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Oral history interview with Harold Tovish, 1997 November 13-1998 April 7

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Harold Tovish on November 13, 1997 and April 7, 1998 . The interview took place in Boston, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

This is tape one of four, cassette Side A.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, this is November 13, 1997, at his house in, uh, Boston. [Audio break.] I think since we last interviewed, I wanted to not only update things but, uh, also to have you reflect on things that you talked more or less about when we talked back in the 1970s. Uh, at some point, you did sort of a biographical outline, and you mentioned, you began investigating Kinetic art in 1962, and you mentioned a piece of yours, *Interior 1* of that year. Um, what had you in mind there? In your notes, you said that it was to give the illusion of movement when you walked around the piece, but it wasn't actually in motion itself, was it?

HAROLD TOVISH: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No. And was that the case with this, uh, that whole phase of your work?

HAROLD TOVISH: No, not quite because, see, there were two pieces, which involved, uh, physical movement. One was called *Tenant*, and what that consisted of was something, you know, like this. There was a wheel, a thin wheel on which, at very precise intervals, were mounted a series of heads. And the heads were arranged in such a way that the form, as it changed from head to head, would be illuminated by a strobe. And you looked through a window when this thing was operating. You pressed a button, looked through a window, and this head would appear to change form, as you looked at it. And what it was essentially was like a three-dimensional film. You were looking at a real object that looked like it was changing. Uh, that was the most extreme use of kinetic use [00:02:00] in—in sculpture that I had ever done, and I've never done any more of it. I abandoned all of that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why did you get into the kinetic kind of a thing back in the early '60s?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, that particular idea of the tenant, the idea if you press a button and somebody comes to the door—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —and living in the world at—at a time, um—when did I do that? It would have been 1960-something, '64, '65 where things were in terrible chaos, you know? Uh, terrible things were going on then just as they are now. And I had the idea of this guy who was, uh, representing somebody who had been a kind of victim of everything, and he was just falling apart, you know? [Laughs.] And it was not a very particularly effective piece, but the thing I ended up not liking about it was that people invariably said, How does it work? And as soon as they wanted to know the technical aspects of that, I felt that the piece had lost its power. Because how—how does it work, it becomes a technical issue, uh, and which is not what I wanted—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

HAROLD TOVISH: —from it, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: So, I abandoned all movement in sculpture. The only kind of movement I was interested in is illusion where—where movement is based on illusion. And, uh, that was much more exciting and much more penetrating because of the idea that, uh, in—in a three-dimensional form, to just have the illusion of movement in a sculpture.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, that's right.

HAROLD TOVISH: And it's—it doesn't exist in actuality, uh, was much more interesting and had [00:04:00] a kind of metaphorical quality about it I rather liked, you know? It's a kind of mystery, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Interestingly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Had you—prior to that, you'd explored as far you wanted to go in more static pieces and you so wanted—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Well, it—it's the kind of thing that happens for reasons that are almost impossible to—to analyze. I—I had no idea what led me to do this or what led me to do that. In general, what happens, you get a, you know, a little thing. An idea pops into your head and—and if it seems pretty exciting and, uh, compelling, you—you go ahead and do it. If it seems stupid, you let it go. But in—at that particular period, uh, I was—I was really quite fascinated with the idea of illusion. And later on, I used a great deal of it when I, uh, did a whole series of sculptures involving mirrors.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And those were done in the—in the late '70s. And in the early '80s, I did a whole series of sculptures in which I used, uh, one-way mirrors to replicate an image endlessly. And there was a kind of beautiful economy involved to be able to get that much out of a single image. Uh, it—it just was a very exciting thing. I did those and, oh, I—I don't do that anymore. I—I usually take an idea and play with it for a while and then I, uh, feel I've exhausted and I—you know, I don't want to beat things to death. I—I don't think that's a good idea.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you find that, uh, after you've gone so far, that your interest is already forming towards something else and—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I don't wanna sound like—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —consciously or unconsciously?

HAROLD TOVISH: —I don't wanna sound like a mystic but, you know, when I—when I [00:06:00] was a student, I worked from nature. You know, we worked from the model. I did portraits, you know, that sort of thing. But in my own case, and I don't think that I'm unique in this respect, that almost always, some image would occur to me. It would just happen. I mean, I didn't will any of these things. They just would—I'd see it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And when I tell you that I have no idea why that happens, uh, all you can do is speculate, you know? I guess things I've read, things I've seen, things I've heard, that whole thing is a mixture that produces an image in my head. And as I say, if it's, uh—if it hits me, I say, "My god, that's terrific, you know? I've gotta do that." Then I go and do it. It doesn't always happen that way but enough so that I would say that imagination plays the biggest role in my work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that's been the case beyond—just beyond your student days when you were doing studies?

HAROLD TOVISH: Pretty much. Even when I was a student, I was doing—you know, we each had a period during which we could do independent work and, uh, I—I would almost never work from the model. I always did something from imagination.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because you—you were taught at a time when there was still a good deal of detail prepare—fundamentals?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes. I—I had a sort of semi-academic training at Columbia, and my teacher was Oronzio Maldarelli—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —who's a very competent, uh, sculptor of some real prominence at that time. We're talking about the '40s, early '40s. And we had the usual [00:08:00]—you know, the whole course was really drawing and sculpture, that was it. There was, uh, very little else. We didn't have design, we—courses. There was very little or no interest in abstraction at that school. Although, most of the students there probably if they were really serious, you know, knew about abstract art. But in general, it had not made the dent that it has since those days, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: With the emergence of Abstract Expressionism, that's when the scene really shifted.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the—uh, the '60s were a time, you said earlier, uh, well talking of—of your work, of a time of a great deal of chaos, turmoil in general.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Um, and you—about—I think about 1965, went on, I think it was sparked—there were some reflections sparked by the recent death of your friends. And, uh, you said, But we don't—here in this country, we don't speak of death. Uh, we tried—and we tried to stay young. That's an obsession of ours, uh—

HAROLD TOVISH: And now that I'm old?

ROBERT F. BROWN: In—

HAROLD TOVISH: [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Once again—not that I mean—uh, would that be an obsession when—say when friends died? Or you mentioned also in World War II, the same thing, you had to get on with it afterward?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But, uh, the ignoring or the—the fear of, um, thinking about that or talking about it, is that something that's come well up and down in your life?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, you know, I was introduced to death as a very young child. My—my father died when I was seven years old, and, uh, I was spared nothing. [Side conversation.] Orthodox Jewish families, [00:10:00] uh, treat death in a very intimate way. I mean I'll give you an idea—get an idea how firmly it's entrenched in my mind that whole incident of my father's death. He was brought back from the hospital where he had died, and put—the coffin was put in the living room. And at one point, there was a ritual where they washed the body. And my grandfather and his son took the body out of the coffin, and took it to the bathroom, and bathed and washed the body. And they came out, and I remember seeing my father's feet. You know, they had a blanket over him, but I just remember seeing his feet, and I was really quite stunned by the whole thing. And then, uh, at the cemetery when he was buried, the lamentations, the screaming, the carrying on, I mean, you know. I guess the only equivalent I can think of is I—I remember in Italy seeing a—a funeral in Italy. And—and the women and men carrying on just the same way—complete abandonment. And I remember my uncle—after my father had been buried, they make a mound, which is sort of like a—shaped like a coffin really. And poor Uncle Sam, he threw himself on there. He was absolutely weeping and weeping, it was just horrendous.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I see.

HAROLD TOVISH: So, you see that's something you don't forget. That sticks in your head. And, uh—and then, you know, literature, I mean I did a lot of reading as a kid and—and so much of literature deals [00:12:00] with the issue of somebody dying and so on and so forth. So, uh, death has never been a subject that frightens me. I mean, I—I'm not—I don't sit around being afraid to die. I don't think about that. And now, having gone through the death of Marianna, uh, and seeing her fade away the way she did. And then going through the whole ritual, with the funeral home and the entourage, going to the cemetery, and the cremation and all of that, you know? Uh, you become aware that this is—this idea that we're gonna die is—is there, and seriously, there's nothing you can do about it. And the only thing to do is to—I rather accepted the whole business. I don't—I don't see myself lying there terrified that I'm gonna die. It doesn't, uh, it doesn't bother me. I don't think that's gonna be a—a problem at all for my kids.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I tell them, I'm gonna go quietly. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Laughs.] You went on them, uh, to talk in 1965, about art, and you—the importance of what you were doing. You were thinking—you mentioned your mother perhaps overpricing it when she first heard of your work and knew—learned about it or saw it. But you came, I think, to feel that, um, that you're—you're—you had a—a regard for your work and, uh—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I hope so. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And, uh, let me see. Back to what? You know, you'd said that, uh, [00:14:00] you—you've believed that art was needed in the world too. You thought that art was a great service. And, uh, despite years of contradictory evidence, you said, "I still believe that art's usefulness is essentially true." Is that still—[cross talk.]

