medical literature, and I'm reading it now, so to see what kind of terrible sicknesses I could contract in the future, and I have contracted. So I have, probably, a fairly good--I don't want to brag about it, but I have a fairly good, for a layman, a fairly good knowledge, let's say, as layman knowing medicine. All my friends call me the "bogus doctor," so whenever they have problems, they don't want to go the doctor's, they come to me and I say, what you should do, this or that, you should see that kind of a specialist, and maybe you have this or that.

And from then on, I really realized what my father said, that to be really a regular doctor, you don't really have to be very smart, and even you don't have to know very much. And as a thing, it turns out, of all the professions that you have, be it, let's say, engineering or being a lawyer, if you know something about medicine, you can hang out a shingle, and you can treat patients and it will really take some time, a long time, before you will get caught. A lot of people have done it and have gotten along famously. As a joke, I always thought, you know, up to a point, I could do it, and it would really take a little while for me to catch it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I hope you wouldn't practice surgery. [Laughter]

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, I wouldn't practice surgery, but internal medicine, definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about psychiatry?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Psychiatry. Oh, that's even easier. Absolutely, absolutely. Psychiatry, it's really very easy. All you have to do is, really, you have to listen to the patient, just to listen and be compassionate and to ask some questions, and you will never get caught.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's go back again. I keep wanting to take us back to prior to the family coming to the United States. I know that you moved, the family moved to Germany.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Basically escaping the return of the Russians, is that right?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right, the return of the Russians.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So where was it? Remind me what city you moved to. Was it Berlin? Is that right?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, again, it is a story. And then again, probably, I have to thank my father. First, we moved to Berlin. There was a shortage of doctors and he was also working as a surgeon, and before that, he was working for a while as a surgeon in a--

[Session 1, tape 2, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing the first interview session with Raimonds Staprans. The date is 14 August 1997, and this is tape two, side A.

Raimonds, we were moving with you and your family from Latvia to Germany, and your father setting up, somehow, a medical practice, I guess, in Berlin. Is that right?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, in a way, he was--now, like in a German hospital, he was sort of promised the post of a director of the hospital in Berlin, so it was quite a good post, but he turned it down. He said, "Well, the Germans have lost the war. Berlin would be bombed. It would be ordered by the Russians, probably, at the war's end. Let's move to someplace else, and I'll work just as a simple, low-level physician, to tide over the war."

So he got a job assignment to a remote hospital, in, of all the places, the Austrian Alps. It's part of what you would call, it's now really a prime, today it's a prime, it was always a prime tourist spot for Europeans. Probably there were, let's say, Alpine lakes and meadows and mountains, snow-capped mountains. It's in the Austrian Alps, in one of the small towns called Badausee, and that's where we, let's say, stayed, and expected and met the American army, the American Occupation Army. Because of him, for this reason I'm helpful, and I'm always, let's say, have this great admiration for him, because he had a really great practical, what you would call "horse sense." He had horse sense, and he had sort of an innate knowledge, which all his friends say, knowledge of people, or what the Germans say, "[German phrase.]" He knew people, and that's why he could so easily switch to psychiatry, and was really a successful psychiatrist, because he could evaluate and look for, talk to someone for five minutes and then he would say, "He's that kind of a person," and it turns right. I say, "How do you do it?" He says, "I have this intuition."

PAUL KARLSTROM: You, yourself, though, seem to me to be very interested in emotional life and mental states and these kinds of traits, personality traits and so forth.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. Yes, I would say I'm interested in, I would say, in psychiatry, for the same reason, and mostly to help myself. This interest I probably got from my father, in a way, I got from my father, in a way. Also, I must really admit, neither I nor my brother, and my wife says it and my brother's wife says it, that that's probably one trait we did not inherit from him, neither one of us really are what I would say are "[German phrase.]" We make mistakes. We really don't know people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you are interested in their interactions?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, I'm interested in their interactions. And what I am saying, why I'm digressing about this, and then he came to the United States, then he has a chance to go, let's say, as we emigrated, he had a brother living in Argentina, in Buenos Aires, who offered him probably to become a partner in some business and to go and really work, had his work laid out, and then he had a chance to go to the United States, where things weren't sure at all, and also he had an uncle there, but it really seemed like a gamble, and he really determined that it's better to take this gamble, and it was his decision to come to the United States, and as it turned out, it was the right one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was an uncle of yours, a brother of your father's?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, it was a brother of my grandfather, who was living in Salem, Oregon. He was, I would say--

PAUL KARLSTROM: A great-uncle to you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, yeah. He was a chiropractor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In Salem, Oregon.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Right. Salem, Oregon. And he practiced there, I would say, 'til the mid-fifties, about '55, when he retired.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's see now. This was '47, right?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah. In '47, March '47, we came to the United States.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what led up to that? It sounds to me like you had a very nice situation, your family, there in this resort town of, what is it, Bad--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Badausee.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you spell that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: B-A-D-A-U-S-E-E. That is Austrian.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anyway, it sounds like that that was a very nice place to be. What was, then, the impetus that led to this decision to move still again? And this is a big trip all the way over to the West Coast.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, actually, because there was really no future in it. In a way, and at the same time,

Austria was destroyed and you were probably an emigré. Of course, you could stay in Germany, but the times were very hard, and then, of course, Germany is a nationalistic country and then, of course, everyone knows about the United States. Everyone wants to get in, even now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sometimes you wonder why.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, but you only have to be an emigrant to know why, and now you realize why. If you are an exile, if you are an emigrant, like you would say, this is the only country to be free, one and only one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so your father determined--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, my father determined that--

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was sponsored by--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah. Well, in a way, he was sponsored by his uncle, and, of course, a lot of people went out in what you would call, two, three years later, because of the Displaced Persons Act, when a lot of the displaced persons, who had, let's say, migrated, fleeing from the Communists, from Eastern Europe, or some also from the Nazis, they were let into the United States. There were several hundred thousand people, I think. It was half a million or something like that, and it was a special Displaced Persons Act. I think it was in '48, passed by the Congress. A lot of people were let in. They were carried in some of those, I would say, old Liberty ships, which used to carry troops, in the old troop ships.

For me, again, it was somehow easier because, before that, we came on the independent visa of Latvia, because we had an affidavit from the uncle. We travelled as regular passengers on a passenger ship, with all the amenities, and also because of my father.

So, I would say, coming back to my father, he was a person, just because he was, in a way, so wise and he had such a horse sense, he always levelled, or made the easiest road possible for the family, under very trying circumstances.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Can you remember what it was like coming here, coming to America? Did you go immediately, then, across the continent to Salem, to Oregon?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right, yeah. We landed--

PAUL KARLSTROM: What are your recollections of coming here?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, there are some recollections. One, we landed in New York, and, all of a sudden, coming from a destroyed German small town, from a displaced persons' camp, you lived in a displaced persons camp for a while, and how to be there, it's a story in itself. Probably one could write a small volume on that alone, but let's bypass that. That would take time.

Then we landed in New York and we were placed. In a way, we were sponsored by Uncle, but in a way, we were supervised by this Social Democratic organization of the United States. So we were placed in a seedy hotel, and it was just right opposite the Rockefeller Center. Of course, all those seedy hotels have been torn down by now. They are all gone. They were torn down sometime in the sixties. But at that time, it was still there, and it was just opposite on Sixth Avenue. Actually, it was Sixth and 58th Street. That I remember.

After a few days, then, on train, we crossed the continent, stayed a day in Chicago, and about three days later, arrived in Salem, Oregon, where my uncle and aunt were expecting us, and we were put up in an attic he had built up for us. It was a very nice attic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There were four of you?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, there were four of us, my father, my mother and my brother, of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is your brother older or younger?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: He's younger. He's four years younger. And then, of course, it was sort of a vacuum. My uncle gave us $1,500 and he said, "That's all I can give you. You'll have to make do." And so my father, what he did, he went out, he had English lessons. For a time being, he got a job at a local psychiatric hospital. He started out as a male nurse, in a way, and then in a couple of months, he was promoted as a resident doctor, when he learned his English a little bit better.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In a couple of months?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: In a couple of months.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He learned enough English, or did he have English already?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, he had some English lessons, but he knew very little. But, like I would say, even at the age, in his late forties, he was a fast learner, and he had to. He has this boundless energy, like he would say, he would put in a full day's work, then he would study English from, let's say, nine o'clock 'til midnight, three hours every day, and then get up at six, like he did before.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he became a doctor, a staff physician, in a short time.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, in a very short time. But he didn't have the license. At that time, if you worked at a state hospital or at a prison hospital, you didn't have to have a license. And it's still true today. You only have to have graduated from a school, from a certain school, let's say, from an accredited university. The university accredited, you don't have to have. But still, that's another story. Later on, he took his exams and he got his license, his specialist degree and everything, first in medicine, then also in psychiatry, etc.

And the mother, she stayed at home, and she went through menopause, and she had a fit of depression, and she was very neurotic. But then, going back, she went through a very emotionally and through a very difficult time, like one would say, I would say, really a depressing neurosis, complicated by what one calls early menopause. She had anxiety attacks, and etc. I would say, from a psychiatric point of view, she was ill.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Manic depressive, maybe?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, not manic depressive. Not manically depressive, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Clinical depression.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Clinical, yeah. It was just clinical depression, I would say, combined with, in psychiatric terms, with anxiety, neuroses--anxiety, neuroses, mostly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So to be direct, you feel that that's the genetic source for some of your own--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, definitely. Yes, yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Something that I'll know we'll talk about later on.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Definitely, and it has really influenced my development quite a lot, because from the earlier days, and this I probably acquired it from my mother's side. Probably what you would call this "floating anxiety," my grandmother on the mother's side had it, my mother had it, and I have it. I always, even when I was younger, I had one prayer in life, you would say. "Take away my anxiety, God. If you do that, I don't want from you anything else."

But I see signs, know that anxiety is really genetically inherited, the level of anxiety each person has, and apparently there is nothing you can do about it. There is no treatment, like you treat schizophrenia, you can treat manic depression and psychosis, but you cannot treat the person's anxiety level. It remains constant, and you have to learn to deal with it. Usually, it's general floating anxiety.

At that time, I would say, I have this anxiety and neurosis, and of course, which probably blossoms into what I would call fear of various illnesses--making oneself a hypochondriac. I would say I'm definitely a hypochondriac. From an early age, I've been suffering seemingly from one ailment to another, real or imagined. I mean, dying from TB from the age I was fifteen, and then I had several imaginary bouts of cancer, until I got the real one a year ago. So that probably aspect has really influenced my life, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It will be interesting to pursue this a little later. Especially I think it would be useful in connection with, maybe not your paintings so much, although there are a few works I can think of that might fit, but maybe I'll learn that in some of your writing, in some of your plays, perhaps that this might--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Definitely, yes. Definitely, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Finally, we've got you to the U.S. I'm very proud of you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right. You're proud, yeah. [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you're how old?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I'm twenty.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're twenty.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I entered the United States at the age of twenty, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what happened to you then? You presumably had to start learning some English as well.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I had to learn some English, and I had absolutely hardly any knowledge of English at all. At that time, I spoke Latvian, I spoke definitely fluent German, which I had learned in childhood. Hardly any English.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And Russian?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Russian--very, very little. I knew some Russian, but actually very little, and the Russian is almost completely gone and the German is about, say, 80 percent gone, since I don't use it. And then I had to learn English, and the first way I learned English, it was, I went to the movies. I went to the movies and I really got fascinated, first time I was exposed to all those serials, which you had in movies in the early--see, like in television, you see the next installment next week, and that's how I learned my English, just by going to the movies. At first, I didn't understand anything, then I began to understand some things, then I understood some more. So, really, I hardly didn't have any, at the beginning, really any formal education in English whatever. In a way, I had picked up by reading and by going to the movies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had already, presumably, completed the equivalent of high school?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, I was a high school graduate, like at that time, what they called "classical gymnasium," where I had really studied Latin and Greek, quite useless languages. French and German. So these were the languages. I knew some French.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you really had completed a course of study that really was more demanding than what an American high school--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, definitely, yes. Definitely, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And did it include literature and art, any art history?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, some art history, some literature. Like in the European high schools, there was a lot of history, I would say, and I was exposed to history. Probably one of my, I would say, pet fields, if one could call it that, is also history. In a way, I consider myself a history buff, and I feel like I have some sense of the history and I can relate things historically. Even today, I read history books, any kind of history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said earlier, when we were having lunch, you were telling me the main themes, subjects of your plays, and you said, "history and sex."

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, that's right, yeah. History and sex.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And maybe sometimes together.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: And sometimes together. That's exactly it. Which means they are the two concerns I have. It's history, and then of course, also, sex, and maybe sexual problems, if you would call it. Anxieties, which probably all males have. Probably I have them more than some people. And then, of course, in a way, to get to terms with it, you have to write about it. But, of course, but now again we are digressing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I don't think so. I think this is a very productive line.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Do you want to pursue this line?

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I think we'll save it, if we may. I think it could be very productive. I still don't have a sense of how much involvement you actually had with art up to this point, if you had actually taken classes in painting or drawing, if this was part of your experience. Where, at this point, did you stand in terms of seeing art as a part of your life and something that you wanted maybe to pursue?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: All right. Well, then, we really have to go back from the very beginning, because we have discussed, I think, probably, our parents and the physical moments.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Let's get to Raimonds the artist.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, that's right. Actually, we really discussed my parents on both sides, and I'm here somewhere in the middle, so we really have to start from the way back.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, let's do it then.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It's myself and my art. Probably, like you'd say, I've been drawing, in a way, doing art all my life, like starting from, I think as I mentioned, doing the funeral processions, doing the others. I would say, only just for pure enjoyment, I've been sketching. I was really just destined, like everyone is in my family, like I say, on my father's side, were physicians, so it's a European custom, you follow in your father's footsteps. So I was determined to be a doctor, and, really, I thought I would study medicine. That's why I went to classical school.

But always, at the same time, something was drawing me back to drawing and painting and watercolors, painted in watercolors and maybe also a little oils. Of course, my parents considered and I considered, it was a very pleasant pastime. And really, I would say, I was doing it most of my free time. Then I went to school, of course. In primary, I would say, in grade school and then in high school, all through this high school, we had art classes, and I was really very interested. I thought I was doing very well. I'm not ashamed to admit that in most of those classes, I really was the best student. Somehow it figured out I always got A's. It came easy, but I never thought, really, at that time that I would become an artist. I really thought that I didn't have what it takes, I didn't have the talent.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Am I right in this, you did see it as an attractive career for somebody?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, I saw it as an attractive--I definitely saw it as an attractive career for somebody, but it definitely wasn't me. I was supposed to be a doctor, and that's what I thought. I went to the proper school where they taught Latin. Naturally, it was a school that prepared for the medical faculties in university, the medical departments of the universities. But at the same time, and all through the high school, I painted, I was doing watercolors. I think I still have a couple of them here. Maybe I can dig them out. I took them over from the old country.

But then it was in Germany, in the displaced persons' camp, and there was really nothing to do, and there, next to this displaced persons' camp, there was this art school, school of art. I think that I've mentioned it in my biography, in art school in Esslingen, Stuttgart, and it was really a traditional academic school of art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was in Stuttgart?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, that was in Esslingen. It's sort of a suburb of Stuttgart. A small town, it's a vicinity. Like you have Stuttgart in the middle, and you have those little towns around it, like Esslingen, Luttingen, Geislingen, Mundelfingen, etc. All those crazy-sounding names, all ending with "fingen" or "lingen." It's particular in this area.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I want to make sure I have this right. You say you were, in effect, in a displaced persons' camp.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I was in a displaced persons' camp, and then we were just waiting. We were just waiting to get to the United States.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But there was an art school there?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. By chance, there was an art school there, and I just went to the art school, and my God, I liked--I would say the education was very academic. We were drawing from plaster casts. Somebody put up a still life, and you really had to paint the way it looked, and I would say it really gave me some grounding in art.

You know, I think I probably have written down, and went to one of the teachers, I was really fighting, I could say, "Yes, these are plaster casts," and the teacher came along, he says, "No, you're all wrong." And he said, "You're all wrong." And I said, "Well, that's the way I see it," and he says, "You see nothing yet. It will take you five years of drawing those plaster casts and still lifes before you can even begin to see." And, of course, I was upset, but then I began thinking. And now looking back, I think, my God, in a way, the man was right. So I really have a--I don't know if I can digress--no, I shouldn't digress. So I studied in this school, which was probably not quite a year, and that was before coming, and then I came to the United States.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You didn't have, probably at that level, life classes?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, yes, I had life classes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You got to work from the nude figure?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Also from the nude figure. Started working still-life nude figures and everything, but mostly it was drawing and less painting, but you have to be really, I would say, very accurate. And in a way, it

helped me quite a lot.

Then I came to the United States. Now the thing it was, what to do? You had to go to the college, try to go to the medical school. Then I think I would have to thank my father. Then I remember his words. He said, "I know you really like art." I said, "Yes, of course." And then he said, "Well, and what do you think about medicine?" Well, I said, "Probably I should study medicine." Then he said, "Well, let me tell you. You know, medicine is really a dull profession, and if you don't mind being poor all your life, I would recommend art. Everyone (and I've told that before), everyone can become a doctor, but only a few people can become artists. So, why don't you try to go that way. I'll support you." And I said, "No, no. I wouldn't do it." "No," he said, "I'll support you. Study art."

[Tape 2, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing this first session, interview with Raimonds Staprans. This is tape two, side B.

We just learned something interesting and rather unusual for a parent, I think. Your father, in effect, as you said, talked you out of what others would say would be the more practical move, the career of being a doctor.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. And, of course, my mother definitely concurred, and she thought, "Why not try it." And then he said--well, he mentioned before I probably left for art school, he said that, and said, "I really probably do it for very selfish reasons, mainly because if you have someone who does art in the family, our own life probably will be enriched in some way."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow, that's very enlightened, isn't it?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, I would say it was--listening to other parents of the emigrés, who all went to the practical side, and he said, "You'll be enlightened," and he says, "I don't really want another doctor in the family. I'm a doctor, and I'm kind of bored with my colleagues, because they are so narrow-minded, in a way, and so, I would say, in a way, very narrowly educated, and I want to expand my own education." And also he said, which was very open and kind of him, he says, "I know you realize that I really have no knowledge of either literature or of arts, and I really don't see art, and I don't really feel it. Maybe with you around, you will help me to acquire some knowledge, some feeling for the arts in general, more." So these were exactly his words, which, in a way, I myself found it strange at the time. But that's the kind of a man he was.

And so I entered--where would I go? I could go to the University of Oregon. In the meantime, I think it was probably for about a year and a half, or two years, I did odd jobs, like every emigrant will do, and I worked at--first, I started out as a dishwasher. Terrible profession. Like everyone, then I worked in sewers, where they paid well, cleaning sewers. It was a well-paying job. So I would say, what I acquired, my shit level is very high these days, my tolerance for shit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That must have been lovely.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I think the first week is hard. After that, you get used to it. You even don't smell it. But that smells awful, yeah. But like I said, you develop a tolerance for shit. Others [unclear], I don't, even now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So after you did those interesting temporary jobs?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, temporary jobs. As a housepainter, I worked as a housepainter. I almost got a union card, as a housepainter. Let's say, I was sort of assigned to paint a six-story house. I had to go up first on the stepladder up, and I looked down, and with my anxiety level, I said, "That's not the job for me." So I went from job to job, working in probably some sort of a--then I worked in a cannery. I would say I had about a dozen odd jobs, as a gardener, and everything else. Then I went to, I would say, to University of Washington, to the art school. That's where I started my studies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, the University of Washington. This must have been in what, '48?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That was in '48. I started in--

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fall of '48?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Fall of '48, after having probably been through a dozen odd jobs, one probably better than the other. I started in, and I sort of worked part time, at the same time I took school, and my father supported me just a little bit. Let's say I lived very frugally, in a way, in a boardinghouse with some other people, with a lot of other friends, people. And to get me some studies, I went to a dance school, and strangely enough, I supplemented my income by teaching ballroom dancing to some old ladies in the school. That's the way I supplemented my income.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you know how to dance that well?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, it was strangely enough, what I did, I already, in a way, danced in Latvia, actually, as a teenager, and actually ballroom dancing, it was, in a way, it was very popular, so I danced from age twelve on. I did some ballroom. And then I went just to take some lessons, and I wasn't really too bad, and then after a few lessons, like I said, "We need, for very low pay, some people who would teach, let's say, the basic steps to people who are coming in. And, of course, if you are willing to work for, I would say, for close to minimum wage, then of course you are on." And usually, like there are people who are coming in, who had no dancing and then they go through the first course, which, basically, you teach them the basic steps and how to walk, and how to walk yourself properly, and etc., and etc., and etc. And this I did after all school. The only bad thing it is, is that there's a policy in dance school, if you are a young man, in your twenties, you are assigned to an old lady. If you are an old lady dance teacher, you are assigned to a young man. It's never, never a young man is being assigned to--

PAUL KARLSTROM: To a younger woman.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: To a younger woman. They say that's trouble, and it's true. It's still true today, and if you see this picture of this--Japanese picture of the dancing we talked about, apparently it's still true in Japan today. [Laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that brought back memories for you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, that movie really brought back memories. The way the first steps are taught, I said, "My God, it was exactly the way I did it."

During the way, I took full course in art, in art and painting and art history, and I also took courses in drama, like I would say, a few courses in drama. So drama was my minor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember much about the departments, especially the art department there?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who were some of the people that you came into contact with?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I would say, most of the time, they were--I probably shouldn't say this--they were local nobodies. And when I consider it, they are still nobodies, and I didn't learn from them anything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Strangely enough. [laughter] At that time, well, there were some regional people, even from the northwest, like Graves. Then the only person who was there who joined a little bit later, from whom I learned, it was Mark Toby.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Toby was actually teaching there? I didn't know that I knew that.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. He was teaching for a little while. Among the teachers, the only classes I took from him, and I would say he was not very good as a teacher.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Toby?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, not--he was always mumbling something. And the thing, it was, you met him on the street, after the classes, and he went down University Avenue. He was only mumbling something. He was talking to himself, and in a way, it was true, when he went into the classes, in a way, he was talking to himself. Then, of course, I liked his work, and then, of course, he was famous, the only person who was internationally known at that time, but I didn't really know from that. But then there was another person who showed up and it was George Lebruin, or LeBrune, or Lebruin, and it was, in a way, a contemporary, a sidekick of Kokoshka. And it is strangely enough--

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was on the faculty at Washington?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah. He was in the faculty of Washington.

PAUL KARLSTROM: George Lebruin.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, George Lebruin. Nothing to do with famous R____ Lebruin.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, no, no. But spelled the same.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Spelled the same.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What kind of an artist was he? What was his work like? Figurative artist?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: He was figurative. In a way, impressionistic. He was painting very much like Kokoshka. They were really close friends. There were three friends--Kokoshka, when he moved; then there was Ensor; and George Lebruin. And they were in a way--

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was he a friend of Ensor, too?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, he was, yes, acquaintance of Ensor, too, yes. Ensor, yeah. Later, because of him, later, I wrote a couple of term papers on Ensor, and in way, through him, I got introduced to Ensor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very interesting choice.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, it was an interesting choice. And he painted, and I would say he was really a strict taskmaster, and whatever I learned about basic painting, about the color, about like the cool colors, about the light colors, about the local color, about deflected color, I learned from him, in about two years. I took classes from him for two years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There is a fellow, Ambrose Patterson, who I think was on the faculty. I'm not absolutely sure. Does that ring a bell?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, that doesn't ring a bell. No, I think he must have come, or she must have come after that. Like I would say that when I really now look back, the rest of the faculty, they remained, I would say, they were all local painters, at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me try one more name. I'm not going to go down the list, because--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, there's one more person, of course, yeah, who was teaching. Okay. I took those classes from George Lebruin, and he taught for two years, and then he was fired, and he was fired for the reason that he went around telling everybody that all this colleague painters and the professors of the faculty were really nobodies. And course, it wasn't tolerated. So he said he had to leave. And of course, he was right; they were nobodies. But we didn't know it, we didn't say it, but he said it openly, and he said it in his classes. He says, "Oh! Don't go to those classes. He's nobody. You will not learn anything from him." So that was interesting, for a teacher.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you ever run into, at the university there, a Japanese American sculptor, George Sudakawa?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah, Sudakawa.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know him. He's actually a friend, and would we--and this is a little digression on my part--but have been documenting him for the archives as well. He, I know, was many years on the faculty. I don't know if he was teaching yet at the university.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, he was teaching at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because he was a good friend of Toby.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yeah. You know, I never took sculpture, but I went to listen to his classes, and I think he was an inspiring teacher. In some way, he was an inspiring teacher, because he not only taught sculpture, he taught art. He taught about art. So I attended now and then. On my free time, I just went to his classes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: But then, probably the most influential person, like after the war, some of those luminaries showed up, like all of a sudden in my second year, Alexander Archipenko showed up. He taught for about two years at the school, mostly sculptor and he taught art also. He taught painting, in general. And there was a man with absolutely boundless energy, and whatever he said was absolutely inspiring. So, from him, I went to his lectures and he sort of--he didn't lecture. He was so emotional. He struggles, the way he lectures, with his hands, with emotions, and he really made you feel that what you are doing, that art is important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That it matters.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That it matters. Art matters. And before that, I really felt that, "Okay, you are doing art, but it's a sideline; it doesn't matter." But, really, when you left your classes, you really left with a conviction that what you did matters, that what you did is important, and could become important. But he was also, like I say, a person, he was really very strict, and, in a way, he really taught you that you really had to be absolutely serious,

absolutely committed. He says, "Unless you are not really committed, don't be in my class, and don't study art unless you are committed."

PAUL KARLSTROM: You took that to heart, I gather?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Absolutely, yes, I took it to heart, yeah, and I committed. So I really have a low opinion of those Sunday painters and those housewife painters and the painters who paint occasionally, because from him I really learned that you really have to do it, and you try to do it well. Like he would say, to paint with your blood, that's what he said. You have to paint with your blood and with your sweat, with your intestines and everything else. And he says, "If you are lucky, if you are lucky, maybe, maybe you will become a painter. But only maybe. No promises, no promises made."

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was your work like at that time? What were your subjects? What was your style? Obviously student work.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, definitely. Whenever I looked, it looked strictly like student work. Also, at that time, I could do a decent portrait. It's a fairly good likeness when now I look. Otherwise, there was life class, portrait classes, there were what you would say landscape painting, and the school was mostly sort of traditional. The abstract expressionism really wasn't in at that time. You could paint in sort of an impressionistic manner, or you could paint, in a way, in an expressionist manner. It was sort of like abstracted realism, in a way. It's very difficult to explain, but when you see paintings of that time, you would see that, well, the way most American painters painted, let's say, between '35 and '45, there was a subject matter, but there was some experimentation, abstract experimentation with the form, if you felt like it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was there interest in cubism?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, not at that time, no. None of the cubists and definitely not abstract expressionism, as such. Strangely enough, it wasn't even up to the time of 1952, when I graduated. Of course, there was Toby, Mark Toby, he was doing those abstract things, but he was sort of, I would say, in a way, he was an outsider. But he was famous, so everybody forgave whatever he did. I don't think he really left any kind of a mark on the students there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you graduated. You completed the course of study, for what would that have been? An MFA?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no. It's a bachelor's, fine arts. I was bachelor of fine arts with, I would say, with a major in art and minor in, I would say, in drama. Minor in drama.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you did this in the regular four-year course?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I did a regular four-year course, yeah. I worked summers half the time, and I did the four years, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you got out in '52.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I got out in '52.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Then what?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: And then I thought, "Well, what to do? What to do next?" And I really wasn't satisfied with what I was doing. And then what happened? Well, then I decided I would go to University of California, to Berkeley. That's what I heard, that it was a really progressive school. At that time, it was abstract expressionism, and there were all those important people, like probably Hofmann had been teaching there, and there was Felix Willow, whose work I had seen. Like I say, I entered the graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley, and then, of course, it's one of the abstractionist strongholds of the West Coast.

Upon admission, I entered the art department and I was informed by, I think, probably it's one vice chairman, I can't remember, and, of course, the quote to us was, he said, "Of course, you well know our school has the highest standards on the coast, and while the other schools, the one where you have been, produce only graduates in painting, we, on the graduate level, produce, on the other hand, produce competent artists, who, after graduation, are able to hold their own in any New York show." So that explains the atmosphere of Berkeley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, isn't that interesting. Nothing changes. You were attracted to Cal. Your family's still there.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: In Salem, Oregon. My family still stayed in Salem, Oregon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were attracted to Berkeley because of the reputation of the department, but it strikes me as interesting that you're interested in abstraction, but you didn't consider the San Francisco Art Institute, is that right? California School of Fine Arts Institute?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, I didn't, and I didn't for the reasons that I really didn't know it existed at that time. And then of course, I thought, my God, an additional university degree might come in handy at that time. So that was my other consideration, and then, of course, you have this famous name like University of California-Berkeley, and that was one of those things. Even if I had known about the Art Institute, at that time I probably wouldn't have attended, for, say, like a master's degree in fine arts in Berkeley. Well, it's better than fine arts, let's say, from like Spokane State College or the University of Oregon or something like it. Then, of course, I started there. It was a 100 percent nonobjective school, and it was sort of impressed upon us that you have to paint in an abstract fashion.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is this the legacy of Hans Hofmann?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's exactly the legacy of Hans Hofmann, that if you want to stay in the school, you have to do abstractionist, or nonobjective painting. At that time, I would say, they were quite adamant. Now, of course, it gradually changed and went through different phases, but that's what they said. He said, "If you don't really want to do this, you'll have to go somewhere else. If you want to learn the abstract painting, or nonobjective painting, this is the place."

And then what? At the beginning, I thought, "My God, I am not really into abstraction." So in one of my classes, what I did--and this was a class of, and probably you know, I had one of my first classes of this gentleman of Earl Loran.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, Earl.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Earl. I guess you know him. And anyway, later became quite good friends. Now I visit his lectures. The last time I saw him, Carl Kasten was giving the lecture. He was old and frail, so we talk about art in general. But my first confrontation, or meeting, was when, in one of his nonobjective classes, the students had an assignment to do a still life. I said, "Well, I'll do something different, just as a joke." And I sort of painted a very conventional vase, with red roses and sort of a slightly pinkish background, and put it in a very ornate frame, and I put it on the walls with nonobjective works. So he went by and looked this way and that way, and didn't mention it. And then he said, "Who painted that?" and so I got up, and he said, "Of course, of course. I know you are trying to make a statement. What's your statement? But of course, you can paint like this and of course your work will be accepted as far as all the architectural requirements of a painting are being met." So that's what he said. I think probably he graded it. He gave me a C on that, which was quite all right.

Then I painted some other things in other classes, but they were, in a way, kind of representational. Then a teacher approached me and then he says, "Probably you've painted here for about three months, but I think this is not really the right place for you. You see, we have a certain, I would say, policy, our policy to do abstract painting, to do nonobjective painting. At this point, you see, if you want to do some kind of realism, or representational painting, you probably would have to go somewhere else."

So, confronted with that, I said, "All right." In a way, I wasn't there. I have no feel for abstraction. Okay, I'll do the abstract paintings. I got out my big canvases, my big pieces of paper, I started splashing away. All those paintings looked like, something like [Robert] Motherwell's, I think, like Franz Kline. Some looked like Hofmann's. I would say I wasn't doing so badly. It was kind of easy. I found it was easy, and I ultimately found out it was fun. It was fun to do.

And probably the good thing, doing abstraction, what I really learned was, I would say, sort of what you would call to become acquainted, or to get the feel of the basic architecture of painting and how a painting is being constructed, even if it is the most representational. And the structure, how you really, I would say, even if you are very representational or realistic, you have to have a feel that the painting should stand up as a building, as a piece of architecture, and this is one thing that you learn from abstract expressionism, which really has helped me later on. So really, actually, the year and a half spent there was not really a complete loss. As far as color went and, of course, I really felt that color-wise, I didn't learn anything, and from the teachers, as themselves, I learned very little. Of course, Carl Kasten was my pet teacher. We are very good friends today.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's a nice man. I know him.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Absolutely a nice man, and we meet socially, even now, and compare notes. [Telephone rings. Tape recorder turned off.]

Carl Kasten, yes. And probably I learned from him something about color, but that's about all. I left really the school, I got my master's, but I, really, looking back, I felt that my art schooling, I'd really learned relatively little,

and just a bit here and there. So I really, to conclude the tape, I left the school with a conviction that art schools, such as they are, it's really a big fraud, in a way, because--

[Break in Taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing an interview with Raimonds Staprans, the painter and writer. This is second session. The date is 25 August 1997. The interview is being conducted at the interviewer's home, Paul Karlstrom, in San Francisco. This is tape one, side A.

Last time, a couple of weeks ago, I guess it was, we spent a real productive about two hours talking about your background, and you went back to family in Latvia, and traced each side of the family. It was very good, and certainly, I think, have that all, that important family history, well recorded. Then we managed, actually, to get you here to the U.S. and actually even got you through school. We really ended up, I think, talking about your experience at art school and your experience at Berkeley, at UC-Berkeley. We certainly don't have to go into it any further, but if I recall correctly, if my notes serve me well here, you described the experience as a big fraud.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, that's absolutely true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you stick by that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I stick by that, yeah, and I really thought it over several times. Art school at a university level, it is a problem. I think it should be eliminated.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a pretty strong statement, and you're not the only one that has that view, but why don't you explain specifically what you mean by that, why you feel it should be eliminated at the university level.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, at the university level, it is because, in a way, you are really fighting for grades, and if you want to graduate, grades are important. This you really can do. Then, of course, there is another matter, that you have a teacher, and what he can really teach you, it is his vision. And you go to university, you really don't have a choice of a teacher. I really realized that it's really absolutely important to find the right teacher for you. If you go to a university, you have to take whatever classes you get, and very often you wind up with a man you really don't like, and you really realize that you don't learn much.

Then, secondly, people who are teaching, very few are simply good painters, when you really think of it, because they really can't devote much time to painting. I could probably say an example. Well, I have a very good friend, and it is Boyd Allen of UC. We were in the same class. Eventually he returned to the UC and then he climbed up the ladder and he became chairman of a department. So we were in contact. What he had to do, he really had to spend all his time in administration, and he did very little painting himself. He taught a lot of art classes, but he has very little experience. I think he's probably dead right now; he was drinking too much, unfortunately. When he probably was up for the chairmanship, then people objected that in all his career and all his life, he had had only one one-man show in a very unimportant gallery, and that's just about all. So I thought he was really doing probably nice abstract expressionist work while we were in the same class. I really didn't think that he really in his life, he really got very good experience as a painter. So that's another reason for it, because very few painters who really work professionally, in a way, they don't teach or they teach relatively little.

So I don't know if it answers your question, but I think it's for those two reasons. Usually when I go to a class and, really, I would say I've been to a lot of art classes, and then I look what the person does. Then you really find out you don't like it. You really see he really isn't a very good painter himself. So you wonder what can he teach you. So I'm a believer that at least I feel that whatever I've taught, I've taught it myself by experience and mainly by looking at other people's work, and that's all I need. You go to a show, you look at the painting. I think all painters are sort of scavengers, and they steal from each other. That's the way it should be. If you get a good painterly idea, you take it. The words really don't mean much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you feel, then, that the teachers within the university, or maybe any art school, that the teachers, even if the teacher isn't attempting to do that, that the teacher's vision, as you say, or point of view, or attitudes about art are inevitably imposed to some degree on the students? In other words, that it works, for the most part, counter to the goal of liberating one's own vision of the artist.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Definitely. Definitely. I would say it's very constricting, and especially if you are an academic on a university level, then what you have to do, you have to realize pretty soon, if you want to graduate, if you want to get a good grade, you have to do your work. Your work has to really, let's say, be done within the vision or the framework of the teacher's vision, of the vision of the teacher. This I really found out it's important, and once you do that, then you can sail along rather smoothly. Then you are a good student and even become a teacher's pet up to the point. I would say if you really are an artist, you have your own vision, stubbornly. I would say you stick to it, to this vision, and that's really a good thing, because if you have a certain vision and if you have certain, I would say, needs, then you really like the painters that paint like you. I really

wouldn't deny it; I like the painters that paint like me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Digressing just a little, but I think it fits, in a general sense, in what you're talking about right now, which seems to me to be an acknowledgement that it's useful and inevitable for artists to look around them, to find the work of the other artists with whom they feel a connection and respond to the work. At any rate, what about you? Going way back to art school days, who were those artists, whether they were dead artists or contemporary? Who were the ones where you felt this kind of vibration?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, yes, definitely. I would say that one of the painters was when we went starting probably with early fifties, I think it was DeStael, in a way, the way he simplified his things. Then, of course, I will always admire Matisse, and then I've always been also an admirer of [Pierre] Bonnard, and also an admirer of [Edouard] Vuillard. Bonnard, how he got, let's say, sunlight in his painting, and then the French painter Vuillard, how he really juxtaposed gray against colors. He had beautiful grays and then the certain color accents. So these were some painters.

Then probably also there was this French painter, very popular in the early sixties, since the late forties, French painter Soulages.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Soulages was more of an abstractionist.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, abstractionist, but I don't separate one from the other. You can be abstractionist, if the painting has something ...

PAUL KARLSTROM: Pretty much gestural.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: In a way, gestural. What I really like, the painting is simple, uncluttered. It really goes deep into my own nature. I really like simple things, uncluttered, uncluttered things, and I'm always trying to work towards that. It really probably affects all the other aspects of my life. I really fight with my wife, like I said, in our room, "You clutter it up with too many things, pots and pans and pottery and knick-knacks." I said, "My idea is like, what I would like really is to have a studio or room with nothing in it, a few paintings, maybe a few pieces of pottery, one piece of furniture, and a lot of empty space." And I know it's very deeply--it's my nature, because I come back to it in every other aspect in my life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you feel that--I'm sorry.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, I just wanted to mention probably another painter, an American painter like [Thomas] Eakins. I really was a great admirer of his clarity, of his color and with his simplicity, and how he could very simply depict very complicated subject matter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A master of composing, of arranging elements and architectural--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Architecturally arranging elements. I would say that's mainly important. So I would say, I always say probably in my second incarnation I probably would choose architecture. Really, I would say deep down, very deeply, to be quite honest, what really turns me on, I would say really more than painting, or a good painting, it is interesting architecture. If I see it and I really--

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, of course, that's not too much of a surprise if one looks at your work, because it's not just the fact that you often, certainly not always, but often incorporate structures, buildings, or boats, maybe, docks. This is a form of architecture; it's a built environment. Then, secondly, your paintings themselves are very carefully constructed.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, that's absolutely right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you've got architecture in the way you approach the composition and then often reference to, or inclusion, in terms of imagery, architecture. So that's not too surprising at all. Your list, as far as it's gone, brings up several questions. Eakins, I can understand that enthusiasm or interest of yours in Eakins, not so much from the color standpoint, because Eakins, not always, but in many of the works, a much more subdued palate, pretty brownish.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Sometimes even, in a way, digressing towards a cheap side, but yet I would say he really opted for a very simple structure. Of all American painters of that time, I really got a resonance from him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Beyond that, beyond Eakins, it seems to me most of your feeling of connection with artists were French. That seemed to take place in France. And around the turn of the century, at least the people you mention here, and, I don't know, maybe you've explained why that is, for some reason they embody these qualities that you feel you're after in your work, certainly they're not the only ones, though.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I would say there are probably others--no, actually, when I really think back, at least it's limited. Then, of course, you know, I got, let's say, exposed to the abstract expressionists. Now we come to another aspect. And the abstract expressionists, I become in a way like the works of [Franz] Kline and initially of [Robert] Motherwell, but then again, at that time, who didn't?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember when this was and how it was? Often artists talk about encountering these works in reproductions. Was that the case with you, too?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Probably reproductions and also seeing the paintings themselves in shows, in traveling. I would say mostly it's in reproductions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are we talking about the mid-fifties at this point?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. I'd say probably it would be early fifties. It is probably early fifties. I probably found those people mostly when I was in Cal, at University of California. You had to do it. Unless you didn't do abstract expressionist work, you were out at that time. It's strange. It probably isn't that way these days, but people at that time were very dramatic about it. It was either, like I say, abstract expressionist, or it was out. I don't know, it was probably--I've written something about it. I had notes and I've retyped the notes from hand. I said, "Discussions always revolve. There are moving planes, interlocking shapes, surface tensions, and other imponderables. Everything had to be flat, flat, flat. So [Hans] Hofmann, Motherwell, and Kline were heroes, and Edward Hopper. At that time, I remember, he really signified the primitive commercial provincialism." That's a direct quote. That's a direct quote. Which American art had outgrown since the last war. Hopper was definitely out at that time, at UC at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you, yourself, did you like Hopper?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, I liked some of his work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Certainly a simplification.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Absolutely. I liked some of his landscapes. I think some of his work, when I saw his last show, together with Peter Mendenhall, I felt that some of his things were really bad and amateurish, like he really didn't know how to paint trees, never got around to it. But some of his buildings and his simpler things, I really liked them at first sight, and I still think he's one of the--even I would say popular as he is, he's still a little bit underestimated. If you look at his architecture, you wonder how he did it. "Then, of course, works of [Thomas Hart] Benton and the WPA School were regarded as representing the dark ages of American painting." That's also a direct quote from some of the teachers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what you're conveying here, you have a text which will be in your papers, I hope.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is recalling favorite artists and attitudes during your time in school at Berkeley.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about abstract expressionism? It would seem to me that with some of the abstract expressionists, certainly Jackson Pollock, this would not necessarily be the kind of work that would be most attractive to you. You consistently talk about a sense of simplification, structure, lack of clutter. I don't want to say lack of a certain kind of unleashed energy, but if the energy is there, it would seem to me, in Staprans, the goal would be to bring it under control.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Under control, within an architectural framework.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Certainly you are familiar with the work of Pollock and [Willem] De Kooning, eventually.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: At UC, and even afterwards, I used to do a lot of imitation of Pollock paintings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you did?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Everybody had to do that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. I really tried them all. I tried them all. Really, I found that I really felt that most of the Pollocks, even within his vision, were pretty bad. What I saw of his work, they were at the Museum of Modern Art. They have one really big Pollock, called "Black and White" ["One (Number 31, 1950)"] sort of a silvery all-

over feel. Then I thought, my God, that man had something to it, but it's only one painting. Then I've seen probably reproductions and I've seen dozens of others, and they left me just cold. I said, "I can do one. I can do one." But that one painting, I probably said I couldn't do it. And it's the same with Kline; some of his was a gesture. I really say, "How the hell did he do it?" Then you look at others' work, work of others, and then it really didn't work.

So what I got about from the abstract expressionists, really, their work was very inconsistent within the architecture and stability of the painting. But at one time I painted like Motherwell and I painted like Kline. Of course, I had some Pollocks. Then I get into the minimalist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like who? Which minimalists? That doesn't surprise me.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, it doesn't surprise me either.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is this the talk you gave at one time?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: These are just notes in a way I typed. I typed up sort of like a sequence of notes, which I have it all around.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean just for yourself?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: For myself. I typed it up last week, actually, for our discussion, in a way, so I could really remember what I wanted to say.