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I had certainly not changed my mind about that. And the reason, uh—I suspect the

reason that subject came up was because one of the problems that we have now is that we don't have an organized, traditional patronage for the arts anymore. The church, which once was the great patron, uh, of art, and then the royalty, the arist—aristocracy was another great patron of art. And when those two forces faded, it became just a kind of happenstance that some particular person with, uh, money and perhaps education or whatever, would take—would—would become in love with—with works of art and want to have them. And that's when—when art began to be patronized by the entrepreneurs, right?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: But it was never organized. It was individuals deciding that they wanted to make a collection of art or something like that. And, of course, the role that museums in played in all of that is obvious, but—so where is the service? I mean I certainly never made, uh, a sculpture with the idea that I was doing it for some rich person who's gonna buy it. I think most of—most of us, at least I—I think, I don't know for sure. [00:16:00] But beside the—the pleasure and the pain of—of trying to produce something, you know, worthwhile. The notion is that what you're doing in a way is you—you're giving an image in terms—in substance, in real substance of something that's going on in the world around you. And it could be done with a kind of metaphorical implication. Uh, it could be very direct and blunt. Uh, and that's why when you look at the art of a particular per—period, it seems to have a certain kind of flavor about it, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: A look about it. The Impressionists, for example, being, a—a pretty good example of that, and you don't know why that happened. Why did Impressionism suddenly, uh, become important in the world? We don't know. It just happened that way. And that's one of the reasons we have change in art in our time. And, uh, from one generation to the next, there seems to be some kind of peculiar transformation that goes on between the generations. I don't understand it at all, but there it is. It just—and out of each generation of artists, uh, very few survive, you know, very few. Then the next generation comes along, and you have them doing things that the, uh, older generation looks at with a certain—let's say they look askance at it. Because a lot of it just are facts. Uh, you know, I look at what some of the young people are doing now, and I'm absolutely baffled. Why would they wanna do that? It just seems so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —idiotic, or infantile, [00:18:00] or whatever, but they do it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: There's some compulsion there that I don't understand because I don't think they're all stupid.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Hmm. Um, you felt that this is in the mid-'60s that at least in the United States, artists were, uh, were tolerated. They weren't persecuted, um—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and by and large is the case, isn't it?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I think the—the—what probably prompted that was this, uh, what was happening to artists in places like the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —where you would expect a total line. And in our country, uh, we didn't have anything like that. When I say the artist was tolerated, I probably was thinking that if art had the kind of power that, apparently, the Russians think it has, I think artists would be less tolerated if they did something that—and I think we've seen this. Excuse me. I think we've seen incidence of that. You know, do something, uh, overtly sexual and you're gonna have a Helms coming up and—and wanting to kill you in some way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: So as—uh, that's what I think I was implying at the time. It still holds true.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: It still holds true. The—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Famous cases in the, uh, late '80s or the early '90s like the Mapplethorpe or the Andres Serrano?

HAROLD TOVISH: Absolutely, right, Serrano. You know, I don't necessarily care for their work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You know? Uh, but the fact of the matter was that they were exercising their individuality and their freedom of expression. And there are people who would have been very happy to stifle them completely if they could.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:20:00]

HAROLD TOVISH: That—that's—that will be here all the time. There's no question. Not gonna get rid of that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You were in Rome in '66 or so as a sculptor in residence at the American Academy there?

HAROLD TOVISH: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh, you mentioned, uh, was that a very—quite a worthwhile experience for you?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, it was terrific to get—again, to get away from teaching for a while.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, 'cause you were still—then you're just leaving and teaching—you'd been teaching at the Boston Museum School?

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: 1966.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: [Side conversation.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned several, uh, Americans were there as well. You made *Vortex* there. Was that, uh, an important piece of that—

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yes. Yes, it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay. Can you explain?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, it's a kind of piece, you know, you really have to show what it looks like.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: But what I had done was I had a mask of a friend of mine, a fellow sculptor. And what I did was I made a template in metal of his profile.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. A template? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Right straight through the middle down through the nose, the chin, and so on. And then I mounted that in a—in a certain way. And—oh God, people are gonna just be confused by this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, it's all right. I can always—

HAROLD TOVISH: But, you know, the way where you—you make pottery? You put it on a wheel, right? You had the clay. You formed the clay, and you use your hands in order to give it a shape.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, the template is what gave the plaster shape.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And what happened was that I made a continuous profile in a—in a circular form [00:22:00] that simply reproduced this guy's profile. And then I opened it up in the middle, and his head was in there. So, you had just—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean this rounded head?

HAROLD TOVISH: No, his three-dimensional—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Three-dimensional?

HAROLD TOVISH: —mask was in there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

HAROLD TOVISH: So, there was a kind of slit. And the point about it was that the head was absolutely still, but the illusion of this thing implied a kind of motion.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And you almost can't help it. The lighting on the metal and all of that gives it a peculiar sense of motion. And then all of a sudden, there's this dead-still form in the middle, and I liked that kind of tangent between—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —the two. That's—that's *Vortex.*

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: It wasn't—it's in the Whitney now, you know, Whitney owns it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes, that was one of the better pieces I—it was the only thing I did there in that year. You know, it takes me forever to do anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It does, huh?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, oh, it takes me a long, long time to work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Preparatory studies, the drawings?

HAROLD TOVISH: It's not just that. It's—it's that, you know, people might think I was not doing a damn thing. I think the fact of the matter is I was—I'm mulling it over, how big should it be and all of those—those, uh, questions, which really are much more crucial than you would think. Uh, how big should it be? If it's too big, it becomes ludicrous. If it's too small, it's ineffective. So, you have to find the, uh—you know, as best you can, the ideal way of showing this image.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that's always been the case, would you say, even as a—

HAROLD TOVISH: Pretty much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pretty much.

HAROLD TOVISH: I—I've not been productive, uh, whatever that means nowadays. But I'm always astounded when I read about some, uh, sculptor who's having a show every year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I mean, I'm amazed. How the hell do they do that? Well, some [00:24:00] of those stuff is done in a way you could see how they would be able to do a lot of it quickly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: But since I almost always destroyed, you know, five-to-one of the things—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you destroyed?

HAROLD TOVISH: —I made. I destroy a lot of stuff.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Even after you'd spent a lot of time on them and working on them?

HAROLD TOVISH: I would spend a certain amount of time in it and then I could see that it's not working. It's not coming through, and then I'll destroy it and start over again. I'm so used to that now. I don't think of it as, you know, a tragedy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right. Yeah, right.

HAROLD TOVISH: It's just me floundering and fumbling my way towards an image that I see in my head. And what I'm doing is not getting close enough to it, and if it doesn't, it's worthless. You know, Marianna would look at some of the things I was doing and say, "Gee, that's terrific, Red," and I'd say, "It's terrible," but she could never—she—she says, "Why don't you make a casting of it? What difference does it make? Who—who are you gonna hurt?" And I would say, "Marianna, it's not what I want," and that was the end of it. But the strange thing about it is that a third party looking at something you would do, uh, sees it in a totally different way. I have something in my head. The third party doesn't have the same thing in their head. And that's—you know, that's the—the problem. So, uh, if you look all of my history, you'll see that I've had, on the average, a show about every five to seven years. You don't become rich and famous that way. [Laughs.] Even if you're a pretty good sculptor, it doesn't matter. You know, you're not gonna make much out of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it had to be that way. You just simply couldn't—

HAROLD TOVISH: I could not—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —get it through?

HAROLD TOVISH: —I could not help it, to tell you the truth. And we all developed—you know, we, all of us, [00:26:00] develop habits of work—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —and, uh, you're stuck with them. I must say that over the years with the example of Marianna who was extremely consistent, and, uh, organized, and so on, uh, I slowly learned from her to be a little less erratic. And now, I don't destroy things as much as I used to. Although, I still do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And when I say destroy, it sounds—you know, it sounds pretty fatal, but it really isn't. Obviously, everything I—I do up until I'm satisfied I've got something reasonably decent has contributed to that final image.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: So, you know, I don't think of it as a negative. So, perhaps destroy is not the word to use. That in a way, these are kind of studies, preparations, fumblings, and so on

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, they're very useful. In fact, they're—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes, they are. They're very useful. They're very useful.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, in my whole career, I could only think of one piece of sculpture that I cast in bronze that I destroyed. Because on reflection, I didn't like it. I didn't think it was, uh, up to standard. I just didn't think it was good enough. And it's kind of a tough thing to destroy a bronze, [laughs] you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

HAROLD TOVISH: I mean—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Physical—

HAROLD TOVISH: —not only emotionally but physically.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] So, the—the year around you were starting this, say, earlier was also, uh, it was a complete change of scene, right?

HAROLD TOVISH: You know, we lived in Italy, uh, for three years, in Florence, [00:28:00] and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Around the '50s?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes, that was in the '50s, uh, '54–'57. And in all of that time, we went to Rome for two days. We, of course, we visited other cities, Venice and so on, but we'd never been in Rome very long. And it was good to be in Rome, because, you know, a—a fantastic place. And it was nice to be able to see, uh, what—what art was available in Rome, and there was a lot of it there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: By the mid-'60s, a very, uh, active scene, wasn't it?

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: We had very little contact though because, you know, the—the American Academy was wonderfully isolated up on a hill. Have you ever been there?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: It's up on a hill and, uh, it's almost like a—a monastery in a way. I mean people would come up there, and they're kind of buried there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Of course, a lot of the people did go out into—into the city a great deal, but we didn't. We had—we had two kids, and, uh, we kept house. They gave us a very nice apartment at the Academy, and, uh, we knew we were gonna be there for a relatively short period. And both of us, uh, worked very hard. They gave me a lovely studio. All, you know, their residents were treated very nicely. And, uh, I insisted that Marianna also have a studio, and they gave her a—a space out in, uh, some kind of storage building, out. And I forget exactly what it was used for, but she did some sculpture there too. But I really did just that one piece, that was it, and that was, yeah, we were there for, oh, seven or eight [00:30:00] months, something like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: I don't know what the heck I did with the rest of my time but I was busy. I—I remember being quite busy there. And it was fun having contact with some of the younger artists, you know—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —and so on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you remember some that you—you got to know or at least had contact?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, um, I'm trying to think of, uh—oh, there was a—a young painter named Gilbert Stone who was a very able artist who, unfortunately, died young, I heard later on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: None of the people, uh, that we knew at the Academy had become extremely prominent or anything, but it was a nice crowd of people. We had a good time there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What about Italian artists or European artists?

HAROLD TOVISH: We had no contact with any of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No contact.

HAROLD TOVISH: None whatever.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because you had some back when you were in Florence, you know, in the '50s?

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, the only contact we had was when we went to Venice. Uh, I met an artist—oh, by the way, that was interesting. While I was in Venice, uh, they had—the Italians are really quite—quite great in—in the way they treat artists in general. Uh, the Venice Biennale—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —uh, had a special section devoted to—how did they put it? Artists living in Italy, or foreign artists living in Italy. And I submitted some work and they accepted there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And one of the, uh, Italian artists who had seen something of mine was a guy named, uh, Pomodoro, Arnaldo I think it—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Arnaldo—

HAROLD TOVISH: Pomod—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —Pomodoro?