Well, I would say Carl Morris. I kind of liked some of his work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Carl Morris?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean up in Portland?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: One up in Portland, yes, and I also liked the other Morris.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Louis.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Louis Morris, yes. I also liked his work. Sort of floating acrylic, bands of color floating down, and very simple, just pure color.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is it Morris Louis or Louis Morris?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Louis Morris. Louis Morris, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Isn't that funny. Anyway, we'll check on that.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, we'll check on that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, the color field painters.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, the color field painters.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And [Mark] Rothko, maybe, or not?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I like some of the Rothkos, but then again, of probably ten Rothkos, there's one which I really felt were good, and then I felt that they were miserable.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seems to me--and again I have to think that we're going back now to your art school days, and I guess we're also, though, talking about the years immediately thereafter, as you were beginning to form your own vision or style, whatever you want to call it--it sounds to me as if you were looking all over the place.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: All over the place.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: All over the place. All over the place. And definitely I would say I had a vision, but I really didn't know how to express it at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This may be jumping ahead a little bit, but this really begs the issue, and it's an important

one in connection with you and in connection with coming to a better understanding of your art. I know that we're going to pursue this a little bit later, but I have to introduce it at this point. You sort of came up in a regional situation that came to be marked by the Bay Area School, Bay Area Figurative School painters, especially up here.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. I think it was a little bit before the Figurative School, since the Figurative School started around the mid-fifties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. We're not being tied right to even a decade; it's general, an earlier part of your career, because that's when David Park and company began their experiment. At any rate, you were in the Bay Area. This movement--and it became to be seen, finally, as these things that were going on with some of the people that you knew or certainly knew about, most of them had been abstract painters, gestural painters. I don't want to get into this too much right now, but in a sense, like it or not, because of where your career has developed, you are included with, or compared to--you can't get away from some of these other people. I have to ask you about--I want to begin to dispatch this issue of two very important artists who have been cited as influential, in fact, perhaps too influential, so outsiders would say, on your work, and that is, of course, Richard Diebenkorn and Wayne Thiebaud.

Having said that, I would rephrase the question. Were you aware, or how did you come to see, or at what point did you, or did you at all, see you and your work as sharing some kinds of sensibility and pictorial interest with the Bay Area Figurative, particularly these people?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, definitely yes. I'm a great admirer of Diebenkorn, probably first because of his structure, and some of the Wayne Thiebauds. I would say the work which he did, I would say, in his sixties, in the sixties, his still lifes, again because they were structurally very simple, and what he did, he developed a luminosity of color, and I've been always after that, luminosity of color. Then, of course, you realize that he has a certain way of approach, like he really had the object and then he surrounds it with bands of rainbow colors.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're talking Thiebaud.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I'm talking Thiebaud. A pictorial device. Then, of course, I like Diebenkorn's figurative, the way he did the very simple figures, which I really felt that were really architectural. And then, of course, the same with color. Then again, I looked at some of his really large canvases which he painted in the sixties, like the "Ocean Park" series. Some of them seem to be fairly thin, but yet what I really admired of Diebenkorn and why probably, in a way, spiritually I am associated, I felt that, good or bad, he was probably one of the more consistent painters of [unclear] and not interior. A scale of Western painting, American Western art, but...

[Break in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Second session, interview with Raimonds Staprans. This is tape one, side B. We, unfortunately, were cut off at a very important point. You were discussing your own views--I won't say relationship--views on the work of two painters with whom you are invariably compared in an interesting way. It sometimes has not been to your advantage.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It has been to my disadvantage.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is something that we can pursue a little more, but just to finish up the thought, you were talking, on the other side of the tape, about Diebenkorn and your admiration of his consistency.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Absolutely, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And also you were saying that not only as a Californian or American artist, but beyond that, you feel--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, definitely beyond that. In his later years, when he was too ill to do large oil canvases, he did, I would say, not watercolors, but he did some works on paper, up to the very last. I think I saw reproductions of a painting he did, probably he did a few months before he died, and they were just as consistent and just as good as his earlier work. So I would say I held him in front of me as an example, that if you are a painter, you should produce work on a certain level of consistency, like he would say, you should be consistent. You really shouldn't let out of your studio works that are really incomplete, that are bad, that you feel yourself that are not up to your level. This I saw in Diebenkorn. So, in this respect, definitely I'm a great admirer of his.

With Wayne Thiebaud, it's an entirely different thing, I think. Probably his work of the sixties--I didn't like his work of the fifties. It was really, I would say, busy and cluttered. He did some landscapes. Then I really admire some of his still lifes, which I've said. I think they are just marvelous. And where he made his white background,

just almost white, how he made it shine. But then later on I looked at his landscapes and I saw he really wasn't a landscape painter either. I really found his landscape work rather cheap, unimpressive, and incomplete. He really hadn't resolved the problem. He really wasn't a landscape painter, so he finally came to that conclusion. With every year, I think, his work became cheaper and cheaper, and I think critics have discussed it. But whenever I paint, I always fall back on this period, I think between '63 and '70. So that's probably the connection with those two painters.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Earlier.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, earlier Wayne Thiebauds and, of course, Diebenkorn.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember when and perhaps where you first came into contact with their work--Diebenkorn and/or Thiebaud? Does it come to memory?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I think probably that first work, I think that he had a comprehensive first show. He was at the San Francisco Art Museum, and I think it was around '55. Then, of course, there was a Wayne Thiebaud show at the Oakland Art Museum, I think it was in the seventies, sometime in the seventies, really a comprehensive show, a good show. But, of course, I had seen some of his work here and there, in reproductions, and it was the same with Diebenkorn.

What I would say, in a way, I would say I learned from him and I've stolen certain ideas from him. But then again, I've stolen certain ideas from a lot of other painters. It's openly, like I said. A painter is really a scavenger; he scavenges whatever he can. If I see, let's see, a good relationship with something, a thing that works, then, of course, you use it in your painting. I would say this is no crime to admit it. If I see a good piece of architecture, like I learned a lot from advertisements, color advertisements in journals and magazines, if I see an interesting relationship, I use it in my work. I guess that's the way it goes. Probably, I would say, like Diebenkorn, he's been very much influenced by Matisse.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: When you really look at some of the Diebenkorns that have been done, let's say, between '55 and '60, and you put Matisse next to it, you will see. You compare especially one painting with a chair in the corner and some houses in the background, and then you put it next to a certain Matisse, you couldn't really tell which is which. In a way, I like both of them.

So, in a way, to put this matter at rest, I would say I always use, I would say, this quotation by the sculptor Smith, there really isn't an artist in the world whose work doesn't look like somebody else's, more or less. I think Malraux and his book, The Voices of Silence, which I think was published in the late forties, clearly wrote an entire chapter, that as far as painting goes, amateur or the dilettante learns from nature, and the true painter learns from the paintings of other painters. That's the difference.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you mean to say by that, that art, then, is really about art, or about other art and not about nature to the same degree?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, definitely not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Can you expand on that a bit more? Because that's interesting.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Especially for your figurative/realist artist who incorporates.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, definitely. I would take one example. For a painter, the most difficult thing to do is how to paint a tree. How do you paint a tree? You can do it, and you really can't paint a tree. Probably if you can be the most pictorial, I would say the most detail, if you do it the most detailed, "realist" painting, you really cannot paint a tree. So how to paint a tree? You have to learn from other painters, and then probably expand on it. Most other painters have done it. For example, I've attempted to make a tree, and even at my ripe old age, I would say I have not learned in my own way how to paint a tree, so I don't paint trees.

Then I've looked at other painters. Probably the most instructive tree painter of all has been [Piet] Mondrian. You see from his early works, he stopped painting trees. And when you really look at the work of Mondrian, how he graduated from a fairly realistic tree and then gets more and more abstract, then you see how he tried to get to the essence of the tree.

Then I went to this Hopper show, and I was really interested, how he paints, how he paints his trees. I realize he really didn't know how to paint a tree. He never should have painted a green tree in his life. In every painting where there was a tree, it really was a lousy painting.

So it goes for everything else. I think a painter really learns from other painters and then he really has this really deep and very rich history going back for hundreds of years, maybe starting with the renaissance and with the primitive painters, and you can go on from there. You learn from them how they did things. Probably if you don't know how to do anything, if you have a composition or a color problem, you have to fall back on some of those people. How did they do it? How did they make it work? How did they breathe some life into a painting? Mostly what you would say, it's the life. So that's the way I work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is very interesting. It brings to mind a number of questions that have to do with art and reality, art and nature, and, I guess, specifically your position on that issue, which you've begun to explain. Certainly the tree anecdote is useful. You're talking about Mondrian as a more or less successful tree painter.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I think he progressed and gradually solved--it ended with, in a way, it was almost an abstraction, but the way he did it, like you would say in his own way, with his own framework, his vision, he solved it up to a point, what I was wondering. I have attempted to paint several trees, and none of them have been successful. But where I feel that contrast, as far as architectural forms, probably some structured architectural paintings from nature, I felt I solved them within my own framework.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You talk about this process, image-making, I guess you'd have to say, painting and image-making, as something that is turning back on itself all the time, is one way to describe it. What I mean to say by that, I guess what I want to ask you, is this: the question is, was Mondrian really seeking the essence of the tree that is essential nature, but specifically, in this case, embodied in the tree, a form of nature, or was his experimentation, his progress, about the abstraction of the form, and it just happens to be this true tree. You see what I mean? There's the essential tree, seeking the essence of a thing, or is it much more than an inside the art activity project of how do you move this object to abstraction, the essence being really a visual or perceptual? It has to do with seeing the world, so it's entirely about us. I'm making this complicated, but do you see what I mean? The goal then becomes art, possibly, and different ways of doing it and moving into the realm of abstraction, but it comes back to art, that art is the subject, not the essence of the tree.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Definitely art is the subject. Definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And not the essence of a tree. Even though people write about that all the time.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. Well, I would say essence of the tree, for you, it would be something else for some other painter. For example, like [Vincent] Van Gogh, he painted a lot of trees. Actually, when you see his paintings, he has probably painted more trees than anybody else. Then again, when you paint a tree, you have really very few choices. Am I going to paint my tree like Van Gogh? Then I would say, what is my tree? What is my tree?

PAUL KARLSTROM: You don't have one, because-- [laughter]

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I think before I die, I hope I come to it, because I'm always painting trees and then I'm painting them out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you see what you're saying, which I think is very interesting, it's not about the tree.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You say "my tree." It's about me. You're describing a very self-reverential activity.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is the making of art. Surprise, surprise. I guess we know this anyway, but it's useful, I think, to make sure that I understand that this is your thinking, because as we try to understand your approach to your art, we need to understand this. If I have listened to you carefully and following you, the elements that you depict in your paintings have much more to do with how well, how effectively, can Raimonds address this subject he has chosen. The success is measured entirely, of course, in pictorial, a sense of getting it right, would you say?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Getting it right in pictorial terms. But the rightness is sort of a mysterious kind of thing. What are the standards of judgment? They certainly are operating within the realm of looking at art.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, do you feel, for instance, those boats that are Raimonds' boats, specifically, they're not intended to be--they may look like the boats, but it's not your intention or major interest to create a portrait of a

particular boat?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, absolutely not. I would say I think probably it's a subject matter I think the late Alfred Frankenstein--and he said it really best than anybody else--is that the subject matters. Like you said, at first he compared the viewing public, especially the buyers, like those mad, hungry dogs, and he says so you throw the subject matter to them like a piece of meat, to make them satisfied. [laughter] I found that it was really an excellent quote. That's what you really do. You throw the subject matter, but the subject matter, I would say you have absolutely no emotional attachment to it, to the subject matter. It could be just as well an old shoe, but you feel you can express some of your painterly ideas through that kind of shape and through that kind of an object. There is no emotion attached to the object itself. Of course, you cannot say to the onlooker or to the person, or to the buyer of a painting, this person who looks at your work. For example, people would say, "You really must like water. You really must like boats. You probably go to a marina every so often." I say, "I don't do it. I hate boats and I really don't like it." [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that true?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. It isn't that I dislike it, but there is no emotion attached to it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you go sailing on the boat?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no. I have no particular interest. But I like painting some boats. This is for someone probably who is another painter or not really not [unclear], it's difficult to understand, that the subject, in a way, if you use a subject, it's probably a double bonus. Like, for example, you have a round piece of--a glob of orange paint. You have a glob of orange paint. Of course, it's abstract. You have a glob of orange paint that looks like an orange. Okay? They both have orange and they look very similar, but one you recognize the object. The orange acquires an entirely different quality. So in a way, the way I see it, it becomes more important. Of course, all the abstract relationships, they all apply. It's a relationship of structure, it's a juxtaposition of the color, how one color influences another, and this is all abstract. For me, a recognizable object adds another dimension to the painting, so it's probably more important to me.

Coming back to the boats, like I said, I have painted a lot of boats, and probably to my discomfort. At one time somebody said, "He's a boat painter." It's not entirely true, because probably I've painted more paintings of everything else except the boats. But you go to the gallery and the people immediately see the boats. So, in a way, I have a very simple view of the people who go to the galleries and look at the paintings, or buy the paintings. But that comes probably later. I'm digressing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so am I. It's my fault.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, no, it's not your fault. But it's good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I do want to make sure, of course, that we get back to some of this. I'm going to go ahead and keep us off our chronology just for a moment, if I may. It seems to me that you see yourself as an abstract painter who has chosen to allow recognizable subject matter into these, in effect, constructed abstract compositions. Is that too strong?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, it's not strong. No, no. I think you probably put it correctly. Definitely I am an abstract painter whose objects are really recognizable and sometimes quite realistic, but one has to really realize that they are all, everything, even if the object in the painting looks quite realistic, they are really constructed from the ground up in absolutely abstract terms. But when you really look at it closely, even if I paint the glass, there is very little truth in it. It looks realistic, but when you compare it to the real thing, it really isn't there. It's like the reflections on such, the shadows are quite different, so it's an illusion. It's an illusion. But the paintings themselves are quite abstract, and that's why I really take a joy in it.

Again we come back to the architecture. I never paint from nature. I construct things from the ground up, and I'm always a believer that nature in itself is in chaos, chaotic. Nature is chaotic. It's busy. A painter has to come in and bring some order to nature, an architectural order. Any kind of a landscape has to be reconstructed from the ground up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We'll get back to that idea in just a minute, because I think that's very interesting. But stepping back again to the idea of realist painting, that carries with it an illusion, the fiction of the real object. Do you see this as an explanation for the work, or operating in the work, again, of Thiebaud especially, but also Diebenkorn? Do you feel that this is the territory where you join them or, at least in some of their works, some of the periods? Did I make that clear, or should I--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, what Diebenkorn did it, I would say, in his figurative work. When it comes to abstract work, I don't quite--

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I mean specifically figurative.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, probably that's where we come together at a point. When you really analyze his work, as far as nature goes, there really isn't, I would say, a bit of truth. There really isn't an ounce of truth in them, although they look really quite realistic, but you have to analyze it. It's the same thing with Thiebaud's painting, his still lifes of the sixties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you mean by that, for instance, like the "Desserts" and the so-called pop art, where he would take, for instance--well, we know about the candy ball, jawbreakers, whatever they are, machine like that, or are these kinds of things the cafeteria display case with pies or cakes?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I would say some of the, especially probably the displays of the deli counter, you analyze them and you see there are a lot of abstract elements in them. You see some of them are rather carefully constructed. Of course, when you comes to those pies and then you eat one pie and have another, it's slightly probably a different thing. But then again, like I mentioned before, then he came to the landscapes and then he lost it, in a way. He got lost in the detail of the landscape. I'm really disappointed that he lost himself, that he really used nature more than he should have.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think that that may be explained by an overly romantic approach to his endeavor, to his subjects, that he becomes then somewhat subsumed by his subject, by landscape, or by the urban streets?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Urban streets. Yes, I would say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because I think of them as fairly romantic.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right, they are romantic, and a lot of them are, I would say, cheap colors. Yes, I would say definitely yes. I understand he really painted a lot with this paintings, especially [unclear].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Exactly.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: He painted his house and he painted from nature, and I think he got lost. I really feel that he got lost.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, these works, the ones you're referring to, are, as you say, direct observation and response to living in San Francisco. Not only that, it becomes--it's not metaphorical. In a way it's metaphor for San Francisco, these specific scenes, and for a place, but many of them are, I suppose, identifiable streets, exaggerated and all that. Well, you've already said it, that it's possible, then, to be somewhat overwhelmed or get lost in attachment to the specific in that sense, to the specific where it carries with it associations, in this case, of a place, of San Francisco. Do you think it's possible that San Francisco in some ways might be a dangerous subject, then, because if it's recognizable, it evokes so many associations, like TV programs?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes. It's definitely true. I think he got in an area where he really shouldn't have gone. It's true, probably, in a way, of every painter. I always suppose, when you look at Matisse, I think probably a painter has to be aware of his own limitations, like an actor really has to be, or a writer has to be aware of his limitations, and to do the best he can within his limitations, never to go outside of them.

I think with Wayne Thiebaud, unfortunately, that's what happened to him. I mean, that's what I probably, myself, I'm trying to avoid. I have certain limitations, I have certain vision, and certain subject matter has worked, I would say I feel I can work with, and others I cannot.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You do choose, in many cases, as have Thiebaud and especially Diebenkorn--

[Break in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing the second session with Raimonds Staprans, this is now tape two, side A. This time I was cut off as I was struggling to formulate a question for you. I remember what it was, so let me try to concisely put it to you again. It comes out of talking about the danger of subjects that tend to be too evocative, that carry too much baggage with them, perhaps like maybe references to San Francisco in Thiebaud, then get out of the control of the artist. We've already established that you're very interested in working within that territory of control.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It brought to my mind, anyway, actually in Thiebaud, in certain works, but certainly in Diebenkorn, these rather marvelous, very simple, humble still lifes, subjects, like even a comb or a brush or a shaving mug, the most humble objects that you will find in their work and, indeed, in the work of others like Giorgio Morandi, for instance. Certainly you've resorted, or you've turned to these very subjects yourself, like

paint cans, reference to the studio, but beyond that, not much; they're just there. I think of them. I'm not supposed to editorialize exactly, but I think jars, you've done some jars that are absolutely superb, and they tend to be very, very almost monochromatic in some cases, very gray, moving from white to black, but not other colors. These are the things I'm talking about. I'm wondering if the reason that you, and perhaps Diebenkorn and Thiebaud, in some cases, and others are drawn to these subjects, is that they are almost neutral. Is this something that you've thought about in terms of your own selection?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, definitely. Definitely. I think the subject should be neutral, and if it isn't neutral, then it becomes an illustration. Probably we can come back to it some other time. But going back probably to Diebenkorn, I would say, like [Franz Kline?], what I have learned from him, and I think in the art history, what he will be remembered by--and this is probably one thing--his use of the diagonal, the 45-degree diagonal. It's in every painting. You take the diagonal out of a Diebenkorn and it becomes really rather static and unimportant. And that was his--I think probably ultimately it will be his contribution to the history of painting, is the diagonal, the use. And you will see that there is this 45-degree diagonal in almost every painting, even in his still lifes and his figurative work. Almost in every one of them, this 45-degree diagonal. I think he found it out consciously, and it is his own personal invention. And that's what I admire him by.

Coming back to Wayne Thiebaud, I think what he will be remembered by in art history, how he made his sort of warm, almost whitish, creamish backgrounds shine. That's one thing I think he will be remembered by. That's probably how he juxtaposed his object and with background, by manipulation of color and texture and everything else, energizing sort of the background. That's what he will be remembered by, probably for nothing, from little else thereafter.

These are the two things that I have stolen from them: diagonal from Diebenkorn, the radiating white background from Thiebaud, and nothing else beyond that. I'm not really ashamed to admit it. It's true. But then again, I have stolen things from other painters also.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like what, from whom?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I would say, first I would mention Pierre Soulages. No, no, no. DeStael. DeStael. The use of pastel, the use of pastel, and how he used bright color underneath, with a sort of a gray overlay, making the bright color shining through. So I find it, like you would say, it has to do something to you in a way, on an emotional level. It has to touch you emotionally. Not emotionally--sensually. You look at work, you have a sensual response. You go to a restaurant and you have a good taste, you have a good piece of meat or some sauce, and you get a sensual response. And you get the same thing from painting. I got a sensual response how to use very heavy pastel, and this I learned from him. So I incorporate it in my own work.

And from Van Gogh, how he used, for example, I would say, very successful, very successfully, how he painted a painting, I would say, quite realistically, then he obliterated the background and painted in one bright color, it's orange or yellow, or something else, and it immediately made his painting important and shine. So these other things I learned from Van Gogh, and so on and so on and so on.

From Kline, what I learned from Kline, it's gesture. It's a gesture. It's some gesture. How to make a slab dash stroke occasionally. I think, in my way, that's the way a painter learns from other painters on how to do it.

But I guess I digressed from Thiebaud and Diebenkorn, but I would say those two items, those two inventions, every painter has an invention, and I think that's what Wayne Thiebaud invented, which is his own, is his background.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Since we're on the subject, you've acknowledged this community of interest to some degree, or practice, with particularly these two artists working in the Bay Area, but then I think maybe of some others as well, connections could easily be drawn between your work and that of some of the other artists, so there seems to be some kind of community of sensibility, if you will. But what is it, maybe more important at this point, in your mind, what is it that really distinguishes or sets you apart from--I hate to do it, but, again, Diebenkorn and Thiebaud?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There are similarities at certain points and things you admire, but what sets you, your vision, and your work apart? For you, where do you really feel the difference?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: The difference, mainly it is as far, let's say, working with Wayne Thiebaud, in a way you try to expand on a certain idea, and for me it's a gradual transition, almost imperceptible, transition of color. When you really look--I'm really glad you mentioned those red paint cans, maybe four cans, and they look the same, and yet they are not the same. When you really look, it is a gradual progression from one kind of red to another. It's probably a very gradual progression from one shadow to another, probably like there was a

progression from Mondrian's, like he progressed in his trees and so on, in my painting of red cans, which is really an abstract progression, which I feel gives painting a life. That is probably a difference between like you would see the way Wayne Thiebaud painted, like his pies. One pie looks exactly like the other. There are probably thirty pies, and when you really look and examine them closely, like pie number one looks like pie number thirty. There's absolutely no change. If I painted those pies, for me there would be a progression that each pie would be somewhat different. So what I probably would say, there I am expanding on his vision.