HAROLD TOVISH: —Pomodoro. And he was, uh, interested. When we went to Rome, uh, we met him at the—at the exhibition, [00:32:00] and we went, and sat around, and chatted with him and his friends. Uh, and what's fascinating is that I had done a piece of sculpture earlier in Minnesota in which I used certain techniques that he used. So, you know, we had that, you see?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And in the catalog of my retrospective at the Addison, it was mentioned that—that, uh, Pomodoro—and I—I think the guy was hinting that I had been influenced by Pomodoro, which was nonsense. The fact of the matter, I had done what I had before I ever knew who he was even. But that kind of thing happens all the time, whatever the case. The truth of the matter is that Marianna and I devoted ourselves to our work while we were there. It was a wonderful opportunity with practically no distractions. Uh, when we did any traveling, we did it for short periods, you know, a day or two and then we would be back to work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You returned, uh, not immediately to teach when you got back here? Uh—

HAROLD TOVISH: I'm trying to think—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —I think you finished at, uh—at the School of Museum of Fine Arts that year you went to Rome.

HAROLD TOVISH: 1966.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you really don't resume teaching fulltime until '71, I think, at, uh—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, there was an interval—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —Boston University?

HAROLD TOVISH: There was—no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is that—

HAROLD TOVISH: There was an interval. Uh, no, what happened was this. When I got back, I had an exhibition at which this piece I told you about, the *Tenant* was shown.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: György Kepes saw that exhibition and found the fact that I was using certain technology. Strobes, um, motion, uh, intrigued him, and he had, uh, created a school called the uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, the Center—

HAROLD TOVISH: —Advanced—Center for Advanced Visual Studies.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At MIT. [00:34:00]

HAROLD TOVISH: And he asked me if I would become a fellow there, uh, and I, of course, agreed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And I was there for, I think, two years. I spent two years there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And in 1971, no, wait a minute, 1969, a guy named Staszak [ph], I don't remember his first name, who ran the art department at the University of Hawaii, uh, came and saw some of the work I had done, and asked me if I'd come here as a visiting sculptor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, Hawaii? Who's gonna resist Hawaii? And we agreed, and we went there and stayed there for, a—a school year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And had a wonderful time. And Marianna did some very nice work there, out of which came this commission that she had. And I did some stuff. I can't even remember what the heck I did there, but to be a year in—in Hawaii with, uh, its—just its physical beauty. One of the interesting things was this. My work has generally been seen as rather on the dark side, which I must say it really is. Although, I, myself, I'm not an unhappy, wretched creature. Uh, for some reason or other, the ideas that have interested me tend to be dark. And to be doing that kind of work in Hawaii, just was so incongruous with because here is this physical paradise, which affects everybody there, at least the people we ran into. There was a—the physical life in Hawaii was almost like its art form. You know, surfing. [00:36:00] The incident that—that cleared the—that [laughs] that made it clear to me what Hawaii was about was I had, a—a class of about 12 students. These were kids who were, you know, pretty far along. They were—they were, uh—had been, they had a certain amount of training, and they were doing work on their own. And I was teaching them, uh, things like portrait sculpture and working from the model, something that they were not really terribly interested in. But I actually got them, uh, finally to see that there was some merit in doing this kind of stuff. But one day, I came to class, and there was only one student. And I said, "What the heck is going on? Where is everybody?" And this girl says, "Sir, surf's up." [Laughs.] And they all were out on the beach. [Laughs.] I just burst out laughing. And that—that made it quite clear to me that, uh, that my certain, you know, almost, uh, grim seriousness about the study, and about applying one's energy, and so on to the art, and being completely focused and all of that sort of thing. It simply was not going to go over here. There was no way you're gonna be able to do that with these people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: And I remember as soon as—what—we're very interested in, uh—they said, "Gee, Mr. Tovish, would you show us the work that you've done?" So, I showed my slides, and at the end when we turned on the lights, there was this dead silence, you know, and I said, God, they hate it. And then one of the, uh, older students said, "Heavy." [They laugh.] "Heavy," he said—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: And just the—you see, it was another generation [00:38:00] who were not looking at the world the way I did, and, uh, it was not their thing. But I—I have never forgotten that. That was really very amusing. But it was a great time, a great year. We had both had a very good time there and met, you know, interesting people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And you've said it led eventually to Marianna commi—right?

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right. That commission came out of that period there, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Um, heavy, they thought your work was.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you think of the Minimalist work and other things coming along via New York by that time?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, uh, the one thing—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because you had been at, uh, your own just flirtation with technology and, uh—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —being at MIT as well.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I want to ask you more about that.

HAROLD TOVISH: You have to—you have to understand one thing about my experience, for example, at MIT. There were several very interesting people there. A guy named Takis, a Greek sculptor who was using magnets in a very interesting way. He—he managed to—by using magnets and certain, uh, electrical, uh, connections—I don't quite know the technical things involved—he was able to introduce kind of random elements in—in the sculpture.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And one of the great limitations of using, uh, light and so on is that you can't beat the laws of physics. And one of them is a certain kind of repetitiousness. You know, you're dealing with frequencies.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And so, you're gonna have—a thing will go over, and over, and over again. In my, uh, *Tenant*, for example, the thing did same thing every time, and—or you had somebody who's doing things with lights blinking on and off and—or changing, uh, color or whatever.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But it happened over, and over, and over again. And then, uh, I began [00:40:00] to feel that the mind would understand the tech—the frequency. And once the mind had gotten that, a certain interest was lost. It was like whatever mystery there might be was dissipated. You know that question, how does it work? It was as if they say no, I know the answer and without thinking about the thing itself, you see?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: So, my experience at MIT dealing with—you know, having contact with some really interesting people. Otto Piene was one of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And was he, uh, doing things with lights or—

HAROLD TOVISH: He was doing—no. Otto Piene was doing things with, uh, balloons.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Inflatables.

HAROLD TOVISH: Inflatables exactly, and, uh, you know, some of them was quite interesting, but it was all impermanent, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You blow up a balloon and then the air is out of it, and then that's it. Uh, there was a guy named Jack Burnham who was sort of a—a heavy intellectual type whose work I don't remember. But he later wrote a book about sculpture—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: —in which, uh, technology played a role. I think he called it, *Beyond [Modern] Sculpture* or whatever the heck that would mean, but.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, you—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, what happened was really, in the end, I felt that the limitations of the—of technology were such that I really abandoned it. I—I went back to more traditional, uh, philosophy about what was appropriate to do in sculpture. A lot of people would probably think I was—I was—had become a reactionary. But the fact of the matter is the only work that involved movement [00:42:00] that interested me were done by Calder and by a guy named Pol Bory. Do you know that name?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: I think he's a Belgian sculptor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And what I liked about both of them was the slowness of the movement. You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And in a certain sense, the unpredictability of it. Because, you know, one is operating by wind and the other one is operating with, uh, motors that ran so slowly that things changed—became magical, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: I don't know what's become of Pol Bory. I wonder if he's still alive?

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you think of the work of Jean Tinguely? He's more frenetic to—

HAROLD TOVISH: Didn't like him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

HAROLD TOVISH: No, I didn't like Tinguely's work. Uh, you know, he did a famous demonstration at the Museum of Modern Art where he made a sculpture that destroyed itself. Well, you know, it was a kind of titillating idea—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —that seems to—because I think comes out of Duchamp, you know? Where the notion of this kind of piety, this—that hovers over arts, you know, this quasi-religious activity of making works of art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, this was like making fun of that whole idea. He—he goes through a long period of making an—a gadget or an object, which is gonna destroy itself, and that's it, goodbye.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I—I finally—I just—I can't—I can't take that. I guess I am too damned conservative for it. I could—I couldn't handle that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, um, what did you think on the other hand of, uh, static sculpture, about this very Minimal thing? Just [Cross talk.]

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, you know, I have to confess that—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —which was coming along in the '60s?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. I did—I did learn from—from those, uh, abstract sculptors, uh, people like Judd [00:44:00] and others who worked more or less in that same vein. And there was a certain kind of economy, uh, of composition, an economy of material that I—I rather liked. Although the work never meant very much to me, you know what I mean? It just never grabbed me in a way that counted. Because I've never, never been able to—to accept the idea of aesthetics as being the main power in art. Uh, I mean, when you eliminate all associative values from a work of art, uh, there's a kind of barrenness that's left which I—I find just too inhospitable, at least for me. I just don't find it's something I can, uh, care about very much. But in some of the works that I did, if—if you look at them, it's clear that there are certain elements in it that might very well have been influenced by Minimalism, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, I don't think it is, you know, absolutely crucial, but, uh, it was as if I had learned something from those people. And I suppose for that reason, I should have a certain amount of gratitude that they went and did that kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. A lot of that by the '60s was driven by—perhaps driven by, uh, the market's need for something different from year to year to year, season to season.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, that's—that's the disease of our time, uh, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: It seems to me it began back then more or less?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Well actually, it began earlier. But, uh, the engine that has driven art from really the turn of the century to our present time is the fact that change in art has become almost like, uh, the most

important commodity, [00:46:00] you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, it just seems as if, uh, our civilization, uh, quickly exhausts any idea that comes along and for a—for a brief time, holds sway, has influence, and then it just fades away. Uh, Abstract Expressionism, I guess, is one of the most, you know, perfect demonstrations of that phenomenon. Uh, although some of those guys I really admire. I mean de Kooning, I think, is—deserves all the accolades he's gotten. And there are few others of that period whose work I do have great respect for. But whatever the driving force was, somehow pretty much dissipated. Then it was replaced by Pop, uh, which I have never—

[END OF SIDE A.]

This is cassette one of four, Side B.

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, Pop art came along, Andy Warhol, and Lichtenstein, and all those people. Uh, it had its moment. Uh, there are still traces of interest in Pop art among younger artists. But I think its major power and—you know, the steam has gone out of it. There's no question about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And that's what's been going on and—and—which is one of the reasons I think a lot of artists do work where they don't give a damn whether it lasts or not, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, they'll work in materials that disintegrate. Uh, I remember seeing an exhibition where bits of the paint were—were falling off, and they collected at the bottom of the—on the floor below the painting, and that was—that was the idea.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I mean, you know, Okay, if that's what you want, go right ahead. Nobody is gonna stop you. But—but all of that I find—I mean it's so anarchic and nihilistic. And I—I just can't accept that as—as serious art, and yet, it's taken seriously. I think probably more because of certain philosophical implications, that kind of thing. You know, the impermanence of things and so on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, perhaps it has a point, but damn it, you do something in bronze, that's gonna last, and that's—that's it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I assume, you'd say the same thing about, uh, Conceptual art, which came along 20-odd years ago?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, Conceptual art was, uh, interesting, uh, to some extent, but I always took it as a form of entertainment. [00:02:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: You know, it could be serious entertainment, but essentially, it was entertainment. And maybe a lot of people would be very offended by that, but, uh, when I looked at any of it, I was entertained. I was not engaged in the way that—what I would consider a serious work of art would engage me. But I know there are a lot of people who find Conceptual art extremely important and respond to it in a way, apparently, I can't. *C'est la vie.*

ROBERT F. BROWN: Same thing would apply to performances, do you think?