It's the same way that Diebenkorn expanded upon Matisse's ideas, naturally, until he became an abstract painter. Also in landscapes. That's probably what I'm trying to do. This progression should be really imperceptible and very gradual, and the color change should be very gradual as to be almost imperceptible, but it's still there. As I see it, at least for me, it gives life to my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. So that is, then, apparently, one of your goals, one of the assignments you've set for yourself.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, assignments. Actually, this is the thing. Right now, like I have two similar objects, but actually they are very dissimilar, as far as construction and as far as, I would say, color scheme goes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is the almost imperceptible progression in color change subtle? Is that strictly a painting issue or coloristic experimentation, or, for you, is there something beyond that as well? Is it metaphorical in any way? Is it symbolic of something else in life or in our experience? Or does it remain very focused on pictorial considerations?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Definitely. At least for me, 100 percent pictorial. I would say, at least for me, it's got to be a certain sensation, and it's the same like enjoying a well-crafted dish in a restaurant. It's probably exactly the same thing. It has to give you sensual satisfaction. For me, nothing else is beyond that. And that's the way a few other people's paintings, like anything kind of a symbolism or subject matter or illustration, I would say I frown upon them personally. It leaves me completely cold. So, in a way, I'm an abstract painter, when I look at it. Probably I have a patch of color and if it a pastel patch, it's several overlays, it is crafted in a nice way, it gives me a sensual satisfaction, but it's the same satisfaction I look at a very interesting glazed piece of pottery. In a way, it's the same thing. It has to give a sensual satisfaction to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This provides an interesting bridge. I'm sitting here trying to think of how to phrase the next question, because I don't want it to be what they call a leading question.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, but leading questions are quite all right. They should be leading. They should be leading and upsetting, I think. I'm very personal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Here's what I want to do, is exactly that--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Provocative. Provocative.

PAUL KARLSTROM: --is move it back into the area of life experience and psychology, your own concerns, your own view of the world. We've been talking very specifically about your painting and its possible relationship to other artists and art. We've been talking about it very much in terms of issues that are inherent to making art into painting. My last question was sort of a slight probe, an effort to see if we can push it, acknowledging that your answers are clearly to the point, and your understanding of what you've been doing, but then also to suggest other explanations. A kind of theme or connection that's come in now a couple of times is the idea of chaos and order. In fact, you said that it is the job of the artist to bring order to chaos.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said that. Earlier you said, in talking not so much about art, but about you and your life, how you are, your own preferences regarding your environment, your domestic situation, your home, your life, is a lack of clutter, a simplification.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's pretty obviously an effort in your life, as in your painting, to impose this kind of order. So I don't think we have to belabor that, particularly. You would agree?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes, yes, definitely. Probably, if you really want to probe deeply, it goes back to one's personality, one's very essence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So then here we've as much as drawn a connection that you obviously have thought about, yourself.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So we're not talking, strictly speaking, or exclusively about pictorials.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You want to go in that direction a little bit?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes, yes, definitely. You would ask a leading, very probing personal question, I would definitely want to answer it gladly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We've described your work and your concerns, your interest in what you're trying to achieve in terms of recognizing an essential disorder, even chaos, in nature and in presumably the experience of life, life itself, and that one way to deal with that, address that, or even counter that, is to construct your own order in any number of different ways, one being a painting. This is certainly, I would think, and ask if you agree, that part of the explanation for the way your work grows right out of your world view and an ongoing struggle in your life to achieve some kind of personal order and stability within.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I think it's very well put, yes. That's what probably my nature is. That's what my wife, she always complains, says, "Whatever you do and whatever you want to bring into everything, your own order." And that's probably where our conflict originates. I feel that I have, in a personal relationship, I've been really overwhelming in this regard. In everything I like a certain structure. Like my wife says, "My God, do you see, you sometimes seem like a very cold person, because wherever you go, even in emotional life, you want to bring a certain order in it. You have to realize that it cannot be done. There are two worlds colliding, and I cannot operate within your order." I say I realize it, but I still have this need to operate emotionally within a certain order.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why is that? I realize one can't answer definitively any of these things, but why do you think this is? Why is there this strong, perhaps not unusual, but in any case, strong impulse to create, everywhere you turn, this kind of order, if not even predictability?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It's not probably predictability, because in a way I'm really open-minded. Well, to make an example, whenever I travel, I don't plan it like, "I'll be in this place at such and such a time and on such and such a day." I like to leave it open and let things float.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But isn't that kind of courting disorder? If you really believe that the world is chaotic, then what you're doing is allowing chaos a better opportunity to flow on in? If you planned to be consistent, yourself, and the way you conduct your life--excuse me if I sound like--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, probably in a way, what you mentioned--

PAUL KARLSTROM: There are two things at work.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, you touched really upon what one would call a contradiction, that bringing in order. At the same time, in a way you--well, I hate to use this cliche--you have to keep yourself open, I would say, to the unexpected and to new experiences, and that's probably what the charm of life is. But once you are getting into a certain situation, then you want to bring order into a certain situation, and somehow this is, in a way, important. Like, again, I used travel. Like I would say I don't know how long I'm going to stay in one city and what I'm going to see. I'm not really planning what I'm going to see tomorrow, like this church or that church. I'll go and let things happen. But once I get to that, I have to incorporate in my world, in a way, and this I find extremely important. This is probably like I have this experience, but once I have this experience--[unclear] exasperating, like a politician said when we discussed politics, he said, "No matter what you say, you have to put everything in separate drawers. Like this thing goes into this drawer, and this thing goes into that drawer." Yes, that I probably have to do, yes. This is also one thing probably what I try to do in my writing, also. Once it's experienced, then I have to put certain things in certain drawers.

I don't know why this need is, but I think it's deeply within my personality. From my childhood experiences? I don't know. In a way, my mother was that way. Whatever the experience is, I feel that ultimately you have to clarify it. You have to clarify it and simplify it and integrate it, whatever you can integrate it, and forget the rest. This I feel deeply that for me, at least, this process has to be done.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This sounds like a kind of essentialism, although everything appears chaotic--this is interesting--although it appears chaotic, in fact, if you analyze, you gather information, leave yourself open for new experience and information, once you've then accumulated it, encountered it, then you must analyze and assign attributes, categorize, and put into the proper drawers.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does this suggest that the chaos maybe is more in our perception, that, in fact, if we work hard enough, pay enough attention, that there is some essence, some essential kind of core meaning?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: You mean sensual?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. Essential.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Essential.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Essential is what I mean.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This, of course, without getting into this too much, is a notion of earlier modernism, of high modernism, that there is at the core of experience a kind of meaning, a universality. That goes against the idea of absolute chaos reigning. I want to make sure of what your views might be on this, because this is pretty important, that you see the world and nature as totally chaotic.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Could you give, let's say, an example? Any kind of example come to your mind?

PAUL KARLSTROM: In modernism, of course, it's talking about art and creativity, but it does really go beyond that. I don't want to get into this, because this gets a little bit tricky. But one of the tenets, as I understand it, of modernism, despite all the apparent inconsistencies, incoherence, distortions in our world, that when you dismantle all this and really examine it, ultimately it leads to an essential truth of some sort, that all of this activity, all of this endeavor, including your painting, and maybe the way you deal with life experience, categorizing and so forth, is a means to get beyond the experienced chaos to an essential meaning. I can't describe what that may be, but it's a quest that goes on.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's definitely, I think--I think, by and large, I don't know what the meaning is, but definitely I would say it's important information. When you go along, in a way I think we have this human need, in a way, to expand our world and to categorize and to put into specific--I don't know if I'm really answering your question. Probably not. I'm going around it. I don't know about that. I don't think that I'm, I would say, intellectually looking for a special meaning, because the world of--a thing of meaning, intellectual meaning, in a way, the concept is somewhat foreign to me. I know intellectually this word is really used and used again--meaning. So I don't know the essence of the word "meaning." What I would say, I have to categorize and, I would say, put it in a drawer so I can use it later. I would say, to increase my sensuality, my sensual needs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean by that? We'll skip "meaning" for a moment.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I would say, my sensual needs, I'm making an example of it. It was reminded to me by my mother. As a child, what I used to do, okay, you go to the potty. This is very personal. You go to, let's say, to number two. You sit it, and at the same time, having enjoyed that I was eating something that tasted very well, and she said, "My God, how can you do it?" I said, "Yes, yes," because I have these two sensual experiences of defecating and eating something that I like. And I became, in a way, aware of it. I really think, my God, it may be absolutely decadent, but it really gave me sensual pleasure. So there are other things in life, and I have these experiences.

Then, like you said, you have this experience within the chaos, but if it remains a chaos, you really cannot use it to your own benefit. You have to put it into your world in a certain slot so you can repeat this sensual experience. This is really, I would say, a very conscious thing. I don't know exactly. It's a roundabout way I'm answering. But I'm not really what you--

[Tape 2, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Here we go again. This is Staprans, tape two, side B, concluding this second session. Again, you were cut off. You were talking about the importance in your life, and presumably in your work as well, of a kind of sensuality.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Definitely, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm beginning to get the idea that it's pretty fundamental. I was asking about meaning. It may be in this area that you have chosen to find your meaning. You gave an interesting anecdote about being a child and sitting on the toilet. I thought that was, rather than being a digression, an evasion of the question, it seemed that that brought it right into an area that might be productive. Let's pursue this.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes. I would say I definitely--that's what I feel. I always think, what's really the reward? One's reward in life, the reward is a sensual experience. If you do something intellectual, probably it reflects in a piece of good writing. Like one would say, it doesn't titillate you, I would say intellectually, when you really go down to it, it titillates you and gives you satisfaction on the sensual level, like probably you have a well-crafted paragraph, good sentence. In my view, everything goes down to sensuality. You have to categorize and, let's say, incorporate those sensual experiences so that you can repeat it in the future and possibly it does give you pleasure again and again and again. If you can reach, let's say, another sensual experience, you have to put it into a world in order for you to repeat it.

For me, I would say this is one of the more important rewards in life. I don't know, it's probably the same in personal relationships and intimate relationships, your lovemaking, it's the same way. Lots of times I would say a good lover [unclear] probably a lousy lover, but, yes, there are still sensual experiences, and it's essential experience. If you have a good experience, you have to analyze the situations and conditions how it came about in order to repeat it in the future. I think probably there is a connection with a painting and the work of art and my life in general, the way I steal the ideas from other painters in life, I steal from experiences around me, and then I try to make them my own.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I want to make sure that my understanding follows you in the right direction, because it's very interesting, of course, the possibilities you're presenting in terms of an understanding of you and your work. Sensuality means a lot, but I gather that there is in this for you a strong erotic component.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, yes, definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't want to use any qualitative or judgmental terms, but maybe preoccupation to a certain degree would not be inappropriate, in terms of an erotic focus.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sexual.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Definitely erotic, sexual. Definitely, yes. I would say it's absolutely true. I don't know, even at every age, even at my age, I think it is a very important component of one's life. It has been in my life, not that I've really practiced it, but it's a very important component. I don't know of a parable to compare it. Always I've been asked, and I think mostly it comes down to some of the plays that I do, people say, "Now, you must have really had a lot of sexual experiences," and etc. I say, "Really very few, and I'm very conservative anyway." [laughter] And I'm very limited. Then I make the example like Jules Verne. He traveled all around the world and he made, I would say, very believable experiences, but then again, he never left his room. Then again, I would say his description of his travels was much more real and more convincing than most of the travel books that people have gone to those places have seen in the real world. So probably it's the same as my sexuality or my feeling of sexuality. I'm sitting in this room and fantasizing a lot of it, and it is an important part of the world, but I'm not necessarily, I would say, a really good practitioner at it. Probably I need not be, I don't know. I don't know if that answers your question. If it doesn't answer, you have to ask.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There's no one or definitive answer to these questions. It is, of course, a kind of fishing expedition, a kind of probing. What we've been discussing does seem, in part, to lead into this direction. As we talk, I'm trying to organize my thoughts, because this now gets somewhat random, with many interesting possibilities. From what you have said, I get this picture of a man who has a strong libido, a strong attraction to the sensual, the erotic, but then, beyond that, sensuality which is a kind of immersing oneself in experience and in the world, in nature, which you also describe as chaotic.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I want to be careful how I pursue this. My picture is also of a man who pays attention to this and looks for experiences or individuals or events, perhaps, episodes that can then be incorporated within this broader drama, if you will, but the drama is playing out in the mind, to a large extent, in the world of fantasy. So there's this interaction with the world, with sensual experience, with perhaps hedonism. Let's not use any of those words.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, probably it isn't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But anyway, an attraction to these kinds of possibilities, these experiences. I'm making the question long. Try to follow with me on this, because I think it will take us somewhere. But then you also described, or I get a picture of a man, and I certainly see it in the art, who has a great need to control, which suggests again a paradox or a conflict that we've mentioned earlier, because immersing yourself in the sensual, in the realm of the senses, is something that you don't control. By its very nature, it pulls you. You have to continually go with it. I hope I'll get some kind of a feeling of how these two aspects of you are brought into

some kind of union or balance, because what you describe, what I see in your work, is even a bit cold.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And very exacting, in many ways very demanding. I suppose I can see the sensuality, but basically represents, to me, a different world view, a different position from what you are beginning to describe now as Raimonds, the man in his own interior life, his psychological life, his obsessions, maybe. That's not even a question; this is a comment.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. Whatever you mention, I have to think about it. I don't know if it's an obsession. Well, you know, I would say even organizing things in an orderly fashion, I would say it is essential. In a way it is a deeply sensual experience. Again, going back to the architecture, an interesting piece of architecture, first and foremost, it is a deeply sensual experience. Like, for example, I would say, the addition to the National Gallery in Washington [D.C.], you have this triangle and you go into it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I.M. Pei.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, Pei. Every time, I've gone several times, there is nothing intellectual about it, it's really a deeply sensual experience for me, at least. It's just as sensual as probably one would consider lovemaking or eating, let's say, a well-crafted dish. Strange as it may sound for me, it's very similar.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I understand your definition of sensuality is much broader.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It is, probably. It is much broader. Probably the only measuring stick is a purely sensual response for me. If there is no sensual response, this thing is bad. If there is a positive sensual response, it is good. I don't really try to intellectualize it beyond that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's so interesting to me about this, in hearing you say this, is that again your work seems to be very cerebral. Architecture, of course, it's essential because you experience it in the world and you move in it and so forth. Of course it is. But in a sense, its construction or its description, its conception, is cerebral. Your paintings, if you wanted to put them on a scale of sensual to cerebral, or constructed in that way, they would tend to be on the more--what should we say--limiting side, in a way, where you described, articulated a problem or a task, and then you deal with it, but it certainly wouldn't be the kind of work that would come immediately to mind as the work of a sensualist. Again, it seems more of your work--if you want to divide these things, the mind and--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. I know clearly what you are trying to say. I don't know. I would disagree at this point, at least. I'm so glad that you asked from that point of view, my process of painting. I've been asked, and I really hate this question, because it's asked many times, "I hope you know what you are doing." And it's been asked again and again and again. Now when I hear it, I really get red in my face. My blood pressure goes up. [laughter] I'm less tolerant. Because whenever I start a painting, I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know what it is, what it's going to be and how it is going to look. I don't plan anything in advance. I just go by this sensual need. In a way I compare it to the sexual need, I would say, you know when you are horny. [laughter] But you don't know exactly how it's going to happen and how it's going to do, but you sort of gravitate in that direction, and maybe you find outlets in various ways, but you have to have an outlet.

I need to say, when I start a painting, it's more of a sensual feel, like I sensually feel very certain things to be done, and how could I express it. And from then on, how can I capture it, the best, essential need? Then I experiment. I go back and forth. I never plan a painting in advance. It may start out as a green painting and now end up as a red painting. It may start out, let's say, as a landscape; it will end up as a still life, or end up as something else. I would say I go strictly guided by the senses. If I cannot, let's say, somehow capture this sensual need, if I can't capture it in a landscape, if I can't capture it in a still life, maybe I can capture it into something else. That's why probably I never worked directly, like you would say, like you see a lot of painters, they make several studies, very orderly make it in a certain way. I just start out with a blank mind and I see what will evolve from it. So I would say the result may seem like it is--the end product, I could say, it seems like it is intellectually constructed, but, no, it's not really true. I don't think any kind of paintings that makes an impact, you cannot construct intellectually, definitely not.

So I don't know if it did answer your question properly. In a roundabout way, touched upon it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, that's a very enlightening answer. That's very enlightening and helped me understand, in part, the process. It's a process of giving form to a feeling, is what you describe.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, and it's mostly feeling. I would say, in a way, the feeling, the way I think, I think it was, if I'm not mistaken, I think it was Rothko who said every morning he lined up maybe five or ten unfinished paintings, and then he looked at every one of them, and he said, "I see what looks good today." And I approach

things the same way. I line up my unfinished work. On a purely sensual level, I would say, "What looks good today?" And you have to ask, for you, what looks good today, what you would want to do, what would give you a sensual satisfaction to do. Then you go and do it, and you do it maybe for a while and the sensual satisfaction stops, and then you realize, "I think it's time to stop the painting." You don't go any further. You go to the next work or to the next work. That's, in a way, on the sensual level that I paint maybe a dozen paintings at the same time. So I would say, for me, it's purely sensual, guided by sensual process. In a way, intellect has very little to do with it. When you are writing, then you have to use probably intellect more, because you have to organize it, you have to see how you begin and how you end.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We might talk about that next time, because I don't think that that's entirely true.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, probably. I'm glad that there is a difference.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Depending on the kind of writing, because there are certain--well, we shouldn't get into it now. I'm going to make some notes a little later. But at this point I will simply say that it has to do with who's giving the assignment and why you're doing something. If you have a commission, whether it's writing or making a painting or a mural, there are certain things that have to be adhered to. It's much more difficult than to think of the process in emotional or sensual terms, what tastes good, what looks good, or what feels good today. I would almost prefer to hear you say what feels good, even though it's through the eye, what feels good. And in writing, I think there is some of that range. I find this very interesting, indeed, because we're moving back into the realm of the senses and the gratification of a need, or a drive. In your case, is it going too far to say that that's fundamentally what's behind your art?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes, yes. I would definitely agree that's fundamentally behind. Do you want me to elaborate on this a little bit?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Please.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's what fundamentally--I absolutely, for this reason, I detest--like I said, as a painter, one has to be probably opinionated--I absolutely detest painters who put some social ideas into their paintings, or some other intellectual ideas in paintings, because I find them absolutely untrue, I find them absolutely naive, and I find them absolutely uninteresting, for me, for me personally, because there is no sensual response for me. There again, we are coming to the point, where is really a painting and what is an illustration. In art, I hate illustrations, be it, let's say, social ideas or other ideas like that. I absolutely abhor, like I would say, you see painters who said, "I'm painting a symphony." My God, why are you painting a symphony? Why don't you write one?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, they would say, though, that they're painting the sound, or rather the feeling of the symphony. What about that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, that's all hogwash. Absolutely not. You can't translate one into the other. I would say it's absolutely two different things. It's absolutely ridiculous. If you want to paint a symphony, I would say be a composer and compose a symphony. The same thing goes vice versa. You have a nice piece of, I would say, a music, then it's labeled "Pictures of an Exhibition." Okay. I don't care what kind of exhibition it was. I don't know what he meant, but I definitely sensually hear the music. It might be divine and gorgeous, or it does something to you. So as far as I look at work of other painters, I would say I have a very narrow view of other people's work. If it goes beyond sensual response or sensuality, it doesn't mean anything to me personally.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you wouldn't necessarily agree, or credit, the symbolist--I mean the nineteenth century French symbolist--who, as you know, I'm sure, whether it was [Paul] Gauguin or Fantin Latour, or [Richard] Wagner, who believed that you could find correspondences between the different arts, and that they would correspond, you would get a corresponding color or a motif in painting, it would be a chord or a harmony in music, or poetic qualities. This is, of course, a very important late nineteenth century notion. That's based on feeling, pretty much. They would really wallow around in the realm of feeling the senses. But you don't see that as a productive way to go?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, not for me. Actually, probably I don't really care what they felt at that time and what kind of symbolism they want to put in naturally as part of the writing. I really hate symbolism, myself. Symbolism leaves me absolutely cold. Like you said, looking at Gauguin, I look at it on a purely sensual level, and I don't care what he felt and I don't really care that he was really on this island where it was hot and musty and probably he was sick and he had a terrible love life, or anything. It doesn't interest me as a painter. But it interests me what essentially his painting does to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Pretty sensual. [laughter]

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It's pretty sensual, yes. But probably quite different. Like I would say, what it does to me,

I definitely feel he did not transmit his sensuality in his painting as I see it. I see it quite differently, strictly on a pictorial level. On a pictorial level, it doesn't matter for me what's behind it. So I really don't care as much. Like I said, very often it's said that the story behind the painter or the artist is more interesting than the work itself. The painter itself as a person, it doesn't really interest me. If the person interests me, it interests me in a literary level, like if I would want to write about him as a person or I want to explore who he is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Then clearly I'm not going to make the mistake of putting you into the symbolist camp.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I do want to say this. One of the big mistakes that is made, of course, is to confuse the Symbolist Movement, sort of the European avant garde, Wagnerian avant garde, with the use of symbols; that is, taking objects, like in iconography, and having them stand for something else.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: With Gauguin and company, that wasn't really the case. I don't want to pursue it, because you've responded to that, but what I was after, what I was thinking as you talk, was a kind of evocative power that comes through works of art that tend to be emotional or tend to come directly out of feeling, and the theory is among these types, anyway, at that time in the late nineteenth century, was that at a higher plane they intersect with similar feelings from other forms, so that you get this kind of unity or union, which can then, if one wants to accept this notion, it's sort of platonic, I guess, I don't know, neoplatonic, that that then represents a kind of universality or shared experience that sort of moves across the different arts and senses in expression. So it's a highly sensual kind of thought. But that's just what they thought; it's not something you could demonstrate.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No. I would say intellectually and historically, I completely agree with you, but how do you communicate in your work? Like everyone sees it quite differently. I don't know, if you can paint, you can communicate it in a painting quite well. I know you are driven probably to paint by some sort of emotional experience, but can you transmit the same experience to a painting? That's an entirely different thing. I don't know if it is possible at all, because you may be deeply emotional and deeply into feeling, and then you paint. Can you communicate the same feeling to another person? I doubt it. I doubt it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you see the act of painting, I guess, that image-making, which is--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: You make an image. You make an image.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you see this, then, very much as a personal, an individual act.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And at that point, if there's any control at all on the part of the artist or the artist's presence, it stops there.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: For me, it stops there. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Then the viewers, those who are interested in the works, will bring, presumably, to that work--

[Break in Taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a third interview session with the painter Raimonds Staprans. The date is September 15, 1997. Again the interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. This is, as I said, a third and, presumably, if we're successful, a final session in this interview. This is tape one, side A.

Raimonds, we have been chatting a bit before starting up once again with our taping, and reviewing what we've covered and considering what still needs to be covered. One of the things that comes as maybe a bit of a surprise, I don't know, is that we only worked ourselves up to 1954, leaving art school, I think.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, it was leaving University of California and all those people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In looking back over what we've done, that was well discussed, your experiences then. You made an interesting comment. I don't know if it's something that would be useful in moving this interview along, but you said, when I commented, "Gee, we're only at 1954 after two sessions," you said, "Well, but in some ways maybe those early years can be the most important, or at least formative." I guess what you meant by this was that certain things then are set, and then the subsequent decades, years, are, in a way, the playing out of a story that's already established. Is that what you meant?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, yes, definitely. I think it's probably developing a personality, although I think psychologists say that your personality is pretty well developed by the age of fifteen, puberty. But I think probably those early years, probably after the age of twenty-five, or even thirty, you've certainly developed your personality. From then on, you are who you are. I think later years, I don't think you're amenable to change, in spite what the psychologists used to say in the sixties. After that time, I think you remain for the rest of your life who you are, and you probably change on a philosophical level, and you have new information, but as a person, you remain. So I think the early years are important. When you really see the autobiographies of a lot of the writers and a lot of the people, then really most of the writing concerns early years. Strangely enough, probably it's an inordinate amount you spend on your youth and your formative years and development, and then after that, you see autobiographies ten, twenty, thirty years pass and you get a few pages only. A novel is fine. It's kind of amazing. Now that you're doing this, I see the same thing in myself. When I think backwards, the last ten years, where are they? There's one incident, two, or three, but nothing is really quite vivid, quite as vivid as it was when you are, let's say, twenty or twenty-five. So I guess I may have answered your question.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Our first job, if we want to follow the menu that we've set out for ourselves this afternoon, is to try to, in one way or another, carry your story from 1954 up to the present. We can be optimistic, perhaps, in some ways, because, in fact, you feel the formative events and experiences were already, for the most part, taken place by the time you left art school.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I think probably as far as the personality goes. I don't think about one's approach to art or literature, I think it changes constantly, because when I think what I did or what I spoke, let's say, thirty or forty years ago, it seems stupid and very simplistic now, which seemed great. So in that respect, your judgment changes, but I think your basic approach to life doesn't; it remains constant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We've been talking very much in terms of personal psychology and personality and the way you internalize experience, and then you perhaps process it, and then it's reflected in the artwork. This is, it seems to me, the approach we've been taking so far. If that is indeed the case, then I would like to suggest that we might follow the thread, then, of biography along those lines.

You left art school. As a matter of fact, we then got on to general subjects. I don't think we tracked your experience, your life experience at all after that. I don't think we got into that at all.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you left art school. What happened? What did you do?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, what happened was then I went to my parents' home, went back to Salem, and I was really depressed and confused, and I didn't know really what to do. That I remember like it was quite vividly. I went to Oregon, and it was one of those really rainy and cold summers. I set up a studio in my parents' garage. They had a big garage, luckily. All the cars were left on the street.

I painted that summer and I got probably one commission, and it was to paint really a huge mural for the local YMCA. I think it was something like eight by twenty feet. So I set it up in the garage, and, of course, I painted in the spirit of [Robert] Motherwell, all the rotating shapes. It still hangs today. Whenever I go to Salem, I look at it. It looks terrible. [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does it?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, it does, I would say. Well, it looks like a Motherwell, in a way, probably.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I thought you liked Motherwell.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I liked it, but now I like him less. I liked him at that time, but now I like him a lot less, you could say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why is that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I would say your needs change, and it's a question, why I like him less. I like him less because I had forgotten what people said, how good he was. And there is really one thing about art schools and critics and influence, when everybody says, "That is really a genius of a painter," you tend to accept it and see what's really good in him. I didn't feel that way. As human beings, we are extremely suggestible. We can be talked into things. That's how advertising works. I would say liberal arts education has a lot to do with advertising, unfortunately. So I was told that Motherwell was good, and I thought that's the way to paint it, that's the way to go. Especially if you really graduated, you really couldn't, at that time--now it's different, but at that time from the University of California, you really could not graduate unless you did a nonobjective abstract work for your master's thesis.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm glad you mentioned that.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I mention that. So I did it. In a way, I liked it, but I really realized it was not me. It was not me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you were pleased with how the commission came out, how the mural came out at the time?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no. Actually, I wasn't. When you really think of it, even at that time it was a mural, that's how I knew it, how I could and wanted to. There was a space, and the money really wasn't big, and so I had to--in a way I would say there was a deadline and I had to finish it. I didn't have really anything better in mind, so I did it. Unfortunately, it still is there. It's a fairly good decoration, I'd say, and thoroughly fits the space. Nothing wrong with that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is it signed?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, of course it's signed. Then I got the papers. It was appraised about four years ago. They sent me an appraisal, and I think the appraisal said something like $18,000. So I sent it immediately to the Maxwell Galleries. I said, "You see, they have a student's work which has been appraised by professionals at $18,000." [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that it? Was that your career in Salem?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, no, no, no. Actually, even during while I wa at Cal, and even before that in Seattle, I had some local art shows. I would say I started showing around the local galleries, even Oregon State College galleries, quite early. So by that time, on the very local level, I had about maybe four or five one-man shows.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They had galleries there?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes. They had two galleries there in Salem, and they have Oregon State College and all the little colleges, they had galleries. Now most of them are closed for lack of funds. I was supposed to really ask to have a show at Oregon State Gallery, Oregon State University in Corvallis, a gallery for this November, and the gallery closed for lack of funds.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no!

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was it under way? You were preparing for it?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, actually, I wasn't preparing for it. As I probably mentioned, probably I would like to mention it earlier, but that comes later in life. At this point I never prepare for a show. I had very bad experiences in preparing for a show. If you are prepared, you are under pressure. If you are under pressure, you really can't paint under pressure. You have to take your time, at least for me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even though it's out of order, maybe we ought to talk about that now, because that seems to be something that it is one of the elements in your career and experience that had an impact. Is that right? When did this happen? When did you have an unfortunate, really unhappy experience?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I think it was probably--do you want to talk about it now?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I think then probably I have to make a jump. [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's my fault.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I don't think it's anybody's fault. As a person, I'm a very--one of my daughters says, "You have a very linear way of thinking." As you realize, it's a very old-fashioned way. What can I say? I'm really an old-fashioned person, so I have linear ways.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We'll break the linear. Then we'll come back.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, we'll break the linear. Well, that was in the very early sixties. It was in '61. That's when my dealer, the late Fred Maxwell, invested some money just for the purposes in a way of advertising. He arranged me three shows simultaneously, that would go on at the same time, like one in New York, one at O'Hanna Gallery in London, then one in Paris. Then, of course, you need all the paintings. Imagine what it takes

to have three shows at the same time.

So about a year before it was announced, I went again to my parents' home, where I would be fed, to take care. Also I had an apartment and a studio in Berkeley. And I just painted. I painted and painted. Then I really felt the pressure. Like I said, I had to turn out so many paintings. At that time I really thought I could do it, and if I really painted from morning 'til night, and if I painted something like seven days a week, it could be done. And I did it. It could be done. I turned out a lot of paintings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How many, do you suppose?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I think probably within a period of a year I turned out something like fifty canvases.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow!

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Fifty. [laughter] Well, some of them are small, some of them are bigger, but there were fifty canvases I lined up. At that time I really had a lot of energy, and I really thought that I could do it, and I really felt I had something.

But then in a few years I looked back at those paintings, and they were just so miserable, so mediocre, and it had really nothing. It had the surface, but really nothing that would give them life. The one thing I say, to breathe life into a painting, that's the most difficult thing. It may look the same, but it has to have the right touches, the right time, the right place, and unless you have it, it's dead. So I produced a lot of dead paintings, and they were exhibited and shown. Well, the reviews, I would say, even for a New York show, I would say I had one bad review and there were about--I think also in the New York Times, they were favorable. Another one actually got about four favorable and one kind of unfavorable. One favorable one, I think that was the correct one; that was the right one. Then, of course, from the O'Hanna Gallery, I got one really pretty good review. I think there was one writer, I think from the Times.

PAUL KARLSTROM: From the London Times?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: London Times, yes. From the reviewer in this, probably I can't remember. I had to put it down because I really liked it. I don't have it. The critic said, "It's surprising that an artist with such international credentials has produced work so limited in scope and so limited in vision."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, no. You must have been devastated.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, no. I'm not devastated by bad reviews. Really, quite frankly, usually my wife and my children say, "Oh, you are tough. You are hard. You have no feelings." But, no, I'm not devastated. I look at it from the--I only dislike it as they affect me financially or otherwise. If it is a well-written bad review, I kind of enjoy it, because after viewing other people's work, I've done the same thing. [laughter] It's really fun to write a bad review, because then you really can craft a beautiful sentence really to put the knife into the person. I find it so rewarding. And if somebody else does it, I really enjoy it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it sounds to me like you're a masochist if you describe it in terms of a knife being put into the subject.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, not necessarily a knife into myself. I've put knives into other people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But this critic was kind of putting a knife in you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you enjoy that.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I enjoy that, yes. Actually, I have a collection of some of the bad reviews. Whenever I've done my writing also, I've had bad comments. Strange enough, in a way I enjoy it, because in a way the criticism really--I can really honestly say good or bad, it does not affect me. If somebody writes really a good review and I feel if it isn't true, then in a way I dismiss it. I say, "That's the way he sees it, but it really isn't true."

For my first show at Maxwell Galleries, I think it was in '54, in San Francisco, strangely enough, I got very good reviews. Someone said, "A Latvian painter, genius of color. There is a man who can do everything he wants," and etc. I still have those reviews at home. Definitely at that I would say, not unrightly, I said, "It just is not true. I know it isn't true. It couldn't be true."

PAUL KARLSTROM: So even if it was very favorable.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, even if it's favorable.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's good. You're not fooled by praise of this sort.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, absolutely not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: By good press.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, I'm not absolutely fooled by good press, no. Well, it's nice that they've done it, but actually deep inside I know whether it is true or not. And, of course, a bad review probably affects you financially, affects with your friends. Of course, my wife is upset if there's a bad review and thinks something should be done about it. I say, "No, don't worry. It really does not affect me." I never lost a night's sleep about a bad review. That I can say really with absolute honesty.

Once I got a bad review, not really a bad review, but it wasn't very complimentary, from Albright, he had written. He was a kind of, I would say, critic, Bay Area, like he would write one day about the same thing one way and about the same thing next day another way, depending on if he's in a good mood or a bad mood. So one review, I remember he was really very nicely saying that, "His paintings look as if they have been painted from Van Gogh Airlines." And I really enjoyed that sentence immensely. [laughter] It was kind of funny. And in a way it was true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you mean? That it was too facile? It was too decorative?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, at that time I turned out semi-abstract landscapes, a lot of columns, stripes. Of course, when you look at the Van Gogh paintings, as he painted all those fields with those converging stripes, there is a vague similarity. It never looked like Van Gogh, but--

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wait a minute. He said Van Gogh Airlines?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, Van Gogh Airlines.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, like commercial art.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, no, no. What he meant was that it looked like really, in a way, a Van Gogh landscape from above, as you see it from an airplane.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I understand.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: An airplane flying. On a bird's view. And it's true, actually, even today. Most of my paintings have a landscape, a bird's view.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's not necessarily negative. That's just descriptive.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, it's negative. Well, there were a couple of other sentences. It wasn't entirely positive. It was written a little bit tongue in cheek, and that you realize, when someone is tongue in cheek. Then there was another one. There was a bad review from one of the New York papers. "He's really a painter who is just barely learning how to draw." It goes something like that, but it was put, I would say, in a [unclear] structure. It was put in a very nice, a very interesting way. So those things I remember. Then, of course, I don't know, you tell me if I'm digressing, because usually in writing I hate digressing, to talk about association. But since you are encouraging it, I'm doing it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Go on.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: In a way, really I would say I really also realize that people like to read, and myself, bad reviews more than good reviews. A bad review sticks in your mind, and, strangely enough, if you have a bad review about a painter, you remember him more than as if the review was good. Like if I have a good review, nobody mentions it. But then there is a bad review and I have a friend calling. "Do you remember what he said? How do you feel when he wrote that about you?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, there's no such thing as bad press coverage, actually.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, that I realize. Any press coverage is good, yes. You know, that's one of the things that I really met Walter Keene once. I guess you remember him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yes.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: [laughter] And Margaret Keene.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They were friends of yours?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no. No, no, but I met them at a party, and I asked him, I said--well, I guess he never got a good review in his life. And then he said, "You know what? It really never hurt my sales."

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's all he cared about.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's all he cared about. As long as your work is in the press. And as he stated, that didn't hurt my sales, because a lot of people came. He says, "It just isn't true. I like your paintings. I like your feeling. I like those steely eyes," etc., etc. When you find out if probably some person is set and likes your work, he really isn't all that much influenced by bad reviews, because, like I said, he knows what he likes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about this? And we'll try not to digress too much, but I want to make sure that we don't move off of this subject and then not return to it. I'm trying to understand this story, the three shows, your attitudes, which seem very mature, about reviews, in terms of your personality, in terms of what you've described as your personality, one part of which, at least in some respects, has to do with a certain insecurity, I think.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anxiety and insecurity.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Certainly I would expect part of your art enterprise, being involved in art and making art, is that you want to be taken seriously by people who are knowledgeable.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that true?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's true, yes. You have to be taken seriously. I guess there was some dealer from San Francisco, what he mentioned is you have to keep in mind that you have to produce museum-quality work. At that time I really felt that if you're a painter, you have to produce very such works. There is frivolous work and there is serious work, museum-quality work. I was really taken by that, and I really had tried and tried at that time to produce serious work. I think that was also the propaganda of Berkeley, that they somehow said if you are a painter, you had to do serious work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you don't think you need to?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, now I really don't care if I produce serious work or not. [laughter] Because, I would say, the more I think of it, the more I am enjoying what I am doing. But at that time I was very serious. I really thought that it had to be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean when you came out of art school.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, when I came out of art school, I was very serious. I had to do serious work. I had to put a lot of effort in it.

[Tape 1, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing this third session interview with Raimonds Staprans. This is tape one, side B. You were saying something that I thought was quite interesting. We were talking about reviews and response to reviews. You were saying how in art school you were taught that you must produce serious art, you must be serious, and perhaps even suffer to make serious art, museum-quality art, that you believed that at the time. Then you also said that now you've decided it's more important to enjoy making the art. How did this happen? How did this come about?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I would say it just came about, I think, very gradually. Starting from '54, I would really say that it was a process of twenty years, because it was only, I would say, in the late seventies that I really felt that I really, really started enjoying what I was doing, when I really thought, "I don't really care what kind of art I'm producing. That's the kind of painting I like, and that's what I'm doing." I'd say, "You may take it or leave it."

But actually I felt resentful, in a way, that it had taken me so long, what I would say, to finding peace--in that respect, peace--within myself, that it had taken probably more than almost twenty-five years, in which I tried this, I tried that. I would say if you are a young painter, it is not only school, it is not only reviews. There are a lot of pressures from the outside, like I said, from the school, from people, from galleries, from what you read what is supposed to be great and what's supposed to be good. Knowing when you are older and you've been around

for some time, you realize that mostly it's like anything else, it's fashion. It's like a clothes model. One day you have long skirts, then you have short skirts, then they're long. That's the way it goes. You have to accept it.

But at that time, I really thought that somehow, some way, there was such a thing as a serious museum-quality work. I really tried to see it in the painters who were famous. Then later, gradually, came the fame, and what are considered great painters today probably the next century they will be quite forgotten. Like I definitely am not sure what will happen to the New York Abstract Expressionist School. I wonder. Let's say the people in the next century, let's say fifty years from now, what will they think about it? We'll never know. There's absolutely no way of knowing what they will think of the nineteenth century, academically. Notice it's coming back in vogue again, resurrected.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, that's partly, as you say, fashion or market-driven.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It's market.

PAUL KARLSTROM: To consume.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: To consume and to change.

PAUL KARLSTROM: To rediscover.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: To rediscover. Just look at the magazines. Had some nice, good things in it, but magazines, they are looking for something novel, something different.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell me if I understand this correctly. I gather from what you say that you came to discover over time that there are a number of external pressures, external demands, external standards that were leading you and other young artists to behave or to work in a certain way with certain expectations.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. Yes. Definitely, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do I understand it correctly, then, that over the years you came to become more and more skeptical about that, and became more interested in internal reasons for making art?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. Yes, definitely. Definitely, yes. Yes, probably internally. Actually, probably you reconcile. I would say if you are young--and I've talked to young artists at that time, and I remember when you are really young, you really feel that with an effort, you can climb out of your shoes, even supersede yourself. You can make bigger of yourself than you are. In a way, it has probably come from, I would say, goes back to the family and the work ethic that comes from family. If you work really hard, you are going to produce good work. If you work harder, the work will be better. And etc. and etc. So this was probably the pressure.

Now I guess you reach a certain age and you reconcile and you believe that you are whoever you are, and you have to make, in a way, the best of it, who you are, and that you really can't jump out of your pants and be higher than you are, and to do what you feel best at, and to do what you know best, and to be very careful about it, not to do things that you don't know how to do well. I think that's one of those wisdoms, to avoid and bypass all those other underwater obstacles. Like you would say, "I'm not going to do this because it's not in me." And if you are young, you'll likely say, "I'm going to do it in spite of it, because if I really apply myself, I'm going to do it." Now you realize that at a certain point certain things you just cannot do because you don't have it in you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the romantic notion of a moment of poetic inspiration, or something mysterious, something coming to you and providing that insight that allows you to transcend yourself and your abilities? You don't believe in that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, no. No, I think it's probably--

PAUL KARLSTROM: It never happens? No great art can be explained in terms of a revelation or insight or an inspiration?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I'm not really a great believer in inspiration. Maybe I'm that sort of a person. Well, I would say as you work, I think inspiration is, in a way, at least it's for me, if I don't work and I don't do any painting, there is no inspiration. As I start working, then something develops and you get some insights. In a way, I'm really a believer that a lot of the art--all the good things that happen are accidental. The only thing is to recognize them and to attack them. But in a way I could say I really get angry. People, they come to my house and they say, "You have this beautiful view. Don't you really get inspiration to paint from this beautiful panorama?" And that's one thing that really makes me angry. No, I don't get any inspiration from a beautiful scene or a beautiful view. It doesn't affect me. The only inspiration I get, it's from other people's paintings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said that before.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I said that before.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting, because that's reiterating in a very specific and practical way, because you were saying earlier that art is not about nature, it's about art.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It's definitely about art. It's about other people's paintings. It's really a shame that a lot of people don't recognize it. You really learn from other people's paintings. When you really look at every artist, he always has a mentor. You really cannot start in a vacuum. I give two examples. First I would say it's the primitive painters. Some painters are what you would call primitive art. Grandma Moses, for example. Not that she's any better than millions of others, but I think [unclear] made a lot of money, from the [unclear] Gallery, made a lot of money on her. And then there are children's paintings by children, and the world over, [unclear] and stylistically, they're alike. Any one looks like the other. You take primitive, amateur painting, painted in the United States, and you see a painting somewhere else, probably in Europe, somebody painting in the Orient, and they look somehow stylistically all alike, because they have not had the mentors and they have not learned from other people's paintings, I would say, traditional art in general as it develops from a certain age and on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's uninformed by art.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, it means you're uniformed by art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that, for you, would be one of the things that separates, distinguishes "serious art" from art that doesn't participate in the broader art world.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right, yes. Broader art. Because if you are a painter, you have to build on something. If you haven't seen much, if you are in an art school--again I say that's why probably in a way I hate art schools, that depending on what kind of teacher you got, because no matter, you can have the most open-minded teacher, but if you really follow him and if you really want to get a good grade and get through, you have to paint somehow the way he paints. You have to adopt his vision. The little I've taught, I've fallen into my own mold, the same mold. Like when I was teaching for a few semesters at the University of Alaska--I did it because I wanted to see Alaska for personal reasons and so on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That was in '79, '80, '81.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was a couple of years?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, it wasn't a couple of years. Like I said, it was a semester, then there's interruptions, another semester. I was really like, I would say, a guest artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A visiting artist.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Visiting artist, so I would say, and I had classes in landscaping and painting in general.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What happened?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: What happened, it was that I really realized that all I had to offer them, it was my approach, my procedure to painting. When it came to judging, as close as the work came to what I was doing, I think the better painter the student was. Absolutely, I couldn't escape it. I did. I would say I wasn't successful, definitely. Probably I was successful. Do you want me to go into some detail in it?