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, just—let's drop performance art. I—I've had it with that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I'm gonna—[audio break.] We've been talking about, uh, purely art matters. But in the late '60s, particularly in '66, '67 or so, you were, uh, appalled by our continuing, uh, presence in the Civil War in Vietnam. And, uh, where you became deeply involved in withholding portions of your, uh, income tax as a

protest, a form of protest.

HAROLD TOVISH: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you talk about a bit that? Is that typical at that time of you? You usually, you know, tried—you don't have overt political messages in your work or things of that so often.

HAROLD TOVISH: No. You kind of write about that. My work, uh, I—I would say really, uh, if ever—I'm trying to think of anything I've ever done which was overtly political. But looking at some of the work, it would be hard to imagine it's devoid of any political implications. You know, uh, a piece I did called, *In Memoriam*, uh, I don't know if you remember that one. But these balls, [00:04:00] which, uh, opened up in the middle with the heads in them, and then piled up like cannonballs, you know, you see in small towns with Civil War memorials, that sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Right.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, it was a comment, on—on the lunacy of war where these people are gone, and so on, and so forth. But the—the point being that to be against, uh, this kind of mass slaughter that goes on during wars, is, uh—I mean it's hard to say it's political. I mean, it's really more moral, or ethical, or whatever you like. Um, but I suppose it does have some political implications, but I've never done work, which was, uh, in protest about a specific issue or something like that. But what happened then when you see was, uh—well, after all, I had a son. My son Aaron, uh, had had to register. And in addition, my own history as a political beast had been pretty much left wing. When I was a kid, I was, uh, a commie. You know, really, uh, I was a leftie.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And I had always believed in the left, no question about that. I wouldn't, uh, quarrel with that for a second. And when the Vietnam War broke out, uh, I was appalled by the—by the implication of that, of this tremendously powerful country going into a country which was, uh, God knows, suffering enough. And, uh, terrified of communism to the extent where they would go in, apparently, willing to kill millions of people in the name of, uh, [00:06:00] preventing communism from spreading, uh, and so on. Well, along came, uh, people like Noam Chomsky and one or two others who, uh, came up with the idea of withholding taxes, 50 percent of one's, uh, income tax as a form of protest. Uh, and I seized upon it. Um, I was at MIT at the time. This would be in 1967, I believe.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And I became very active, and in fact, a lot of it happened at our home. We used to have meetings at our home, and we sent out thousands of, uh, petitions to people all over the country asking them to join in and that sort of thing. Uh, nobody that I know of was ever, uh, arrested for tax evasion, uh, which is interesting. I don't know why the government never did that. You know, they never did that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But, I think they may have decided that to do it would be counterproductive because it would cause even more reaction and so on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But I went down to Washington on, a—a major protest. You remember the march on the Pentagon, Norman Mailer, and those guys? And I had a movie camera, and I went down there and made a film of it, in which, uh, there was first—let's see. There was a protest at the, uh, department of justice, and, uh, all these people including, uh, Norman Mailer, and, uh, who's that wonderful poet? Lowell?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, Robert Lowell.

HAROLD TOVISH: Robert Lowell was there, and, uh, of course, Chomsky, and several other people of so—[00:08:00] of note. And then I filmed, uh, the bigger march on the Pentagon, which was absolutely fascinating. It was just, uh, an extraordinary experience to see, uh, these mobs and mobs of people and so on. But, when the war finally did peter out, and—and, uh, all during that period the—the thing that was unfortunate about it was that so many other people who were doing work on their own—I lost two years of my life, really, during that period, my—you know, life as a sculptor. And I don't regret it in particular, but, um, it just seemed important enough at the time for me to, uh, abandon any, uh, pretense of trying to live a normal life, you know? It was not a normal time, God knows.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was there—would you equate that with your time in World War II? I mean that, obviously, was, uh—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —involuntary. You were—[cross talk]

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Yeah. I was—I was drafted, of course. But, you know, if there is such a thing as a just war, I suppose World War II, uh, would—would pretty much come under that heading. Also, you gotta understand, uh, although I've never been a practicing Jew, uh, it was apparent to me that if I had been in Germany, it wouldn't matter whether I converted to Catholicism. They would have gotten me, and I would have ended up a dead man. Uh, and, of course, the whole force of fascism with all of its, uh, implications was something that really had to be dealt with. There was no way you could let it just go on and on. And Hitler would—if he had been content to keep it in Germany, the chances are [00:10:00] uh, there wouldn't have been any war, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: But, uh, he wanted to spread the good word, as it were, and as a result, uh, we had that horrendous war. So, uh, I went and was—I went. Let's say I was inducted in '43 and came back in '45. Uh, and my experience in the war was, uh, not as awful as it might have been if I had been in the infantry. I was in the anti-aircraft outfit, and we were in support of the infantry. That was our major function. And I did see some hairy stuff, you know, some nasty business. One of the interesting things that happened was that at one point, we were, uh, going down a road from one, uh, location to another, and coming from the other direction with trucks, which were filled with people from the concentration camps. I'd think Buchenwald, I'm not sure which. And they still had on those uniforms, you know, those striped uniforms, you know? That was—that was impressive, you know? God, they were being taken, I guess, to hospitals, you know, to be fed up and given a little nourishment. But, uh, man, that was—that was something to see, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And that had an effect on me because I did some work that had direct association with, uh, that little piece of sculpture called *The Victim*, emaciated figure in a kind of fetal position. Uh, but I was a young guy, you know, and I got through the war, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —came home, and married this marvelous young woman. And, uh, [00:12:00] I didn't have any post—what did they call it—syndrome?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Post-whatever-war syndrome.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, I did not have any syndrome about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Then came, uh, the Vietnam War era, uh—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, it was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —it was voluntary on your part, and you felt some helplessness, I guess?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. My son was never inducted. I think he, uh—he told them flat out that he was, uh, not—and they let him go. You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: He was just a potential troublemaker. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned when you—back in '65 when you—and I'm just throwing it out as a general structure—that um, the agony of exhibitions and yet the necessity of them, uh, that you felt they were important. But, uh, there's an awful lot of turmoil getting ready for them, doing, seeing—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —what the after effect was?

HAROLD TOVISH: —well I mean the—the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you say it works well, so your major exhibitions had been rather periodic.

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yes, yes. Uh, they—they generally had taken long periods between exhibitions. Well, the thing about exhibition is, it's a peculiarly artificial system of dealing with art. I mean, here you have a guy like me, and there would be, you know, thousands who would have the similar experience. You're alone in the studio. You're doing what you want to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And then at some point, when you have a sufficient number of works, uh, you put it in some place where the public can come and look at it. [00:14:00] It's there for a period of three weeks, a month maybe. If it's a museum show, it might go as much as two or maybe two-and-a-half months. And all that effort, which may have taken five, six, seven years, has a very short period during which it can make any kind of dent.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And it's just a peculiar business, because what you're doing really is it's a performed speculation. You don't do it—at least I have never done it, and I don't know that many, many artists were—do their work with a view to selling it, you know, specifically. This I'm making, it'll—it'll sell, I'm sure there are artists who do that. But I would think most serious artists, uh, don't do it. They do it because—out of some kind of compulsion, neurotic or otherwise. But once it gets out into the public, uh, it is generally bought by people who have the money for it, uh, or by institutions and, uh, it's a hell of a system, you know? What prompts people to buy this or that is very hard to determine. You know? Why would anybody wanna buy something that I did? Somebody bought that piece I called *In Memoriam*, you know, the one with the cannonballs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, a Mrs., uh—what the heck was her name? Well, she gave her whole collection to the National Museum of American Art. I can't remember her name.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sarah Roby was it?

HAROLD TOVISH: That's the lady. Good for you.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Sarah Roby, and here's this woman, you know, and I, uh, I don't know, I never met her. And she comes into the gallery, and she sees this piece, and she likes it. Why? Why [00:16:00] did she like it? I'll never know. Because she bought other things which I don't like. [They laugh.] You know what I mean? So, it's—it's all happenstance, the whole damn thing. And, of course, you—you—it would be wonderful to earn a living doing one's work. Uh, something I've never achieved. Uh, but you know, I was a teacher, and I lived on, uh, you know, the salary I got from teaching. But, uh, my sculpture—although I wouldn't say I haven't sold any, I have sold some work. But in all the years since I was about 20, I would say two years, and that was in the '60s, I sold enough to have been able to live on without teaching, but that's it. And since then, uh, I have relatively modest sales. But that's the fate of most artists. You know, uh, very, very, very few artists actually do earn a living at their work. And the more serious they are, the fewer they are. There are artists, you know, who do a kind of work, which is easily accessible.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Pleasant to have around.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: There's nothing wrong with that, that's fine. Uh, but then if your work has a certain dark aspect to it, you know, you've got a limited, uh, audience. And a—a limited audience in the sense of how many people wanna have this stuff around their house, you know? I can understand that. So, uh, you do what you do, and you take your chances, and that's all there is to it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Well, that's about what you said 32 years ago.

HAROLD TOVISH: They haven't changed. Things haven't changed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No. No, no.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, it was happenstance who would buy what? Happenstantial also, I guess, is what the art world writes about or talks about it too. I don't know.

HAROLD TOVISH: Exactly, exactly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: If that's something you really can dwell on or ever—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. I—I—[00:18:00] this may not happen to other people, and maybe their luck is better than mine. But I've had some very, very good reviews of my work, you know, really, uh, very flattering reviews. Uh, some of them, you know, based on misapprehension, but it doesn't matter. A good review is useful, as they say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: They never made any—that I could see—any difference in terms of sales. Whereas in other cases, uh, a rave review would have resulted in sales. And that would almost involve work, which perhaps is more accessible by people. And that's just where the chips fall. There's nothing you can do about that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What about, uh, you've said in that note, or memo, or reflections, uh, that fellow artists, their comment on it was very important too?

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yes, yes. I mean if your peers respond to what you're doing, uh, that carries—that carries a weight, which, uh, you know, I'm being patted on the back by a critic or somebody, you know, you don't know. It's always nice to be praised by somebody who has no vested interest in you at all. Uh, those things are all encouraging. They're the kind of thing that makes you feel you're making contact, you know? You—you're not really alone in your studio doing something that nobody gives two hoots in hell about.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And I've had some pretty good response from other artists. And there, of course, are artists who, uh, would find my work, uh, heavy, and they're not—they're not interested in it. That's their business you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. [00:20:00]

HAROLD TOVISH: We don't have much of a great community of artists. Artists in general now, more so than in the past I think, uh, are much more isolated from one another. You know, the BVAU when we started here, uh, had a period—that's the Boston Visual Artists Union—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, one that—

HAROLD TOVISH: —had a period where, uh, there was a lot of contact between artists. It was—it was very, uh, exciting, stimulating for a while, but it sort of petered out. And the reason, I think, was that some of the political actions that we took, uh, they were not ineffective. But we also used to have, uh, lectures. You know, artists would come and talk about their work and stuff like that. And for a while, it—it created a certain kind of energy. But one thing you could not defeat or counter was the fact, in the end, the artist goes and is alone in the studio. You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, I think after a while, the uh, novelty of this action among artists, uh, seeing each other with some frequency, uh, simply began to fade away. The novelty disappeared. And back to the studio they went, which is where they belong. I don't lament it. It's just the way it goes. That's all there is to it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well that—the Boston Visual Artists Union in its beginnings, which I guess were in the late '60s or so—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —you were very involved with?

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yeah, I was very, and Marianna, too, we both were.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Marianna as well?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Will you, uh—would you say this uh, count this as part of what went on the two years you lost from your career? The Vietnam War—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, when I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —protest and this?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, the union, uh—no, I would not claim that the union took up the kind of time that the war did. Uh, I was active, but I was not, [00:22:00] you know, completely engulfed by it, by any means. I—I—you know, there were a lot of other people, thank God, who were doing work with the union.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. You're—uh, but you felt very strongly that it—it was in—it was valuable to try to create a—a community of artists?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, it was. It was important. Uh, it's something that, you know, uh, in other countries, uh, there's a tradition for that. Here, not so much. And, uh, I think when artists get together and care about one another, uh, it stimulates the whole atmosphere. The whole life of art in—in an area becomes much more intense.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But, you know, the whole business of the competition between artists was, uh, all—each and everybody struggling to make a reputation, struggling to, uh, get their work seen and sold, and so on. All of that ends up being, uh, a divisi—a divisive thing, you know? And the irony of it is that there really is some competition between artists. I mean, you know, each of us is doing something we wanna do, you know? And, uh, the rest is all career. You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: A—and it's kind of sad in a way. It really is. It's kind of sad because who's to know why one artist becomes a big name and has a brief period of notoriety, of fame, of making money, and then down they go?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Times have changed. Something has happened. We don't know why, but even artists who, uh, I forget—a guy like Hyman Bloom whom I felt was a major, major artist, I'm astounded that, uh, so little attention [00:24:00] is given to him now. But his fate is the fate of a lot of artists, a lot of artists. I don't think Hyman Bloom is finished by any means, because I think he's going to be looked at again very seriously. I don't see how he can be avoided. But it's happened to a lot of them. One of my, uh, heroes, when I was a kid was William Zorach. Now, how many young artists do you think even know that name?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Damn few. Damn few. Yeah. Well, it's all strange business.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Of the, uh—you wrote to, uh—in '75 to someone in Chile who had inquired about Boston Visual Artists Union saying that its purpose was to help artists survive as artists. Uh, that—that we weren't political, but we do feel we must come to the aid of fellow artists who had been victimized in any way.

HAROLD TOVISH: And he was a guy named Nunez.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Nunez, yes.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, there's, uh—you know, among the papers I gave you, there's a letter I wrote to him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Which will give you a flavor of, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yup.

HAROLD TOVISH: —what was going on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, that's where I just was quoting from this one.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. He—he had to, uh, literally flee his country because of his political, uh, stance.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I think he lives in France now. And he came up here. He was in Boston. And, uh, we sort of rallied around. I don't know what the hell we did to really ease his life, but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —I remember we told him that if he ever needed any, uh, help or backing for some reason or other, we'd be glad to do it—give it to him. But we never—he never asked for anything, but that was the sort of thing we were trying to do. We didn't do much of that, but so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did [00:26:00] other, uh, focal points develop elsewhere sort of like the union? Was it a—[cross talk]

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, one of the things that came up was this, uh—what do they call it—entry fees for exhibitions. Uh, we fought against that. We said that the idea of asking an artist to pay a fee for the possibility of having a work in an exhibition was a bit thick. And in fact, ideally, the museum or whatever, should pay the artist for—for letting them show his or her work. Well, we got—we got—we did pretty well on the first part of that. We never got very far on the second part of that. You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: But that was one of the practical things we tried to do with some success. And some of these places that had annual exhibitions or biennials, uh, dropped their entrance fee request. And I hate to tell you, but I think most of them have restored it since.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Although, supposedly the BVAU still exists, it—it is really pretty inactive. It doesn't do very much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this particularly a problem, do you think, in this area or nationally?

HAROLD TOVISH: About what?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, the entrance fees.

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, no. It's a national phenomenon, no question ever—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Did you have other groups that developed as like the BVAU and—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, you gotta understand it was the artists, uh, union, Artists Equity.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Artists Equity.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But that—

HAROLD TOVISH: Which had been around a long time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, I think it's still going, but I don't know that it's, uh, very influential anymore.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But even in those '60—about '60s, it wasn't nearly as influential as it once was—

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —I believe.

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right. Which as [00:28:00] I described, is the fate of most art organizations. There are very, very few of them that can hold out over a very long period.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And the only ones that I know of that do, are the most conservative ones.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Because they usually have a—a place they show their work, you know, and so on. Whereas, you know, for example, there was an organization that was trying to foster, uh, greater interest in abstract art. Do you remember that group?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Used to picket the Museum of Modern Art?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: American Abstract Artists something or other, and they've disappeared.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. You've mentioned that teaching has, sort of, been the, uh, practical glue that's kept you going along. I mean, paid the bills for many years. And in, uh, '71, you decided to get back in full-time teaching, or you were approached, were you, about, uh, going to Boston University, the School of Art?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Yeah, that happened—we were still in Hawaii, and I got a letter from Sydney Hurwitz who was, uh, heading up the art department asking if I'd be interested in joining the faculty. Well I mean, you know, we were gonna return anyway and, uh, I didn't have a job. I was finished at the Institute, you know, of Advanced Visual Studies.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, at MIT.

HAROLD TOVISH: And there was no, uh, other source of income, so I said sure. I accepted it, and that's how I got into BU.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You received a warm recommendation from, uh, Harvey Arnason?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, that my God, what an extravagant [00:30:00] recommendation that I got from him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he taught in the University of Minnesota back in the—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, he was the head of the school. He was also the head of the Walker Art Center, a very—you know, a pretty influential guy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And he was a great admirer. It's wonderful to have somebody in that position who thinks you're terrific, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. He was one of your closer friends?

HAROLD TOVISH: No, we were not friends in the sense that you—one usually thinks. We—we were friendly. We would go to his place, uh, when he and his wife had a little dinner party occasionally. And, uh, he kept a certain distance, which was great because I didn't wanna—I really was nervous about getting too chummy with a museum director.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: You know? Uh, that's that kind of heavy-duty moralism that, uh, some of us are afflicted by, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Where you feel that you don't wanna get to know critics. You don't wanna get to know people who are very influential in the art scene. Uh, on the grounds that, uh, they may push you this way or that, or you

may be ass kissing before you know what you're doing, that sort of thing. And I—uh—you know, we grew up with a certain kind of a moral system that had a lot to do with the Depression. Uh, when you went into art, as I did, at the end of the Depression, with the Depression still hanging heavily over everybody, you certainly weren't doing it because you wanna make a fortune. You know, it was almost, you know, like entering a monastery. Uh, you—my teacher assured me I would never make a living at it. He was absolutely right. [They laugh.] [00:32:00] Yeah, that—that had a big, a big, big impact, the Depression.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then so Arnason, you were friendly with. Tom Messer, the same thing too?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, yeah, we kept a certain distance. Tom, uh, also admired what I was doing. Otherwise, he wouldn't have uh, arranged for that show at the Guggenheim. Uh, which I must say, I was stunned when he asked if I'd be interested. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that was an assemblage of work from the last [cross talk]—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes, it was a survey.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Survey, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: It was a survey of my work over, uh, you know, what constituted my career at the time, that was 1968. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And at, uh, Boston University, how would you compare it with the other place you've had a reasonably long stint? The Museum School here in Boston and now—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you compare the two of them?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Well, the Museum School was much looser. Uh, we were pretty much left alone. Ostensibly, one was hired because one had a certain history, one, uh, had a certain ability, one had a certain record as a teacher, and in my case, that was true. You know, I taught at the University of Minnesota. I—I taught at Alfred University. You know, I had some experience. But, uh, BU was a much, much organ—more organized, in terms of its program than I recall, uh, the Museum School being so organized. The teachers at the Museum School really operated very independently. Now, because [00:34:00] you'd had people like, uh, David Aronson, and Reed Kay, and, uh, Jo Ablow, I guess, and—and several others, who had shaped, to some extent, must have shaped the Museum School and the kind of program they had. The people who were hired there would generally be sympathetic to that program, you see. So, when I, uh, came to the Museum School, nobody had told me what to teach, but they knew I was gonna teach, uh, work from life, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And the same thing happened at BU. They—they saw an exhibition of mine at Swetzoff. Apparently, they liked what they saw and that's—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Swetzoff Gallery?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, and that's what came out of it. They asked me to—to join up because they thought I would teach the kind of thing they were interested in. Uh, but the difference there was a much, much more organized and—at the Museum School, we had one meeting a year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Two at the most. At the Museum School, we met with some frequency, and we would discuss all the issues of program, and this, that, and the other thing, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean at BU?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. And, you know, uh, I taught—to give you an idea of the kind of, uh, control that was kept over the program. Uh, I was asked to teach drawing for two years, and so I did. Now, as a sculptor, there's a certain kind of drawing that I found useful for me, line drawing for example. So, I emphasized line drawing. I also did a lot of, uh, experimental teaching where I would suggest that they do this or that, like draw from [00:36:00] the model without looking at the model. You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And apparently, that didn't sit well with some of my colleagues, [laughs] you know, the ones,

the painters who taught drawing also. They felt it was too limited. Uh, I didn't go in much for the kind of drawing—we do a lot of shading, and modeling, and all of that. I—I just didn't do that to the extent that, I guess, they felt was crucial for their people. And, of course, you see, the majority of students there were studying painting. For every one sculpture student, there were probably eight or nine painting students. So very quietly one year, I discovered I was not teaching drawing anymore. I went back to sculpture. It was okay with me. Uh, but you get the picture, you see?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: They wanted—sculpture to them was a side issue. It really was. And the whole history in Boston has tended to be painting and drawing. The only big, big, big figure that Boston had produced, who is Saint-Gaudens—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Of course.