PAUL KARLSTROM: We need to talk about it sometime. [laughter]

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: [laughter] Otherwise it might take forever. Probably what it explains, what I did, I really wanted to concentrate their vision, to make them to see. What I did--and everybody hated it, because, of course, you have an art school, and in a regular art class I would say, like what I said in an advisory class, you have all those young good-looking women, and then you have some men from other departments, and then you have some really who want to paint, but they really want to study hard. It's good if you have one person who's a serious painter in an art class from early on. What the people really wanted, they wanted to paint beautiful landscapes like the Mendenhall Glacier or something like that. I set up a still life, a white table, and probably there were some objects like a still life. I asked them to bring in anything that's white or slightly offwhite, and I said, "For an entire semester, that's what you are going to paint, and I want you to find color in this white and white still life." So you'd train your eyes to see something that you ordinarily don't see. Like you would see color in a gray shadow. I said, "You are going to paint the same still life for the rest of the semester." And that's what they did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But they didn't like that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, nobody liked it. There was one person. Seems there was one young woman who took it seriously and who did it. Then I heard that she became a painter of sorts. In a roundabout way, the only one. Then, of course, I didn't get, I would say, very good recommendations from the students. I probably was too rigid and I wasn't really, I would say, catering to a person's individuality.

Then the other time I just set there also a still life, and I said, "If you want to paint landscapes, paint landscapes. If you want to go out, go paint Mendenhall Glacier." And everybody was so happy and painting along, and, actually, in the class I was doing my own work, and I was painting alongside with them. Then they came and looked at my work. I said, "I'd like some criticism," and I would sort of superficially, in a way, criticize his work. I felt it was of no value, and everybody was very satisfied. But really, I really felt like an imposter. That's probably the way an art class is. If you wanted to be, I would say, a popular teacher in the art, that's the way you operate. Then I really fall back on the most popular teachers which I had at Cal, and that's what they were, because they found out that's what they were doing, anyway. Except like you would say, well, the only limitation was as long as you are an abstract painter, you can paint anything you want, as long as it's abstract.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you ever teach anywhere else? Was this your only teaching experience?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I taught some art classes at YMCA in summertime when I came to San Francisco. The YMCA has art classes for women, people, and young students who want to know something about art. So I taught a few classes, I would say, in the summer. I made some money, a little money, but I made some money which I needed at the time. I never really thought that I really contributed anything worthwhile.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about in Alaska? You were teaching in the university there?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: The University of Alaska, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where is that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Juneau. Well, it has actually two campuses. One is in Juneau and another one is in Anchorage. But I was teaching at the Juneau campus.

To digress, they have an art museum, and they gave me a one-man show a couple of years later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's jump back now. We have a productive digression, and this is real good. I see a sort of theme emerged to help us, or at least to help me in tracking you now, these remaining years up to now, and that is a kind of progress or journey where you describe yourself as starting out with notions of the gravity of your endeavor, the significance, the importance, and this led you, in '61, I think you said, the three shows.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, we got the three simultaneous shows.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that sent us off on a digression, because you described that as a very unpleasant experience, which, no doubt, contributed then to a process of you ultimately changing your views on what was important or what was even involved in being an artist, what it meant to be an artist. At an earlier stage, at least for a short time, you thought it was to work very, very hard, make lots and lots of pictures so you could have three shows at one time. This was a serious artist, right?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I don't know if it was serious art. No, I wouldn't agree with that 100 percent, because there is some truth in it. I don't think that painting many pictures was serious art; it was a necessity. It was a necessity. I had to have those paintings, and I thought that I could do it. But even then I couldn't say that I liked the situation. Even at that time I didn't like the situation, but I thought that I could do it. Now I know that I cannot do it. If somebody asked me, "There's a show. Would you paint for a show?" I'd say, "No, I'm not painting for a show." If I had paintings, there are enough paintings for a show, there's a show. If there are not, there is no show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. What I glean from this, apparently you came to see that the work ethic, working hard, did not necessarily guarantee accomplishing a more important goal; that is, to be working well.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Absolutely. I think you put it quite well. [laughter] We've come together at this point, really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so it seems that perhaps the story of the ensuing years, that would be part of the theme, as you say, of coming to peace, understanding what is important to you and your work.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, absolutely, what's important. And also to realize what kind of a person you are and to realize under which conditions you can work best. Usually, actually, we discuss things with my brother, and he says he really can do his best work under pressure. And I am not. I'm not that kind of person. If I'm really under pressure, I do very bad work. It has to do with one's personality, and one has to accept it. At that time I didn't

accept it. Now I accept it, that to do good work, I can do it under certain conditions, and if the conditions are not there, I know I cannot do it. I have to do my best to create those conditions under which I can work well.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's try this, because we do need to get back to our nice little linear development here. What about thinking of the way your life then unfolded? Or I guess I should ask if there's a possible way to think of it, of you actually striving within the means any of us have to do this, to create that life and that world and that situation in which you, Raimonds Staprans, work, do your best work.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did that unfold then? What happened? What did you do? You got out of art school. We've only gotten you back to Salem, then little references to down here. We really went everywhere, but in terms of our chronology, almost nowhere. So let's move it along. What happened to you as a man? What happened in your life as you were being an artist?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: As I was being an artist, well, I can probably divide my work along the decades, like the fifties, sixties, seventies. I think probably in the fifties--well, I have to mention that at that time, when I got out of school--and again I don't want to get into too much detail--of course, what to do. I thought I would go into advertising somehow, because that's the only way to make money. I'm very grateful to my parents, especially, like I said, "Don't go into advertising. I thought you really wanted to do painting. You wanted to do art. How are you going to support you?"

So I went around to galleries. At that time there were not too many galleries in the San Francisco Bay Area. There was one, like Gray Shop in Oakland. I showed them work and they would immediately give me a show. There was Lucien Labaudt Gallery, which was considered the intellectual gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had a show at Labaudt?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No. I showed some work, and they really wanted to give me a show immediately, but I turned them down. I somehow had this notion that there you had those artsy gallery people, intellectuals, who were really talking about art, but they were very weak in business, and they weren't strong personalities. Even at that time I really thought they could not do, in a way, much for me. And at that time I really was becoming suspicious of the very smooth-talking painters who were intellectuals, painters who were at Cal, and also the professors. I somehow made a connection that those who really talked well and wisely and nicely about art do not necessarily turn out the best paintings. I put it all together, in a way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So they had good words, but they weren't necessarily good pictorially.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. They were talking really well. They had beautiful command of the English language, but they were not necessarily good painters. I think on one occasion, really I think probably what I did, I met [Richard] Diebenkorn, and he really wasn't a smooth talker.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. Not at all. He was very reticent and was quite shy.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Very shy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very thoughtful, very slow.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Very thoughtful, very slow. Very thoughtful. He's the kind of person that, in a way, he'll inspire you immediately. Beautiful sentences and beautiful observations.

So, people at the Labaudt Gallery, I somehow instinctively knew that they really couldn't do anything for me. They would give me a show, but they really couldn't--then, I'd say, even by default, I walked out into Maxwell Galleries, which was sort of a commercial gallery, and, in a way, they were showing at that time, I would say, nineteenth century California art, some of the French Impressionists thrown in, and American Impressionists thrown in, like, at that time, strangely enough, you could buy a Grace Hudson painting, a Grace Hudson for $300. [laughter] Well, you have to pay something like $60,000.

[Break in Taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing this third session interview with Raimonds Staprans, this is September 15, 1997. In our slow, slow progress of bringing you up to the present, in terms of your career, we have you now in San Francisco. Presumably you made this move. You never did, of course, tell why you did that, and maybe you will in a moment. Somehow you got from Salem down to San Francisco.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, it was because, I would say, as far as a town, there's nothing in Salem. I really felt also at that time there really wasn't much in Portland. So after school--again I have to digress. Also I would say

that the Portland Art Museum, they looked at some of the work and they gave me a one-man show at the Portland Art Museum while I was in Salem. Of course, at that time it really was a big thing. You get out of art school and you get a museum show, people liking your work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had a show at Portland?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, at the Art Museum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's incredible for a young artist.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I thought it was incredible. There were some people who looked at the work and they thought it was somehow museum quality, for some reason. I didn't think so. I didn't think so myself. If they were willing to have a show, I said, "Well, good for me."

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were obviously getting an unusual amount of good attention and response right out of art school.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, right out of art school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very few students get that.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's true, yes. I thought that I was lucky, in a way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you think you were a better painter than the rest of the students? Be honest, now.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes, yes. Definitely. In all my art classes, in most of them, I was one of the better students. Actually, I thought I had the eye. I guess one of the teachers, which became really a personal friend, like Carl Kasten, was one of my teachers. We still meet on a social basis, and he just came up. He told me so, he said, "You are the only artist in my class." But, actually, I knew it. Actually, in that respect, I hadn't been wrong. There was a painter, he's dead now--I think he drank himself to death--it was Walter Snellgrove.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, Snellgrove.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: And I thought he was a serious artist. There was Walter Askin.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Walter Askin. I know him. He's down in Pasadena.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, he's down in Pasadena. I thought he was a serious artist. The ones I really respected, they became, but out of those classes, there were only a few, a person here and a person there, and the ones I respected, strangely enough, I really had a conviction they probably had an eye, that those who had something, but there were just a few, like you had a class with thirty people and there you get one, and another class you get another one. Of course, I knew I was a lot better. In a class of thirty people, that there were probably two or three of us who were worthwhile mentioning.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How many people can be decent artists at any given time?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, that's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, just because they go to school and choose to enroll in these classes doesn't mean they're a damn bit of good.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, I might be better than half of them.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Exactly. Anybody.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even me. [laughter]

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I don't know if you had been or not, but I would say most people could be better. I would say that [unclear] and a lot of people have done it, and especially if you're getting to the abstract expressionist mode, my God, with a little training, you can really turn out a good abstract expressionist painting, but that probably I'm going to tell later, an experience. It's an entirely different experience.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, once again, we're going back to school. You see, we can't get ourselves away from art school.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It's amazing, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So let's try real hard. Otherwise, we're going to end this interview and not get it. Maxwell. Remember we had you there.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right. I headed back to Maxwell's.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When you went to visit, you saw the old nineteenth century--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Nineteenth century. Then I saw it really isn't the gallery for me; it's nineteenth century. But then I met a man, like an artist walking around, you have your bag of paintings with you. To digress, whenever I see artists walking around, I really feel for him. I have a big feeling. I say, how miserable and how insecure. What a disappointment it is when you walk into a gallery with your paintings and, "Take a look at my work."

Then he said, "Well, I really like that work," and he explained, he said, "Do you realize that I'm in business because I like art?" He says, "I'm a business man, but if I were selling eggs or refrigerators, I would be probably doing just as well. So I'm a business man who likes art." So he made it quite clear.

Then I thought, "My God, he's the guy for me." So he gave me, in San Francisco, the first one-man show in his gallery, and I guess, strangely enough, I got fabulous reviews. At that time, Alfred Frankenstein, who was the icon at that time in San Francisco, as far as art criticism goes, he gave me a very, very, very good review, which I really thought at that time I didn't quite deserve it. And there were others. Freed gave me a good review. I think I got five or six probably better reviews that I've ever gotten.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I can't expect you to retrieve exactly what these various reviews said. In general, what was the nature of the response? What did they see that they liked? What was it that was praised?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: What was praised, at that time I was painting sort of heavy in pastel. What they said, one of the things mentioned, it was vitality. Vitality and really a magnificent sense of color. I think that was probably the general gist, a natural sense of color, of putting colors together in such a way that I could put the colors in a way to make them shine, in a way, to make them alive. In a way, I agreed on that point. But they were the two points: vitality and really a sense of color, that I could do with color whatever I wanted, and etc.

So the show was a success. There were quite a few sales, which also was surprising. I didn't think that they would sell at all. Suddenly there were sales, and even some important people, I would say, sold. People like the Magnum family, I think sold some pictures.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean they bought them.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I mean, they bought some pictures, etc. I said, "My God. Am I not lucky? I really don't deserve this." Looking back, I really didn't deserve it at that time. [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is amazing, though, because the San Francisco art community has never been viewed as one that is especially supportive of the visual arts, and certainly local or contemporary artists.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A very bad record in that respect. But you just described your own artist as something quite unusual in terms of the way we look, the way we think the art market was going here for contemporary art. Does this seem to you that you were, as you say, pretty lucky, that this was unusual? Were there others?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I don't know. I would agree that it was unusual at that time, because it was really an age of optimism, like the country was recovering from the war, the economy was going up. There was a lot of money around. No, it isn't that people were not buying; they were buying. In a way I would say at that time they were--well, of course, they were buying pictures like everywhere, but I think there was a small group of people who were buying what I would call the serious artists. Anyway, there were some. But really, to be quite honest, most of the buyers, as I look back in the five-year perspective, they are out of town, like today. Most of the buyers are either from Texas or Los Angeles or New York, or even Peninsula, I would say.

It wasn't a sold-out show, but I think people bought quite a few paintings. I think probably I was really gratified the paintings were bought. Yehudi Menuhim [or Walter Menuhin?] bought one of the paintings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yes?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, Yehudi Menuhin, that's right. In Russian, I think it's [unclear], but in English it's Menugen. And he bought a painting. Of course, that helped a lot.

Then I think it was [unclear], and I think a year later, Irving Stone bought a painting, the writer who has written.

So I really thought, my God, how lucky I can get. I knew I was a pretty good painter, but I also knew already at that time I somehow felt that a lot of luck, there was a lot of luck. And in a way, some of those people came into Maxwell's. They came. I knew how it happened. Basically they didn't came to see my show; they came to look at, probably, nineteenth century American painting. They came to look at the American Impressionists and some of the French Impressionists. He also handled some of the big-name French Impressionists which were very marketable, like early [Claude] Monets and etc. You could have them probably for $50,000, you could buy early Monet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Certainly Maxwell was, I think, at that time probably the leading gallery in San Francisco.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: He was a leading gallery. I know that really, I would say, with some jealousy, like [unclear] said, "Now this man is making more money than most of the galleries combined in the Bay Area," because he was a good salesman. And we became, in a way, he had no family, had no children, and I became all for him, I realized, almost like a son for him, like he wouldn't do anything for him. He would arrange shows.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He would socialize, have dinners?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, socialize with him. Later on he came to my house, wherever I was, and to him. He came to Salem to see my family. I would say he was not only my dealer, but my larger personal friend. I knew his limitations. He was a man with a heart, in a way. He liked to help people, someone who needed money.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he was obviously your first important dealer.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That was starting from '54, from '54 on. Well, up to his death.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did he die? I forget.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: He died in '73, spring '73.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then Mark Hoffman.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Then Mark Hoffman took over his gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was he a nephew?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: He was a nephew, yes. At that time, for years he had a rather large paint store in Oakland, and he was also famous at that gallery. He was the first one, he bought my first painting at the gallery. I remember then he bought some more. In a way, we socialized with him after that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: With Mark Hoffman?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Mark Hoffman, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was he married to Coleen?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Coleen, yes. She was a docent for some years, I think, the Oakland Museum. That's the way she passed her time. A nice, very charming woman, really not very sophisticated, very plain in a way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But very nice.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I would say she didn't know much, very simplistic, but very nice person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about Mark? Do you think he knew much of anything?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, I don't think he even knows that much now. But then again, he doesn't know much, maybe he doesn't have too much of an eye, but he has a love for art. He has to have art around him. He's learning. He's learning, I would say. He's the kind of a person, while he was in the gallery, he was known. But definitely he really didn't have the eyes that in a way Fred Maxwell had. He had an eye for the nineteenth century, I would say, Californian art, which he collected. He bought up really a collection of California art for a few hundred dollars apiece, and I remember him saying at that time, "Remember, ten, twenty years from now, people will pay a lot of money for it." And I didn't believe it. So he thought I had--

PAUL KARLSTROM: During these years and subsequent years you were associated with the gallery, did you establish relationships with other artists? Were there other practicing artists, contemporary artists, showing in

the gallery as well? Did you feel you were part of like a stable or a circle of artists?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no. In a way I was not. At that time, you know, strangely enough, I was really the only one. I started out as the only one artist in the gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The only living artist.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, the only living artist in the gallery. Then only later and gradually he added other people to the gallery, because, like I said, what he was really showing was art of the dead artists, and I was the only living artist in the gallery. Anyway, I enjoyed it, that I was, in a way, in a unique position that he would give me annual shows and he would give me shows in other places. He gave me a show in '55, in Paris. He arranged a one-man show. He arranged shows in other parts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did he have relationships with dealers in these other cities?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Actually, there is a network of dealers, and usually, as I found out, the network is such, "You show my painter, I'll show your painter." So, in a way, that's the way it goes. It's still true today, whether you like it or not. In '61, I got my one-man show in New York, through the Gallerie Saint Etienne, of course. This man ultimately got rich by discovering Grandma Moses. So, he said, "In a way I like your work, but you are, in a way, in New York unknown, but if you show Grandma Moses at your gallery, I'll show your Staprans in my gallery." So that's how I had the show in New York, so it was that simple. He said, "I have to like your work, but in order to show, you have to show my painting." And it's still true today.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you're connected, in a way, professionally, to Grandma Moses.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, it is that way. I would say I have to thank Grandma Moses for my show in New York in '61, Gallerie Saint Etienne.

PAUL KARLSTROM: While we're on this subject, why don't you talk a little bit more--this is, of course, part of your career--about your experience with, association with, dealers in galleries. You were for many years pretty exclusively with Maxwell.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't you describe--you began to describe it, but in the beginning, I gather they did very well for you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did it continue, or not?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I would say at the beginning. Later on, actually, as the art scene developed, gradually in a way I really began to realize that there were limitations, what he could do, because really a new generation--at that time I was probably starting from mid-sixties, from the late fifties and in the sixties, I would say a new generation of dealers came to San Francisco, and that's what happened with some of the galleries. They were people, some of them were quite educated in arts, with degrees from art schools or art history. In a way, they were more knowledgeable of the art market as it developed, and probably, in a way, one drawback is that from then on, gradually Fred Maxwell, I think, could do for me in a way less and less, because he really became outside of the network of galleries, especially those like, let's say, in New York and Los Angeles, that determined or influenced the art scene and that determined which painters are going to be the big ones, like they determined what kind of art is going to be shown, what kind of art is going to be marketed, how it is going to be marketed. They probably had some money. And it's still true. Whenever he was influential in the art scene in the fifties in the Bay Area, I would say gradually, in the sixties, became less so, and in the seventies he really was nothing influential any longer.

That was also probably my drawback and the reason that I really felt, in retrospect, that I probably didn't get the coverage I probably deserved. Inside, looking at people's work, I probably deserved. But probably it has to do with my personality and with my upbringing. You know, coming from a European upbringing, it was such a way that you really shouldn't blow your own horn. You should not advertise it. It's bad taste. You should not really think that you are good or anything, which is a big mistake. I know it's a big mistake. I tell my children, "You should remind everybody how good you are." But at that time, from the society I came from, it was considered absolutely, it's bad taste. You really shouldn't tell that you are good or anything like that. You should let other people tell.

PAUL KARLSTROM: At what point did you recognize that maybe you were at a disadvantage professionally, being associated with Maxwell?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I think probably, in a way, it came around in the seventies. It was sometime in the mid-seventies, when Mark Hoffman took it over. I really felt the disadvantage. Like my wife says, "Why don't you leave? Why don't you leave?" But then I looked around, and probably I had some people who were interested from other galleries, but then I looked at them. By God, they were not really interested in me, in a way, as a person. From a financial point of view, in a way I was a little afraid to break off the relationship, because he was giving regular shows and people were coming, he could arrange it. He was investing some money into shows, which very few dealers at that time in the Bay Area were willing to do. He was putting out catalogs, where other dealers were putting out postcards, sending out postcards. We also had sort of a personal relationship. In a way we were sort of friendly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What were some of the other galleries you mentioned that at least showed some interest?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I think there was G____ Gallery. My God, I cannot remember, because a lot of the galleries that had begun, they are now defunct, like most of the galleries that opened up in the fifties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hansen Fuller Goldeen?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, Hansen Fuller Goldeen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Diana Fuller?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Diana Fuller. She was ready to take me on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is retrospect, but that would have been an enormous leap, because that gallery, along with Berggruen, was the most influential, became--I mean, obviously we know that Maxwell Gallery, to a large extent, really became peripheral, marginalized. As a result, you became marginalized.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I became marginalized.

PAUL KARLSTROM: If it's true that whatever stage it was, whether it was Fuller Goldeen or Hansen Fuller, if you had taken that step, you would have been then moved right into one of the most prominent, visible galleries.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right. Yes, that was probably my mistake, in a way, because I didn't realize it. First, I didn't realize at that time. Second, oh my God, there is this upstart gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember when that was? Early seventies? Mid-seventies?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That was early seventies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Must have been Hansen Fuller.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, Hansen Fuller. Goldeen was later added, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you think about that? Okay, so maybe it was a lost opportunity, but it's interesting to me that they were interested in you, because I'm pretty sure they weren't looking to Maxwell. I don't think anybody was, at that point, looking to Maxwell anymore, or to that gallery, for much of anything. So they obviously had scouted around and somehow found your work, and found it fresh. Let's put it this way: found it fitting in with what was really a very much progressive avant garde stable.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes, that's true. Yes, I would say that's true. But you know what, probably it wasn't quite true. At that time, when you really think of the sixties and up to the seventies, Maxwell Gallery was doing, in a way, even in the seventies, they were doing some important shows either from New York or from here, like they had really--well, for years they had the estate--hell, what painter was that?