HAROLD TOVISH: But they've had quite a few painters who became, you know, Prendergast—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —and a whole—a group of painters who were of consequence, coming up to Hyman Bloom and so on. And, of course, I didn't like that. You know, I didn't like being made to feel that somehow sculpture was, uh, the second fiddle to anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: So over the years, I think a certain tension developed between us.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I remember I had an exhibition of those. You know, do you remember that show I had of the variations on the self-portrait that I did?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: The 15 heads? I think they found that upsetting. It was a little bit [00:38:00] too wild for them, or what, I don't know what. But I don't think they, uh, cottoned to it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But you're suggesting that not only did they, uh, come—all come out, almost all come out of the MFA school at a certain time within—under a certain teacher, Karl Zerbe. But that there was an attitude at the school, uh, even though I suppose there were—

HAROLD TOVISH: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: —meetings and consensus were arrived at. But there was a sort of prevailing outlook that they had known and shared?

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, no question about it

ROBERT F. BROWN: It wasn't all [cross talk]—

HAROLD TOVISH: And, you know, the—the point I'm making is that the work I was doing—I mean after all, the last work that I was shown—I showed at BU involved this illusion basically with the mirrors.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I mean that was beyond the pale for most of them. All of that would have seemed like gimmickry to them. And there are people would dare say that bluntly, you know? Well, I don't think it was gimmickry. There was no other way for me to do it. If I wanted a certain kind of image and I had to use mirrors, by God, I'm gonna use mirrors. And if they wanna call it gimmicks, go ahead, nothing I can do about it. But, in short, you see they had a view of art and to be—to their credit, you know, they had a view of art which was conveyed to the students that you're going to learn, you're going to be skillful. You're going to leave the school with some real experience and achievement under your belt. You will know how to draw a figure. You'll know anatomy to some extent. You'll know a little bit about a composition and so on, and color, and all the rest of it.

And I liked that because I felt that, uh, these kids are paying money, uh, to learn, [00:40:00] and these people were very serious about giving them their money's worth and that's to be respected. And in general, the kids who came out of BU, uh, some of them have gone on to do some rather good work. I'm sure some of them have gone abstract and have no—you know, they just don't do figurative anymore but that's okay. That's what they wanna do, fine. But it did put me in a—in a kind of awkward position because, you know, I—I didn't hue to the line in a way that they would have liked me to. So what? [Laughs.] The fact of the matter is, in the end, I left BU, and, uh, I went on with my life, and they went on with theirs, and that's it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: It's okay.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] Right.

[END OF SIDE B.]

This is cassette two of four, Side A1.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible] of December 30, 1977. Robert Brown, the interviewer. I wanted to talk, uh, this—this time about your work since the late 1970s. We've covered quite a lot through about that time. We last interviewed in 1977. In 1980, you had an exhibition at the Boston University Art Gallery. You were teaching at the university then, uh, and it was concentrated on recent work, but a particular theme, *Transformations from a Unit to Measure.* And, uh, it seemed to concentrate on a kind of self-portrait, a head, and then many variations on that. Uh, can you talk a little bit about that? Was that typical of your work at that time?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, since it took me quite a long time to produce that, it—it's pretty typical. [They laugh.] I wasn't doing a hell of a lot else. No, the idea, uh—the basic premise behind that exhibition was that in this case, I—I took a self-portrait. And through a process of measurement, a triangulation over the whole head with calipers and so on, I was able to reproduce the volume of that head.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And what you did was used—you stuck matches, a match—matches into clay. And then moving from the plaster head to the clay head, you would make a measurement. And then you would place the matches in such a way that it—it reproduced that measurement. And you kept doing that until you pretty well had the whole volume.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Now, I wasn't so narcissistic that I was gonna go [00:02:00] do endless variations of my own portrait. That would not have interested me. But what I did then was to connect these points according to what—the way my imagination, uh, dictated.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And as a result, I was able to do—I forget—14 heads or something like that, each one different from the next.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But all of them within the confines of this, uh, if you like, a kind of universe, which was identified by its volume. You didn't go outside the volume. And the results, I think, were fairly interesting, at least so I've been told. That's it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Did the—was—did you get a good deal of feedback from that show and from this work?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. I had quite a lot of feedback from the show. I—I showed it first. I showed it, uh, here in Boston at Boston University. Um, my dealer at the time was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You know, Terry Dintenfass?

HAROLD TOVISH: No, no, no. I'm talking at Boston. My dealer—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Boston.

HAROLD TOVISH: —at the time was Fink.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, Alan Fink—

HAROLD TOVISH: Alan Fink—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —Alpha Gallery.

HAROLD TOVISH: —at the Alpha Gallery. And he—he came down to the studio when I was working on these heads, and he didn't seem to be very enthused about them. I think, frankly, what he was worried about was that they were gonna be difficult to sell, any of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: So I got very, uh, huffy about the whole thing, [laughs] and I said, Okay, forget it. And that's why I showed first at Boston University, which, uh, also—gave me the whole gallery. And I showed drawings and prints all having to do with the human head.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, and the general reception was pretty good. I mean it was gratifying. [00:04:00] In New York, the same show got relatively little attention. For one thing, there happened to be, uh, a newspaper strike at the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: [Laughs.] Uh, I don't know if the newspapers were striking or the people who deliver the newspapers. So, I think maybe that was it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: So, we got very little attention except for people who have to come into the gallery, but I did sell some stuff, uh, which I was very happy to do. And, uh, I still have quite a few of those heads lying around in the studio, I might add.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you went—so, it wasn't just inscribing or describing at this volume, was it? But I mean, you—you—the different media you used, the different effects of—and were very, uh, wide-ranging. They're ones who looked almost like Constructivist work of the '20s and the others and—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —all.

HAROLD TOVISH: —you know, I must tell you in all candor that I really had no preconceived idea of what I would be doing with this whole thing. It—it really would not be off to describe these things as improvisations. I mean I would start connecting the points and then suddenly, I began to see a way to resolve the whole thing. And the beauty of the whole business is that because these are de—you're dealing with measurements, you can find you have a certain, uh, discipline built into the problem.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I would just simply let my mind take me where it will, uh, you know? I wasn't trying to be Cubistic in one and surreal in other, or any of that stuff.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: It's just the way it turned out. Now, people can look at it and say, Oh, well, this is being influenced by Cubism, it doesn't bother me at all. It had nothing to do with Cubism, but that—if that's what they see, let them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: It doesn't bother me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, it was just [00:06:00] an interesting thing to—to see that potentially, you could spend your whole life doing this because the—the permutations are—are endless, you know? There was something like

82 points, you know? And I don't know what the mathematics are—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: —in 82 points, what you could do to, uh—the various ways you could connect them. I'm sure it's enormous.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: No, I enjoyed doing that. That was a project that I really quite enjoyed. [Sniffs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Is this something you would work in? Uh, when you—you were teaching, did you have a good deal of time for your own work? I mean you were carrying a full load—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —while you were in Boston University, were you?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, yeah. But the—the fact of the matter is that after I'd been teaching for so many years—I mean, after all, I started in 1947, and I'd been on and off teaching at various places, uh, since that day. So, I was pretty well disciplined. When I was in school, I was in school, but once I got out of school, I was on my own. I tried very, very hard not to allow, uh, school matters to, uh, interfere with me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Once I was out of BU, I was out of it. I don't know that that made me particularly beloved by the staff, but that's it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, and in that way, even with a full load, I was able to, uh, produce a body of work. You—you also have to understand, Bob, that I showed really very infrequently. My record, you look at it, you—you wonder how the hell—what kind of career is this, because my average one-person show [00:08:00] was about every five to six years, in some cases even more. Uh, I don't know particularly why it turned out that way, but I think I had developed a pattern of work, which required me to take a lot of time. And, you know, so long as I was earning a living as a teacher, the compulsion to turn out huge quantities of work, uh, in order to possibly earn some money was never there. In a way, teaching for whatever deficiencies, uh, that induces, you know, whatever problems—there are a lot of problems when you're, uh, teaching in a—in any university—it did provide a certain anchor in terms of not worrying too much about money. However, by showing as infrequently as I did, my reputation, I suppose, reached a certain level and stayed there. Or maybe, well, it sank a little bit, I don't know. The point being in—in our society, as I'm sure you know, you—you have to be constantly thrusting yourself in front of the public in order to maintain a presence on the scene. And, uh, I don't doubt for a minute that my own career suffered to some extent by the fact that I really didn't do a hell of a lot about pushing my name forward at every opportunity. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you think it would have made a difference had you, uh, gone to New York and—

HAROLD TOVISH: I doubt it very much. I really do. I doubt it very much. Even when I took a year off from, uh, teaching or I got a—some kind of grant, and I would get a year off or maybe even two at one time, I produced about the same rate.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: [00:10:00] I have never felt—or I—I'll put it this way. It has always seemed to me that simply doing sculpture like some kind of instinctive act, like—like an animal, you know, making a sculpture—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —has never been of any interest to me. I have had—I've got to have some image in my head that is so interesting to me that I have to do it. And since these images don't crop up every single day, uh, there can be periods where I'm not doing anything except drawing. In the intervals, I'm always drawing. To me, that was the basis of everything. But, uh, I mean there were periods I remember where I—I, well, I think there was one period of two and a half to three years where I did nothing but draw, no sculpture whatever.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is drawing, uh, has a life of its own for you?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or would you look back as if—

HAROLD TOVISH: It's—it's sort of a catalyst. Uh, whenever I fell into some kind of barren periods—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —I could sit down and draw. It didn't matter what I did, you know, I could draw anything. And very often, I would do self-portraits because being cheap, I didn't have to hire models and, uh, I was much more patient. [They laugh.] And so, I—so, I can do lots and lots of drawings of self-portraits. And very often, those things—the drawings that you would make, you—you would do this way, then you would do that way, then you would do it another way. And then suddenly, an image begins to gel in your head, and you begin to see possibilities. And that's when I can move into sculpture. Yeah. A peculiar process, I absolutely cannot explain it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it's been with you [00:12:00] going back to the—into the '40s here, isn't it?