PAUL KARLSTROM: They had David Park.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, David. They represented David Park.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's true.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Actually, they represented his estate. Then they had quite a few, several, I would say, painters from New York. Who was this painter of portraits which became famous? I wish I could remember names.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A New York painter?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: A New York painter. Actually, what it was, in the sixties he hired David McKee to work

with the gallery, and he was the one who arranged those shows. So I would say it would be quite true that he was peripheral. He was peripheral in that he was showing very few, I would say, living Bay Area painters.

[Break in taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing our interview on September 15, session three, with Raimonds Staprans, tape 2, side B.

It sounds to me as if we've been talking about maybe, in some ways, a crucial or pivotal point, possibly, in your career, and that is when the gallery that you had been with for over a decade at that point--well, almost fifteen years in the seventies--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, probably for a decade, for fifteen years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which had served you very well over that time, but was slipping out of central position.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right. I think it really happens starting probably from the early seventies on. Like I would say in the sixties it was still important, an important gallery, but in the seventies it started slipping out, especially probably after Mark Hoffman became, I would say, the owner of the gallery.

I think we came to the point where I think you were asking why I didn't leave, and I mentioned the point, it was one of the financial reasons, and probably a miscalculation, in retrospect, but I saw that this gallery probably isn't going to last. Then other things, that we had had an exclusive, in a way, relationship, and probably to my detriment, we also had a personal relationship. I really felt that it probably wasn't right to walk out at this time, that I was being sort of ungrateful, that they had done things for me in the past. I think we probably thrashed it out with Ilona many times, she said, "Why don't you go? Why don't you leave?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your wife encouraging you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: My wife encouraging me. I said, "Well, yes, probably, in a way, at this point I probably should, but, you know, I really hate to do it. We have this personal relationship. They will do whatever they can, they will do for me, and I just don't feel like if things are turning a little bit sour and going down, that I should abandon the ship."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fair-weather friend.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. Like you'd say, shouldn't be a fair-weather friend. I have this feeling, not that I would say I'm a special person, very honest in that respect, but in that respect, somehow I still believe that you have to have a certain sense of loyalty, and it was really, I would say, a lot of loyalty had to do with it, to the gallery, because they wanted to do things, they wanted to have shows, they wanted also, in a way, to have an exclusive relationship. It wasn't necessary, but they wanted to be the number-one gallery I would be associated with. So, in a way, it was dragging along for years and years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's look at it in a different way, because it's clear that you simply made a decision at that point.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, it was really a decision that had to be made, and I made it. At that time it might have been, probably was the wrong decision, but that's what I made. In a way, I don't regret it too much, like you would say, in terms of one's life. I felt I had to--

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were loyal.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's a good thing.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. I don't know if it's a good thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a good quality.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, it's a good quality, but as far as business, it doesn't help you any at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you did that. That's history. As a result, you stayed with the gallery, associated with the gallery, and it became less and less, I think, able to serve you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. With every year, less and less that would serve my needs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what interests me very much here, and gets to a bigger topic, and that is that you are an artist who has received at various times very favorable recognition. You have a long, consistent history, a productive history of making work that anybody would agree is, as you were saying, serious work. You're a serious artist.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's pretty clear that you have not received, at least in this country, wide attention. Your name is not one of the more familiar names among contemporary artists, even in the Bay Area.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And yet you've produced, in my view, a consistent and distinguished body of work that one would expect would have received more attention in terms of shows and in writing and so forth. So the question, then, is, is there something in the work that accounts for this, or is it, rather, something in decisions about how to associate yourself with the market?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I would say definitely, you put it very clearly. It's definitely decisions about market and probably part of the blame you have to put in one's personality, in one's personality and upbringing and, I would say, attitude, also I would say sociability. I would say my personal qualities have a lot to do with it in that respect. If I had to live it over, I probably would do things differently. I would do differently. I would definitely abandon loyalty, in that respect. I would go around more. I would try to associate with the right people, which I know who are influential in the field, and I have not done this. Probably it's to my detriment.

I think I probably have mentioned several times that discussions about art, in general, and such, at times I find it somehow boring, because I feel that it never gets to the core of the things. You get artists together, we talk a lot, but then it doesn't mean anything, but you get one glimpse of the painting, you get all the information you need. That's the way I felt it. I was also an individual, because of my personality or my personal shortcomings, I was out, I would say, of the Bay Area art scene with people who are writing or determining art.

Now that I see that my daughter [unclear] fundraising, she knows how important it is to have the right connections, the right people to do the right thing at the right time. To succeed in art, you have to have what you call good business sense. It's absolutely necessary. When you really think of all the big-name artists, they had it--contemporary artists. They had it, when you really see their biographies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, one way or another, but certainly the fact that Wanda Hansen or Diana Fuller or Dorothy Goldeen, whoever it was at that time, that approached you or sent an invitation--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, not really. Let's say we talked about it. Like you'd say, "I am with the Maxwell. Would you like to do something with me or come over and have some paintings?" and etc. I thought, "My God, is this a schoolteacher? She's not going to make it." I really felt that the gallery isn't going to succeed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think I understand that. The point is that at least there was some interest from Hansen Fuller, which became very much one of the avant garde galleries, certainly progressive galleries, in San Francisco--Boyd Wiley, with Hudson, the big names, Bill Allen, all of the biggies in Bay Area art. Maybe Arneson; I'm not sure about that, too. But this was one of the top galleries. They at least considered you as appropriate, perhaps, for fitting in with their gallery.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So I guess you can't say that there's some conservative or traditional or realist aspect of your work that was necessarily holding it back; it was where it was being seen.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Probably. Probably. But also I think probably, in a way, the kind of works that was being done, I think also had something to do with it. Personally, I always felt that I had been a little bit out of the mainstream, out of the fashion, either too early or too late. There are certain things floating around, I would say, in the air at a certain age, as far as the art market goes. Recognition is absolutely connected to the art market, there's no doubt about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What has happened since? Why don't you quickly bring it up to the recent time. We know where that will take you. You hung in there with Maxwell until quite recently.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, that's right. In a way, I still haven't broken ties with him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's happened? You have taken some steps in terms of managing the career.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Some steps. Like in the eighties, I developed sort of a relationship with two galleries in

Germany and one in Berlin, one in Hamburg, and I've had several shows there. Then I developed a show with a gallery in Sarasota, Florida. Again, I developed in a personal way a relationship with that person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What are the names of these galleries, the Berlin one and the Hamburg one?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It was Redmann Gallery and Bruschter Gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One was in Berlin?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's the Redmann Gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about in Sarasota?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Sarasota. What was the name of the gallery? My God.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We can find out later.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It was in the early eighties, for a few years. Actually, it was a man who--now I know. It's Bruewaken Gallery. The man was Bruewaken, and he was a collector of my works for a good many years. He had, over the years, bought maybe six or seven paintings. Then he retired and he opened a little gallery in Sarasota, Florida. So he gave me several shows, which, in a way, were doing quite well. We got very good reviews and etc., etc. But the man died of melanoma, and the gallery closed, and that was the end of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it was somewhat productive?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It was productive. It was a productive relationship, at least, in that area.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And the German galleries did well by you? Did you sell any works?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: In the eighties, I sold quite a few paintings. It was a surprise. The first show, I think it was '85, and I know I talked to--I said, "I'm lucky if I sold one painting." I sold ten. What I was told, they were relatively serious collectors, since the prices were relatively high, considering the German market wasn't the size today. Sold ten. He was exhibiting at this Cologne Art Fair, P_____, what's it called? Sold several paintings to him, one through the dealer. It was the Bruschter Gallery in Hamburg. So he gave shows. Now he's even asking would I be interested in having a show with him. I said I don't have the paintings.

So, in a way, I was sort of awaking a little bit. Then, of course, now I would say it is the Mendenhall Gallery who are trying to expand, but that's the present. That's where you are involved. At the present, they are expanding, I think. They could probably do things with you, with you working with them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a completely different--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's a completely different thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That had to do with me. But with you, I am curious to know how you became associated with the Mendenhall Gallery, which is in Oldtown Pasadena, for the record. You had at least two splendid shows there, and it is true that I did a little bit of writing for you, because they invited me to and I like your work. But the main point for our purposes here is that somehow you connected with them and they seemed to take a real interest. How did that come about? Frankly, how do you feel about it?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, so far I feel fairly good about it, because I really feel that--well, the way it was, usually those things happen very simply. It happened with those German galleries. It happened with, I would say, the galleries in Sarasota. With Mendenhall, I think he distinctly said, "I have a gallery and I have seen your work. Would you like to show with me?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Probably he was in Maxwell.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, he saw the show in Maxwell. Then Peter came over, he looked at it and he talked, he said, "My God, I really would like to have a show for you." And I said it was all right, so I talked to both of them, and I think that I thought they were--especially Peter--that they were really serious about it, and I said, "Why not." So it was that simple.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where does that leave you now? You've had two shows that, as far as I can see, are very successful--they sure look great--at Mendenhall. I attended both of the openings, and you picked up some new collectors, some of them who have considerable means and are attached to the movie industry. You basically cracked into the whole Hollywood entertainment--not the whole, but I think Tim Allen, if I'm not mistaken, may have one of your works. His agent/manager, Richard Baker, who is actually--I'm going to credit him, because

he's going to be helpful with funds for the transcribing of this interview. Anyway, this has opened up a whole new group potentially for you. Have you thought about what the next phase for you? You've acknowledged that maybe there were some choices that you a little bit regret at this time, or at least perhaps weren't from the business/career standpoint the best.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now you're at a point where clearly you're going to be able to make some new choices. Do you see ahead at all to where the sort of next phase will be for you in terms of exhibitions? What are you hoping for?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: What I'm hoping for presently, what my wishes would be, probably--I don't know. Probably a museum show would be helpful, I would say. A museum show, I think it would be helpful. Probably some publication would be helpful. But whether I would be very much myself able to invest the time and energy in it, that's a different point because I really find those two things, as soon as you get involved in what you would call, in a broader sense, the art market, and everything, then you have to abandon--

PAUL KARLSTROM: That actually moves beyond the art market. It moves into what they call the bigger art world.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, probably, but in a way it's connected with the art market. Whatever it is, it's connected. I don't say it disparagingly, not at all. I think it is a good--wherever you move or whatever you do, it takes money, and it has to come from somewhere, and somehow it has to be managed, and etc. Of course, if the management is good and the money is there, then things start moving. If it is not, then they don't move. I think it's a part of life. In a way, I've come to accept it. That's one of the things. But I don't know, I think probably we've digressed again.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no. It may appear that way.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Maybe not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't think so, because I think what we've done, basically, is now pulled through this career side right to the present. Now what I would like to do is step back again and maybe quickly sketch in what happened more in your personal life. Let's set aside art career, exhibitions, gallery and all that. But what about how Raimonds' life then unfolded? Meaning family, wife, children, these kinds of things. What is the biographical story?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Probably we have gotten up to the sixties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did you meet Ilona?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: In a way, we met in Berkeley, and she was a student in Berkeley. I was moving in the Latvian circles. At that time there were a dozen Latvian-born students, emigrés from Latvia, at my age, close to my age, so we met together, forming a Latvian student group. That's how we met. I guess, for me, in a way, it was like love at first sight, in a way, for some reason. I thought that she was coming from a very simple family and she was not very well informed, but she was a tremendous student. I found that she had a tremendous capacity for learning and understanding, and it fascinated me. So at the beginning, it was almost like student-teacher relationship, which--

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were in graduate school then?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, I was out of the graduate school. That was in '57, and I graduated in '54. I was out. I was just painting in Berkeley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had a studio then.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I had a studio in Berkeley, on Prince Street, Prince and Ashby, yes. There were several artists, and I was really close friends with Boyd Allen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, you mentioned him.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I mentioned, who later became chairman of the gallery. There were some other painters left, so there was a small group of painters, so we got together and we just talked a little bit about art, and I painted. So that's where I met her. Then on '61, just when those three shows were going on in three cities, we got married in '61.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, boy.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: And took sort of a honeymoon in--I went to New York, I stayed for three months in New York, in a small flat, and painted there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that, in '61?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, that was all in '61.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were married then?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I got married in '61. We got married in New York. Then we took, let's say, probably a honeymoon trip in New York for three months, and in a clandestine way went to Russia and Latvia. I couldn't afford it, but I would say the generous Fred Maxwell paid it all. He paid for anything for our marriage ceremony. He paid it really nice, for a few friends. He rented a suite in the Plaza Hotel. It was a marvelous gesture. He took us in a limousine to the place where we were married, and etc. Like he was a man with a gesture, which you find very few of those people, find today. If you were a friend of his, he would give you everything he had. And he paid for that three months' honeymoon trip in Europe.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was very generous.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I would say it was very generous.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No wonder you felt loyal.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, that's exactly right. There was a loyalty. Like I said, in a way I was like a son. He admitted that he never had a family. But I am digressing.

And then, of course, returning from Europe, all the shows were going in, and then the reviews are going in, and all the disappointments of the sales really were not such as one had expected. Especially Kallier was disappointed in the New York show. He thought that he would sell many paintings, and he sold just one.

Again, like I said, you mentioned this art world. Very much it comes back to the art market. He had organized people, like from the art circles of New York, and I would say the man who was really organizing it, in a way, was supposed to invest a lot in the gallery and the advertising, I'd have to look up his name. He was chairman of the Polaroid Corporation, and he was a sponsor of the show. Just before, I would say a month before the show, when everything was on, he discovered he had inoperable cancer, and he died while the show was going on. So as far as Kallier, really lost a great opportunity. He said he had some contacts, he knew the right people that would come in for the show. He was willing to put in some money into it. He would contact. And just before the show, like I said, I know it was really true, I said he couldn't have died at the most inopportune time.

Now from then on, we came back. We lived in a flat in the Upper Market area, like a new married couple. There was really a lot of romance and love between us. I had, of course, a studio on one of the hillsides, in one of those apartments, in a sub-basement. When it was raining, the water was running through.

Then I really buckled down to the painting, and it was exactly at that time I made the decision, "I will never, never in my life, I will paint for the show." So there was a show coming at Maxwell's, I said, "We have to postpone it. I just don't have the work for it." So I painted, and I think I painted--with that style and [unclear], I've turned out some fairly good work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was mid-sixties.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: From '61 on--'64, '65, '66, '67. At that time I had a show also in a gallery in Los Angeles. I'd have to look it up, because the gallery is defunct, like the galleries come and go. It wasn't one of the influential galleries.

I had shows in other cities. I have shows in Nightingale Gallery in Toronto and some other shows, I think in Cleveland and other cities, in some galleries, but nothing influential, I would say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You don't remember what the L.A. gallery was?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I'd have to look it up, but I would say it wasn't a big gallery then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was it on LaCienega, you know, that street--

[Break in Taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right, here we are, continuing a final session, third session, with Raimonds Staprans. The date is 15 September 1997. This is tape three, side A.

We're determined now to quickly finish off kind of a biographical sketch, really what happened to you in your personal life. At least we got you married now. We heard this, and you settled back here in San Francisco. Real quickly, how did things then develop for you in your life? What happened in your life in terms of your family and things like that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Definitely I would say a year and a half, a couple of years after the marriage, we had our first child, and then two years, the second child. From then on, of course, like two young children in the family, there are distractions and you've got to take care of them. I would say, as far as that goes, I would say I wasn't a very happy person at that time, because of the children and we were not rich.

PAUL KARLSTROM: These children were girls, by the way?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, both girls. Both two girls, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How old are they now?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, one is thirty-two and one is thirty-four.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was a difficult time for you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I would say for a family growing up, you have all the childhood illnesses, sleepless nights. I got from them a nasty sinus infection which it took me probably a year and a half to get rid of. It changed our home. I was really cooped up in the studio with bad ventilation. No, it was not--it was a hard time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was Ilona working?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, Ilona was working all the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was she working?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: She was working at the UC.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Same place?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Not at the same place. I would say at the same place, but in a different department. She was actually getting the Ph.D. at the time. She was also partially working and going to school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And with two little babies.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: With two little babies at home.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So did you then have to take care of them?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, actually, we hired a black woman to take care of them during the days and whenever she was at work. Whenever she came home, she took over, took care of them. It was a really hard time, I would say, otherwise. Were we unhappy? No, I think we were happy. We had a good relationship. And that lasted, I would say, up to '70. Then at '70, I think we bought our first house, the same house we are now living in, on Potrero Hill. Then our differences began, in a way. She found it cold and inhospitable, and everything was wrong with it. But, of course, I think, in a way, our marriage was failing at that time, for some reason. Then suddenly she fell in love with another man, and then she left me, and I was devastated. Of course--

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That was in '70. Probably, in a way, it was rightly so. Probably, in a way, I was depressed. I wasn't a very hospitable person at that time, and there were all those children and trouble at home. Then there was this nice, young, very attractive man in her life, who was working with her at UC, and she just fell for him. Actually, he was something like six or seven years younger than she was, and I was older. So I really felt at that time I was at a disadvantage. So, in a way, I felt kind of devastated, and the only thing I could do, in a way, I should immerse myself in the painting. At that time I also started to do some sculpture, and I rented a studio in Lower Potrero Hill, where you could get a studio for $100 a month, and I did some sculpture and painting at the same time, also writing. I would say I really kept myself busy twenty-four hours so I wouldn't have to think about it. So it went for a couple of years. Also at that time I branched out in other things. I became a part owner of a

gallery, but that's a story in itself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You did?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes. It was Arlene Lindt Gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was it called?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Arlene Lindt Gallery. It's now, of course, like all the galleries, it's now closed. It was in the [unclear] area.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you didn't show there?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, I didn't. I didn't show there, but, I don't know, in a way it's a story itself. I became a part owner of the gallery. I sort of bought into the gallery a little bit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why did you do that? A business venture?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, because I thought I wanted to see the gallery business from the other side. Like I said, I was alone, I had a lot of free time, I didn't have any children.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So Ilona took the children with her?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Ilona took the children.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And went to live with this other man.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, she went to live with this other man. I was alone, and all of a sudden I had this big place and enormous free time. I could do anything. So I bought into this gallery. I wanted to learn about, really, the art market from the dealer side. I almost became a dealer, and I looked for artists. It was a gallery that catered to--actually, it was very narrow. It was a downtown, I would say, commercial establishment, corporations and etc. I really found out with what kind of art those corporations are being filled. The downtown banks, offices of big corporations, all those highrises in the Financial District are full with paintings. But what kind of paintings? Now I know.

Then I see that actually there was a second breed divorced from the art, what you would call commercial high-class artists, who are painting for the corporations, whatever you wanted--realistic paintings, big abstracts, paintings à la Motherwell, paintings à la Pollock. They turn out anything, and they are full of them. I found out the gallery already had several painters. Oh, my God, they were really making a lot of money.

I thought, "I'll try to make some money." Then what I did for a year, I painted some of those paintings under an assumed name. It was Carl Ulmanis.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was your name?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It was named Carl Ulmanis, and it was the name of our last Latvian president--as a joke. I signed then as such. Then I engaged another artist, it was Marilyn Rabinovich. She was a recent graduate. She had a master's from Stanford University, a master's in painting. Terrible painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the terrible painter's name?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Marilyn Rabinovich, a Jewish girl. I don't know if I should digress. Later on--she's dead now, and under circumstances that she went to India, she got tied up with a cult, and she was found dead with her heart cut out. It was some sort of a cult.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, my God.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes. It was really splashed in all the papers. I think it was in '78, I think it was. She would do the underpainting and I would do the finishing work, and we would split the income. I rented a studio, but then, in a way, after a while I fired her, because I felt, technically and otherwise, she just couldn't cut it, didn't cut it, for whatever you would call commercial painting, and especially if you needed something representational.

So I worked all alone, with utter disgust and contempt for the buying public in my heart. I [unclear] and then I set the alarm clock. I said I would spend three hours on this work, and whatever it is, it's finished. So I set the alarm clock and I turned out the painting in three hours, and then put it in the gallery, and I sold it. The painting sold something from $500 to $1,500, but I thought I sold myself for 600, 700. I said for three hours of hack work,

it was good pay at that time. So that was anything. If you needed an abstract, you needed an abstract. You needed something from California, a painting of San Francisco scenes, like turn-of-the-century ferry building, with things in it, no problem. Three hours, it's finished.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No matter what the work was, you allowed three hours?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I allowed three hours, yes. You had in some way to gratify your contempt. And then you figured out whatever it is, and, let's say, if you have been professional for some time, you can turn out those things very rapidly, and you learn how to do it and you know the technique, and you paint by numbers. So I did it for something, for two years, besides my, I would say, artistic work, and I probably made more money than I'd ever made before.

But then when really I thought the time was to quit, it began to interfere with my own work. Like all of a sudden your attitude becomes very superficial. You don't feel through it; you just paint it. I know many, many writers who went to Hollywood have felt the same way, and now I understood it. Before, I didn't understand it, but now I understood it, what it means to do, I would say, strictly commercial work.

Then I became, in a way, all of a sudden I was gaining among the downtown artists and what you would call, in a minor way, I became sort of known. People were asking, "Oh, there is this painter, Ulmanis, Carl Ulmanis," and they wanted to see more of his work. But then the worst thing came, that people at the Maxwell were inquiring, they've seen a couple of paintings from Carl Ulmanis, which aren't bad, they'd really like to know him and take him on. And I said, "Now it is the time to quit." [laughter] "It has gone too far." So it's all true.