HAROLD TOVISH: From the very beginning, there were two—two phases in—in the way I went about my business. One, of course, is working directly from nature. You know, the model stands there, you make a—a nude figure study, or you do a portrait of something. But looking over what I've done in my career, it's obvious that the imagination has played a major role in my work. There's no question about that. And, uh, you know, an idea will just pop into my head from God knows what source. And I say, Oh, boy, that's terrific, and I—you know, then I can go ahead and do it. And then there were periods where those ideas are not popping into my head, and that's when I draw or do something like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But you're not anxious or anything during those periods?

HAROLD TOVISH: No. I never—I never pushed myself, uh, to the point where you could describe it as being anxious. You know, I've done only what I felt was interesting to do for me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And it's worked out for me. I mean, you know, uh, I can't imagine me doing it, working any other way, I really can't.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Um, at the time, the—the Boston Public Library showed your drawings and prints in 1983. Uh, you're an old friend, I guess, of Barbara Swan, you know, Alan Fink's wife—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —commented in this review I saw, uh, that, you remained steadfast to your private rhythms and your own develop—of your own development. And, uh, there was a consistency there, a—there's not a, uh, being moved one way or another by the times particularly, except sometimes social concerns I think. But [00:14:00] the drawings in this particular show, I think, were almost entirely self-portraits, the kind you just spoke of?

HAROLD TOVISH: No, actually that's not quite true.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were mixed, huh?

HAROLD TOVISH: They were mixed. Uh, when—when you use the word self-portrait, when you say self-portrait, that's a very deliberate process, doing a self-portrait. If you take the general configuration from that self-portrait and do something entirely different with it, it's no longer a self-portrait. And in that particular exhibition, uh, I did something not unsimilar to what I later did with the heads. And it was all those variations on the head that propelled me into this project with the—those 15 heads. Uh, at the time, I've remarked somewhere else that I had no idea how the heck I was gonna get sculpture out of these things. They looked so damn two-dimensional. But one day, I suddenly realized, My God, that's the way they do it, and I—I went ahead and did it. It was a lot of fun. I enjoyed doing them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The uh, there's a collection of your drawings and prints at the public library here, isn't there?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that's it's—it was very deliberate on his—on the part of the curator Sinclair Hitchings, I think.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, Sinclair, of course, has been a kind of cultural hero around here for a lot of us. Because I'm sorry to say that most of the art institutions have not been terribly encouraging to the—to uh, area artists. And Sinclair has been really wonderful. He's accessible to people. Uh, he's very interested in what people are doing. [00:16:00] Uh, and when he decides that you do work of some consequences, he'll keep buying it. And for many young artists around here, that must have been a godsend, you know? I mean he's—he's—I think he's an important figure here. I don't know what the scene would be like without—without him—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —to tell you the truth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Other institutions in that—as you've been in Boston now, going on 40 years, I guess, uh—by and large, haven't stepped up to the plate in terms of artists of this area, have they?

HAROLD TOVISH: No. I'm trying to think. When Perry Rathbone was running the MFA, there was some talk of creating a Boston Gallery in the museum, which would be devoted—I don't know it would be called Boston museum—but it would be devoted to showing the work of artists in this part of the world. Never came to anything. Uh, and I think the museum—you could make a case for it, I suppose. The museum felt that its posi—its function was to bring the best art from everywhere into the museum. And perhaps, they decided they didn't want to uh, spend any of their funds on something as temporal as showing local artists when they could get some hotshot from New York.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And use that money, uh, perhaps in their opinion, more intelligently.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But—but the result was that the local scene, in general, has not had a great deal of vitality, and my—my impression has always been that. Uh, the—the ICA has been [00:18:00] beleaguered with money problems, and changing staffs, and so on and so forth. They used to have the *Boston Now* show. It doesn't exist anymore, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, c'est la vie.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And you're at the Boston Visual Artists Union with which you are involved—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —I guess practically from the beginning.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It could never reach that institutional one?

HAROLD TOVISH: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Damn.

HAROLD TOVISH: In fact, in order to get people's work shown, we created our own gallery, uh, in that very, quite elegant gallery down opposite city hall. I forget the, uh, the number of the building we were in. But we had many shows there, and they were, you know, quite handsome-looking exhibitions. We also had, uh, mammoth shows at the BCA, Boston Center for the Arts.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Which was a big circular building, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Big, tall.

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, all of those exhibitions created a certain spirit at the time. But we couldn't keep it up. We just couldn't keep it up. Uh, in order to do that show, somebody had to, you know, give up an enormous amount of time to organize things and so on. It was, uh—it was asking a lot of an artist to spend a lot of time. You know, putting that show up would take days and days.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm, far more than uh, maybe they want to do. Um, is it to fair to say that drawing for you

is an exploration or—?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And so is sculpture, isn't it?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, both. Both really are a kind of exploration perhaps, but the drawings generally, I would say, uh, are more specifically so. It's a kind of a way of fumbling towards something, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. [00:20:00]

HAROLD TOVISH: Moving towards something without really knowing exactly what it is you're moving towards. Uh, I would say that the sculpture usually—well, let me give you an example. There was a piece I did called *In Memoriam,* you know, the piece with the balls piled up like a—like bombs in the Civil War—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —uh, a memorial kind of thing?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

HAROLD TOVISH: And then there's these splits with little pieces of the human head inside. That literally popped into my head one morning. It was almost mystical. I woke up and pulled the blanket off, turned. As soon as my foot, my feet touched the ground, that image popped into my head.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Gee.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I said, "Marianna, what an idea I just got!" And I described it to her, and she said, "It—it sounds interesting." [They laugh.] And so, the next three, or four, or five months, I was doing nothing but getting those heads in the cannonballs. But that's fairly typical of the way things have worked for me. I—I don't think it's unique with—with me, but it's—it's interesting, it's mystical. I—I absolutely cannot figure out why artists will—will conceive of certain images and others don't conceive of the same images, you know? We're all living on the same planet. We're all more or less experiencing the same things. And then I come up with something, and someone else comes up with something altogether different. It's kind of strange, it really is. You wouldn't think we were sharing the same culture. And that's odd business.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. And culture is pretty well shared, [00:22:00] is it? I mean in many elements.

HAROLD TOVISH: Whether you like it or not you're drowning in the culture whatever it is.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. There's some quick something Michael Mazur wrote on these catalogues. That you'd gone to a mediocre movie with him, and you had come out and you quipped that, uh, you're glad to be alive in the decline of western civilization or something.

HAROLD TOVISH: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's on the upturn or not [ph].

HAROLD TOVISH: [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: One's immersed in it.

HAROLD TOVISH: No, I don't know. I was just being a wise guy, that's all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah? [Laughs.] Being a wise guy, I mean you do have a wonderful sense of humor. Is that, uh, something that stuck with you for—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Is it—it's a way of survival.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

HAROLD TOVISH: In our society, you better have a sense of humor. It helps.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Don't you think?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yeah, yeah. When you had your, uh, retrospective in '88 at the Addison, this, uh—I

gather you'd been approached by them to teach even 20, 30 years before that, you and Marianna?

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you had other involved—engagements, I think.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that would have been teaching, you know, teenagers.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Well, I—I think as I'm trying, uh, to recall exactly what was going on with us at that time. We had just come back from, uh, Italy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, we had to get settled, and Perry Rathbone offered us this position at Andover.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you mean, um, Bartlett Hayes?

HAROLD TOVISH: I'm sorry.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I mean Bart Hayes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You—yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You're quite right, Bart Hayes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

HAROLD TOVISH: I get these, uh, museum directors confused. They're all the same, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs]

HAROLD TOVISH: Anyway, well we had—we had three kids, and Marianna couldn't possibly be teaching. She had to look after the little one especially. [00:24:00] And I was, uh—so, I took the job here. We did not want to go to Andover.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: It—it would have been too isolated for us. And we were going to have to be—what do they called it—dormitory parents or something like that? I mean, God help us. I mean, I said, "Marianna, don't even consider it."

ROBERT F. BROWN: It ain't easy. You had three at home. [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right. I mean, you know, the idea, oh God, no. Um, but at that point, Bart Hayes, apparently, put the notion of hiring, uh, both of us at the Museum School. It was the same thing, Marianna couldn't do that, so I took the job and I taught there for quite a few years. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And in that retrospective, so you—you did have a relation of sorts with Andover, I mean—

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and then years later—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —Chris Cook, had you known him a bit? He was an artist, but he was [cross talk].

HAROLD TOVISH: No, I—I did not know Chris Cook. Uh, in fact, I didn't know anybody up there except Bart Hayes. But what happened one day—I'm trying to reconstruct it. I—I can't. He called up and asked if he come—could come visit with—with us. And I had seen some of his work, and I really admired him. He's a pretty damn good painter, that guy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, he turns up and uh, we're chatting in a kind of idle way back and forth. At the time, he was more or less, uh, running the school up there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, the gallery, the museum, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: The museum.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And teaching.