And even now, years after that, I had architects that were asking, "What happened to that painter Carl Ulmanis? He turned out kind of interesting work. What happened to him?" They always said, "The last I know of him, he died." I think it was just about five years ago, somebody still asked from the downtown architects. That was a decorator.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who was Carl Ulmanis?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: He was the last president of Latvia when the Russians, the Soviets, moved in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What did his works look like?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: You mean my works?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean Carl Ulmanis.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Carl Ulmanis' work. Anything. Anything that was asked for. Actually, his best paintings were paintings of birds. They were paintings of birds. That was sort of originality, various birds, seagulls and whatever. It was just birds. There were California scenes and they were nonobjective abstracts. But mostly I was known as Carl Ulmanis for the painting of birds, and, actually, birds were very marketable in downtown at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did they look like Morris Graves?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, no, no. That would be too artistic. In downtown, you cannot sell a painting which has some feeling in it. They have to be decorations. I would say as soon as something disturbing creeps in, you cannot sell it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you a question. I sound like a therapist or psychologist here. This can't be ignored. The timing is very interesting. You, in your own life, had been, in effect, betrayed. That which you can count on, a kind of honesty, shall we say, you'd been disappointed.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I'd been disappointed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And here you are and you find yourself in this opportunity to, as you say, indulge a kind of contempt for people who believe you're too trusting. I don't want to put it that way. They don't have taste, is what you're saying. But this doesn't sound particularly like you overall, except for getting the money. That's not a bad idea. But to enjoy entering into this deception, it sounds to me like a kind of revenge. You'd been, you felt, mishandled, mistreated, not dealt with fairly in your marriage. Art, in a sense, is not a contract, exactly, but it's a relationship between the producer and the consumer.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think any of that was operating in your reasons and motivation for your--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, I don't think so. I think my personal relationship didn't have anything to do with it. Definitely not. I thought of the buying public and being in the art field for so many years, in a way, you come in contact with a lot of people, with a lot of buyers, and then you see that very few people really have an eye for what art really is, and that's a very disappointing thing. Usually I think the greatest disappointment is that people who really have an eye for art, they cannot afford it. In most cases, I think for an artist today, I've talked to other artists, the same thing. A painting is bought because a person has money, and it is very often bought for the wrong reasons, for the decorative reasons.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's true.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It's true. Decorations. It's also true, if you have a lot of money, you have to take time to earn it, you really cannot become exposed too much to art, but then again you want to be, let's say, a man of culture, so you go out and buy it, but you buy it for the wrong reasons. The world is full of people who want to buy, who would like to buy your work, but who cannot afford it, who really have the eye and have the appreciation, but you cannot sell it to them because you have to live. And if you were rich, you would donate the painting, but you cannot do it, because in order to paint, you have to make some money. So, over the years, in a way, you develop contempt for the buying.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, some people do. But let me play devil's advocate.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes, good. You do that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because I'm not going to give up on this little--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, this is true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: If you had any idealism at all, and everything I had heard about your earlier story was a quest. I won't recite this whole thing, but just certain things that come to my mind that suggest you had found something that was meaningful for you and that had value, and is very close to what some people would say is a way to maintain some idealism about what you do in the world. Most artists, true artists, I think, have that. Something happened to you, and you say it's just observing the art market. The art market was pretty good to you. You had no reason to get back at the art market, because you had been selling work. Something happened to you that turned you into--I have to say it--a kind of mean-spirited, for a short time, person, vengeful. It's like getting at the uneducated, uninformed, getting at them, making fools of them, tricking them, when you were involved with an art gallery. Some people would say, if they have ideals--maybe it's too idealistic--that part of what an art gallery can do is even educate slobs and philistines.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I think probably I really should elaborate on it. In a way, in the first thing, it had really nothing to do with my personal life. Vengeful? I think it was really brewing. It happened in '71, '72. It probably had been brewing, in a way, for twenty years. The thing is, being an artist, you're having shows and you talk to a lot of people. You go to an opening and you have to listen to all this sometimes very stupid talk. You have to do it, and you have to smile, and you have to be informative, and you have to tell about the painting. Like someone says now, "Tell me about this work." Then everybody doesn't want to see the painting, but see the story behind the painting. So I would say I accumulated some sort of an anger, anger towards people, and resentment that the right people couldn't afford the right art, and the wrong people were getting the wrong art just because they have the money to buy it. And very often, more often than not, very often, actually, with a good collector, they're exceptional. There are some that are very knowledgeable, but the average rich art buyer, he is not.

Just as a joke, I said, "For a while I have the satisfaction of getting back at them, getting back at them to see what they are getting, what they've been getting all along," because the downtown is full of junk paintings. When you go look at it, from the gallery, that have been bought for a lot of money, which have been turned out by hack painters who have made a lot of money, and whether it's realistic or abstract, I know exactly how much time they spent on it. Like I spent three hours; I didn't spend much more. And they know what they were doing, and they do it even now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You realize three hours is exactly how long this interview is.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: [laughter] Yes. So let's move on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: This is interesting. I felt for a time that I had to get back at them somehow, and in a way, probably in an oblique way, it gave me an inner satisfaction. I know it's going to be for a little while, but for a little while I will do it, and I also wanted to find out how it was being done, how you can do it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I can understand that. There's a part of me, of course, a part of all of us, that would say "Bravo" because this is a great problem and a kind of frustration.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Frustration. Absolutely frustrated. Yes, I would say all my past, I would say I don't get easily frustrated, etc., but this thing, this human condition really has frustrated me from day one, and still frustrates me. I think it's the only frustration which I have, being in art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But do you feel, in a way, that attractive as it was, this opportunity to get back at the philistines--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I would say, not philistines. I would say otherwise honest people, but yet they really didn't care about art; they cared about pictures.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Again, devil's advocate.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, that's good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I agree with you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, no, but I really want you to inject some controversy. [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some of us feel--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: --that this can be remedied, and it's through education, that these people are being led by the wrong people, those people who recognize the sheep who's ready for slaughter, and cater to them, move in, whereas there are educators, and many of them in museums and in certain galleries, that insist upon quality, even if they don't make money from the artists that they're selling, there's a belief that the situation can be redeemed, that it's possible that many of these people, when they are exposed to better and shown reasons to compare between good or bad, that's what museums are supposed to do. So I ask you, do you feel that through this process you became cynical to the point where this didn't matter, that you then went ahead and joined the forces, in a sense, of those who were bilking, making money off the stupidity of these--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes, that's exactly right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's cynical.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes. That's true, yes. I fully realize that I was cynical, and I'm also cynical, and I am cynical even now when I go to--sometimes I go to corporations, when I see this man who says, "Now, this is great painting," I sort of inwardly smile and say, "I know exactly how much time he spent on it." They don't know it. But I never tell it to anybody.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe it was Ulmanis.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Could have been, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are they still out there?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: There must be, at least. I think I sold about thirty or forty of them. Some of them must be around. I don't know where. I think Potlach Corporation bought quite a few. [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's interesting as a study. You should have documented it, because it would be a very useful study.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Probably.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The taste of the art market.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: The taste of the art market. I know. I know exactly. I sometimes go into one of the bank buildings, and there's a big painting, and I remember how it is being painted, by whom, and how much time he spent. At least I really felt it has been brewing in me for years. I knew it was only temporary, but I felt, as a joke, "I think I had to listen to you, let's say, you'll get it back in some way."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, on the other hand, you do agree that, for the most part, you have been fortunate and treated well.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, relative. Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seems to me that your association with this gallery, buying in as partner, made you more directly having to confront the horrible taste, or total lack of taste, and too much money that was being spent in this way. Joining into the gallery, becoming part of the gallery, did that accentuate and amplify this whole feeling of yours about these people that did not understand and did not really deserve to be--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, probably. Well, no, I would say in a way it was if I'm not doing it, somebody else will do it, so why not do it. Why not make the money on the side? Because a lot of people were doing it. I said, "Well, I'll do it for a while." Also I wanted to find out how much time it takes, how much effort it takes, and how can you, let's say, be an imposter.

I also learned another thing. Being on the other side of the fence, I had to look for artists. My job--

[Break in Taping]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Final side of third tape, side B, in the final session with Raimonds Staprans.

So we have to be very efficient about the use of this side of the tape. I'm not sure, I think there was something you wanted to add to this very interesting anecdote.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, very interesting. I became a dealer who was looking for young painters, and I visited quite a few studios. Then I really began to realize that there are a lot of, I would say, talented young people who are probably starting out as painters, without support, and who will never see the daylight, who will just wither and disappear. I saw several of those painters, and I saw that they were good painters, and they were poor and they were destitute, almost to the point that they really wouldn't get enough to eat, didn't have enough food, in extreme poverty, but with talent and with imagination and probably emotion and drive and feeling. I could not take them for the gallery because I said, "I cannot take you. You are feeling your emotions. There is something disturbing this. It would not sell," knowing the kind of people I was dealing with.

I knew I had to do it, and I really felt quite dejected about this, because I realized that we have those few people here, let's say, in the Bay Area, in the American art scene, who maybe they are great. For every painter, you know, maybe there are ten just as good people who try to emerge and just as well disappear, and all this richness is being buried just because there's this energy for those few people only, for those big names. So I would say this was the second reason I became also very cynical of the art scene, the art scene in general, and disappointed.

There was even a point where I saw those two things, I even entertained the thought, I said, "Maybe I should really quit and get out of this, get out of the art scene and do something else." But then, my God, that's the only thing I know how to do. Then, on second thought, when I dropped this whole thing, I felt I really wanted to do it. I said, "I'll try to do it well." There was sort of a catharsis. That was happening sometimes between 1975 and '80, in the process of five years. I said, "My God, finally I am going to paint exactly how I feel. I know how the market is, I know what the tastes are, and I know that influential people who are probably in the field of culture really can't tell the difference. There is no such thing as museum art, all the big art. I'm just going to try to paint the way I feel, what I think is beautiful for me." My theory is, could I paint a painting that I would hang on my own wall? If not, then it's not good.

So, after those upheavals, in between I had a show of my paintings at that time in the Soviet Latvia, and that was an experience in itself. The show was closed a day after it opened. But that's an interesting story in itself, but that's beside the point. Since we are really running out of time, I think this is very important, going through this personal upheaval, all the disappointments, and seeing the art market, this time of cynicism.

I would say from '70 to '75, it was a time of reevaluation, and then I returned. I would say that from '75 on, if I could use this very cliché term, I found myself and what I wanted to do. Then, in a way, it was a regret that my God, I spent thirty years, and the time has gone, and I wish I could turn back some twenty years. Well, I wish I could. You cannot do it. At the same time, then I felt anger probably at the art schools, at the writings, at the criticism, at all those subtle pressures, which are very subtle from the outside, that guide you in a certain direction, and almost in every case divert you from who you really are.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds like there are two parts to this, maybe. There's the personal part, how you conduct your life, and most of us have some regrets or disappointments about that, but there's also the professional part. Are you saying that in terms of the art that you produced, that you created during those years, that this was somehow not up to what you would hope for from yourself? Was this an evaluation of the art, that the earlier art was no good?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, no. I wouldn't exactly say that. I think it had its values, but if it had not been for sort of those constraints, there wouldn't be a voice telling you, "You should not do that. You should not do this. This is not really serious." I think I probably would have arrived at that point earlier. I would say I've done some

good paintings and some paintings not so good, but I feel that they could have been better if this voice hadn't been telling me what it should be. Of course, I know it is not universal; it really has to deal with my personal makeup, my personal psychological makeup.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you might describe this, then, as this process of liberation.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, I would say in a way it is a process of liberation, that you begin painting for the pure pleasure of painting, and at that time when you really don't care about the art market. In a way, you don't care even that much for recognition, that you're painting for the pleasure of painting and putting it on your wall, that you've gone through it.

Then I discovered that I began to really, really enjoy it and to come down, and I wasn't banging my head against the wall. Earlier, emotionally, at times I was banging my head against the wall, saying, "You have to turn out important work. You have to turn out serious work that would be noticed, that would be good." And all of a sudden it is all gone. And I think from then on, probably I have become more like myself. I didn't have also the drive to become, let's say, original, like you. Like I say, there is always this pressure. Your work has to be original. It doesn't have to look like this painter, it doesn't have to look like that painter. It has to be something that nobody else has ever seen or tried to do it. And that's absolutely ridiculous, because we cannot get out of it, really. If you learn from other people's paintings, you are going to be influenced by them. There's no way. I always have painted dozens of times with [unclear], like I said. There isn't a painter in the world whose paintings don't look like somebody else's. I see it every day and I'm not ashamed of it anymore, whereas, before, I was ashamed. If somebody said, "It looks like that painting," I said, "My God, I have to get away from it. I have to be original. I have to be myself."

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think we established earlier that originality for its own sake is not one of your goals, if it ever was.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, it never was. It never was. For me, it was a painting I could enjoy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of like Matisse.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Armchair for the mind, whatever that famous quote is. Painting is an armchair for the mind.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, yes. There are quite a few other quotes I would agree with completely about painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What we haven't really touched on very much, except only in passing, was this whole other career that you have as a creative person, and that is your writing.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, yes, yes. And since we are running out of time, I think I will be very short about it. The premise is that painting always uses a very small part of the brain, the back of the brain, and I really found that you really can become stupid by just doing painting. You can be a good painter, but you can be a very stupid person. This is one thing, I agree with a gallery owner now in New York, McKee. We are friends. He always mentioned, he said, "All painters are stupid. I know that from personal experience. They are like children." And in a way, I agree with him, because painting is something very basic, humanly basic, a very basic human occupation, and to be a good painter, you have to be that. As soon as you intellectualize, or if you become, let's say, an intellectual educated person, you really cannot be a good painter. You have to bring yourself to a level of an idiot. So that's the reason, not to lose my mind, I would say, I resumed play-writing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Resumed. Does that mean that you were doing that before?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, I was doing some play-writing when I was in Seattle. Actually, I've always associated with theaters. I've done stage sets and other things. By the time I was in art school, I took some courses in drama, and I wrote about five plays, all of them mercifully melodramas. I had forgotten about them. The best of them, I think, was a surgeon had a ballerina for a wife. Then the ballerina gets gangrene in the foot. Then who will cut the foot off? It's the surgeon. Imagine all those, I would say, romantic complications and the suffering. Of course, when you're young, you write about suffering. Terrible play. But that was the best. The others were a lot worse. [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: These are all written in Latvian?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, no, these were written in English.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you have plays and writings in Latvian?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, actually, I'm writing in Latvian now only. I wrote those plays in English. It was in '68. Believe it or not, it was produced by the drama department of UCLA.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it was excellent, right?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, it was the most terrible play, but it has a very short run. But it was produced. It was quite an accomplishment. Actually, I knew the director at that time, who was there, and he said, "Write a play," and he produced it. One of the actors said, "Do I have to say those god-awful lines?" And he said, "Yes, you have to do it." It had a very short run.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: I think it was in '68, '69, but I'll have to check it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does it have a name?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, its name was "President's Potty."

PAUL KARLSTROM: "President's Party."

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Potty. Potty. It was something about the politics of elimination.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughter]

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, it had some good points in it, and it was kind of funny, but as a play, it was pretty lousy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The ones in Latvian, presumably, are much better.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you explain that? You can't write as well in English?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: No, the thing is, in the play-writing you really have to--whereas in art, it isn't necessary, you don't have to have any experience, but to be a writer, in play-writing, you have to live, live the life you live, and only then you can write. That probably distinguishes, separates, I would say, art from writing, play-writing, or art in general. In writing, first you have to live. Since probably all the writing, more or less, it's autobiography in one human form or another, you disguise it, but it's sort of biography, nevertheless.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is one of the subjects we were going to touch on, art as self-revelation. Maybe it is a bit disguised or concealed, but that if you really look at it and you look at it carefully and properly, you can uncover things about people in their work. What in the writing, in some of your plays, performed that function of revealing the person?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Revealing the person, I think probably what I've been really concerned with the play-writing, with two things, two separate things. First, with very intimate relationships of people, and very intimate relationships are really closely connected with sexual relationships. In a way, you have to live through them, all the glories and the disappointments and the anxieties and the anguishes. Some of my plays, I would say, they are on a very intimate level, to the point that some of the audience even looks, I would say, uneasy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why? Because they identify with the themes or the events and the characters?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, in a way, if you feel uneasy, I think that's the reward. If you like the play, you are identifying with it, and if you walk out of it, in some way you're also identifying. In Latvia, one of my plays, the first ones, there were people in the audience who just walked out in disgust, who say, "I don't have to take it."

PAUL KARLSTROM: What would be an example?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: An example, I think the scene was the male castration, in a way. Actually, I had a lot of interviews with other people about the subject. Well, like the male and the female, they are so different, it's really, I would say, that God has really played a joke on us, in a way, that as far as one's sexual needs, they are so dissimilar. So the only way to eliminate the battle of the sexes, which lasts until the day we die, it would be for the male to castrate himself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He did it to himself?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, it was a way that he would self-castrate himself, and then he would become like a

woman, and then they could probably enjoy, in a way, a loving relationship on the same level, like there is lovemaking. Of course, you make love to a woman and you think, "I won," but each one is enjoying in an entirely different level. There is no denying that the differences persist. They cannot be overcome, no matter how close you are. So that was the main theme of the play. Well, of course, there were a lot of images, and a lot of people walked out. A lot of men walked out in disgust.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was this? This was in Latvia?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It was here and it was also in Latvia. That was the first one, and I got a lot of notoriety for it. In a way, it was good, because in Latvia it established me as a playwright. I am very little known as a painter, but I'm known as a playwright.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the name of this one again?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: The name was "Freeze." In English. In Latvian, it comes out a little differently, like you freeze up. You freeze, you become a [unclear] ice, and then you melt. Then you become a unisex.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was this?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That was in 1980.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did you get back together with Ilona?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Ilona, she came back in '74. She came back. I think it was all over. It was sort of, in a way, a short-term what you would call infatuation.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like a recess.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, like a recess. She came back, and we arranged a marriage on different terms, and I think we learned to respect each other on a different level. From then on, it has been fairly smooth, relatively speaking, fairly smooth going. We battle every day. [laughter] We fight every day, but now we realize that, like we emphasize how different we are, but we really have a deep respect. She has a deep respect for me, and I have deep respect for her. Like you would say, the lives could be better, but we realize there is not really all that much on the outside, either.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That sounds wise.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Wisdom that you acquire, that the relationship, it isn't really perfect, it really isn't all that good, but maybe that's the way things are. Maybe the bliss [unclear]--speaking of plays, then the other kind of play, I've been always really involved in the politics. It's a historical play, and that's amazing, where you really have to have a lot of, I would say, you have to use a lot of vortex. I have an organized mind to make a historical play out of bits and pieces, and I really have a lot of what you call docudramas, documentary dramas, where you try to capture, depict a scene as closely as it happened, from various materials, from various interviews, etc. And it goes for the writing in general. To write a play, you have to have an organized mind. You have a beginning and an end, and you have to have an ear for dialogue, which I have. I would say, unless you have a very organized mind, which you don't need in painting, you cannot write a play that will be reproduced and the public to enjoy. And you have to look from the other side. You have to look, always ask yourself, "Am I going to listen to this shit or not?" And if you think you are not, then it shouldn't be in. So it is a relief. It's a relief from painting, and I'm enjoying both, really, I would say.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But they satisfy different sides of you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: That's right. Yes. It satisfies entirely different sides. A painting is a quiet thing. It's a one-to-one thing. I would say it was really a revelation and an exhilaration when I saw the first play produced, when I went to Latvia, to an audience of, let's say, 1,000 people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: And to see how they react. It was a national theater. Then it came for the performance, and you saw that an entire audience, all of a sudden they were laughing. Several hundred people laughing at the lines at the same time. They were being quiet, they were being whispering. And all of a sudden there is a sense of power you never get when you're a painter. It's a lonely thing. But then again, you are influencing 1,000 people at the same time. They are listening to you and living through it, and if they like it, you see, you are getting to them. So that's probably a reward for a playwright which I never experienced before or since. I think I've had four plays produced. There was one filmed for television, showing [unclear], and one play is running now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: For television?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, for television. It was filmed for television. It was a historical play. They sort of resurrected, since it's on film, re-runs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a political one?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: It's a political one, yes. I've been involved in the Latvian Freedom Movement and politics on the side. So that's part of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you, unless there's something else that you want to add, we have just a tiny bit more time, but let me ask this question which emerges now very much out of these conversations. We've talked about your life, mainly about your life as an artist, that experience. We've talked very little about your writing. Do you feel that it would be fair to say that art, for you, your art, whether it's the painting or the writing, is about a way to make things more the way you would like them to be?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, probably.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A chance to fix things a little bit?

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Oh, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like relationships, men and women.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, definitely. Well, definitely yes. I think probably an artist, probably the reward and every desire, you are to rearrange the world. If you are a painter, you want to rearrange the nature. Of course, if you are a writer, you want to enlighten the public in some way, and the reward is that you are being read and you influence other people's thoughts. That's the reward, definitely. Usually, I fight with Ilona, let's say when she is angry, she says, "You want to arrange everything, including your own life, our own relationship." Probably my psychological makeup, me as a person. I said, "Absolutely. If I could do it, I would do it. I would really rearrange it that we would live happily ever after." I said, "I know exactly how to do it. But the trouble is, you won't do it." [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So then, in a sense, it comes back again to control.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Control. Yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Chaotic world. You said it earlier.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's the artist's job to give--

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: To rearrange it, to bring order into it, and I would say I'm not ashamed to say it, to be in control over your life, over people. The more control you have over your life, of the people around you, over the nature around you, the better you are, the less [unclear] you get.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The happier we are.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: And the happier we are. I think we all are deserving of this control, and it's not a bad thing. In the sixties, like they said, you strive for control. I would say strive for universal love and, let's say, to understand the other person and to give him space. Well, it's all nice and good, but if you have control, you feel pretty good about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is it. The tape's to the end. Raimonds, thank you.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Thank you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This has been edifying. Good interview.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Well, hopefully, there are some other things, but I think, on the whole, we touched about the important points.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was a good start.

RAIMONDS STAPRANS: Yes, it's a good start.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Thank you.

[End of interview]