HAROLD TOVISH: And teaching at the school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And suddenly, he—he turns to me and says, "Would you like to have a retrospective?"

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And I'll never forget, I just looked at him. I said, "What?" [00:26:00] He said, "Well, uh, we'd like to have a retrospective of your work." I said, "I didn't even know you knew my work." He says, "Yeah, I've been watching you over the years. I've seen quite a bit of it. I'd like to, uh, have a show of it." So, I—I remember saying, "Well, let me—let me mull it over a little bit." And, of course, the next day, Marianna said, "What are you, crazy? Of course, have the show." [Laughs.] And she pointed out in her wonderfully sensible way that out of it would come a catalogue. And long after the show is a kind of dim memory, that catalogue is—is still there and she's quite right. So, I agreed, and we had the show.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. That's where, uh, Michael Mazer wrote an appreciation and—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —then Al Lerner and I guess you've known according to his tribute to you.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. We—we met in Florence.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Florence.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Yeah. Interesting guy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Oh, yeah. He said that you, uh, you wouldn't let people see your work. You were—you took him around to see other peoples' work, but—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, at the time, I—I wasn't in any sense being, uh, you know, secretive or anything like that. I just didn't have work ready for anybody to really look at.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I wasn't going to, for example, uh, do that unless—you know, the idea is you wanna show people your work, you wanna show them, uh, the best. You don't wanna show them stuff you're not gonna keep, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And he had also mentioned—he was trying to analyze the breadth of your career, uh, and thought that the earlier work was infused with modern influences, uh, rather than the classical masters that you really loved. I think he's referring there maybe to the fact that when in Florence, you were—you went to the Bargello all the time, and you particularly loved Donatello, [00:28:00] and so. But in fact, when he did see your earlier work, he felt it was more modernist than classical.

HAROLD TOVISH: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You know, I must tell you—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you do that sort of thing or—?

HAROLD TOVISH: I must tell you in all candor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: You know, we—it—it's kind of a part of our society and the way we think. We've got to categorize. We absolutely have got to categorize. Otherwise, chaos, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: So as a young artist, no doubt, I was influenced by things that were visible here and there. And if the thing interested me, I might do something that suggested that I had seen that kind of thing. But the notion of, let's say—I mean, one of the things I've always found absolutely weird to me is artists who had been doing figurative work who suddenly decide that figurative work is finished, and they do abstraction after that. And I've never been able to understand, how could you abandon one way of seeing the world for a completely different way of seeing the world? Either that takes an immense amount of, uh, courage, or it takes a kind of feeling that you don't want to become irrelevant. And if it were—especially for example, when—when Abstract Expressionism took hold in the late '40s and early '50s, lots of artists who have been doing figurative work, sculptors—I can think of names—suddenly were doing abstractions. And—and I—I find that very hard to understand how they could do that. You know, I could understand why you might fiddle around with stuff in your studio, but I mean just to abandon everything you'd been doing before, or being able to say, It's [00:30:00] all the same?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which some did, huh?

HAROLD TOVISH: Which some did, and I absolutely disagree with that. It is not the same. When you're doing figurative work, you are making connections to the world outside of yourself. When you're doing abstractions, the only world that you're looking outside of yourself is other abstractions. [Inaudible.] And I just can't—I just can't conceive of the thing. It doesn't make any sense to me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: For that reason, I suppose I'm some kind of a reactionary type. You know, I, uh, I've always felt that the figurative imagery offered the best possibilities for getting work that was rich, rich in associations and possible meaning. And I have never felt that aesthetics alone is sufficient to make a work of art of real consequence. Now, there are many who will say he's an—he's an idiot. Of course, that's not true. Look at Mondrian. Well, go ahead, look at Mondrian, it's okay with me. But it's just that I cannot imagine that abstractions count as much in terms of human experience, shared human experience, as figurative imagery of a—of a high quality. You know, I think, let's say, Goya.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Can you imagine Goya—an abstract artist [laughs] giving it all up? No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you ever talk to such as had done that? You must have now and then or at least—

HAROLD TOVISH: Talked to people who had done that?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Who had made this complete break of this.

HAROLD TOVISH: I'm trying to think of anybody I personally knew who did that and I really don't. I knew other [00:32:00] sculptors, Seymour Lipton being one, a guy named, uh, Herbert Ferber.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Herbert Ferber.

HAROLD TOVISH: Um, Gozal [ph], these were all people in the sculptor's guild. You know, they were older than I.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I used to see their work when I was a kid.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And then they, uh, abandoned all of that. In fact, this guy Lipton came up to Skowhegan when I was teaching, I think, in 19—there it was at the—in 1978? Well, it doesn't matter. And I remember him saying, "Never underestimate the importance of novelty."

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: You know, and he—gave a great emphasis. And by that, it was clear to me that what he, obviously, felt was that the dynamics of modern life, or Modernism, or whatever you wanna attribute the whole business to, was such that the new—you know, uh, Rosenberg's, *The Tradition of the New*?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Was the most important thing in art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I've never been particularly attracted to that idea. [Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, uh, the interest in being novel or in being different has never really arisen with you, has it?

HAROLD TOVISH: If anything I have done comes out looking different—whatever the heck that would mean—it was not as a result of, uh, seeking the novel, God knows, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Like for example, when you got into your kinetic work [00:34:00] in the '60s, people might very well have said, hey.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, in fact, some people did say that. But I—you know, I—I really as—I don't know exactly when, but at some point in my life, you know, since I—I surrendered to my imagination, I wasn't gonna be intimidated by it. B ecause there was a period when I was intimidated. You know, ideas would begin to come to me. I said, What the hell is this? So, I mean I know—you know, I was quite a bit younger when this happened. I had been working in rather traditional ways, being a very good student and—and wanting to, uh, show my great respect for Donatello, and Rodin, and, you know, the great artists of the past by trying to do work that came out of that tradition. But then when ideas began to come into my head which seemed to depart, it scared the hell out of me. But in the end, I—I said, Oh well, what the hell, you know? And I went ahead and did them. And from then on, I said, whatever it is, if an idea really grabs me, I'm going to do it and damn the consequences. And that's the way it's been ever since.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But, uh, social concerns, I mean that certainly came into your sculpture again in the '80s.

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And perhaps now?

HAROLD TOVISH: Less so now than back then. Less so now than back then. Well, you know, I've been through, uh, WWII, right?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, I had come back, gotten married, had kids, teaching and so on. And when things start to fall apart, [00:36:00] uh, during the Vietnam War for example, which went on and on and on. And after all, I had a son who was of draft age, and it was so obvious to me that the Vietnam War was a lunatic venture on the part of the government. And I was very active at that period in anti-Vietnam, uh, activity. Well, it took a couple of years out of my life, that whole business, you know? But it had to be done. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this crept into your work in the '80s again?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, but you know, undoubtedly what was—what was going on was what went on all the other times earlier. Was that information from, uh, TV, from reading, from wherever began to get absorbed into my psyche. And these translated into images. See, I was not doing—I didn't do this or that in order to show my pro—you know, protest against the war. I really didn't do that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, the *In Memoriam* thing came out of anxiety about, uh, the possibility of nuclear war. You know, at the time, there were all kinds of—remember the Cuban business, all of that?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, we were—we were really taking them very seriously. You know, the whole damn thing could end. And that's—all of those tensions and—and possibilities were stewing in my head, and it would come out as an image. [00:38:00] You know, and I would do that. And later on, some of the other images I did of the people, uh, trussed up in a cell, the piece called *Witness*, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Came out of having been exposed to reading, uh, about people who are being tormented because of some political reason. And I remember reading about the—what was it—the French? I forget which, uh, king it was at the *oubliette,* you remember that? They put people down in a cell and forget them, the oubliette.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: That had become quite common in our time. And the image of somebody lying in a cell trussed up is perfect for the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Stuff like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. You're, uh, if I may use the term, your craft or your mastery of the—of your medium, uh, carries on. Some people seem to me, uh, like Leon Golub, and I think he'd been mentioned in the breath adjacent to—well same as yours—with you. Much more overt or it became so, in the '70s and '80s and his, uh, great upset with torture, the hammering of—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. His work—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —through the countries and—

HAROLD TOVISH: —very—very blatant, very upfront. I rather admired his work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And, always—I—I knew him slightly, him and his wife Nancy Spero and we were in Florence at the same time. But we didn't have, uh, enough spare time to pursue a—a real friendship. And, uh, also, I don't know that we would have ever become really good friends. [00:40:00] [Laughs.] Probably personality problems would have arisen. They were, uh, an interesting couple, those two.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But, uh, his work comes out overtly political. My work, I think, comes out obliquely political.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: At least that's what I think. I don't know. Some others might object to that and say, No, you're pretty dammed overt. But I don't think so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you don't do it. Say when you're absorbed, have absorbed social concerns or are agonized by them, you don't programmatic—programmatically go out there to—

HAROLD TOVISH: Never. I've never, never done that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —express?

HAROLD TOVISH: Never done that. Because I think that if you drum up something, there's gonna be, uh, some basic fallacy about it, something false in it. I mean look, how many things are there in modern life that one can give complete loyalty to and have complete faith in? If you look at the political world we live in, the answer would have to be, For god's sakes, forget about the political world because it's just too damned creepy. Uh, you look at the art world and you see chaos, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: The only thing where you can have this undivided feeling of a kind of devotional thing is in your own work. And if you don't have that, I just don't see what the point of it would be, you know? So, I remember reading one time, de Kooning talked about the business [00:42:00] of pursuing art as a kind of religion. I think that's probably a pretty accurate quote, a kind of religion. I agree. I agree. It's the one place where you can be honest, where you're not hiding anything, and where you're giving it your best, you know? And there aren't too many places in life where you can do that. It's true.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. Is this pretty much what you're—as far as you can tell, there's—you're continuing—

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —like that [ph]?

HAROLD TOVISH: I mean for example now, I'm beginning to have ideas which are completely apolitical. And I don't know why that's the case, but that's—that's what's happening. And I might say, Gee, what's going on? I mean the world isn't exactly—hasn't become a sweetie pie that—you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But whatever it is, that's what's happening. It could be the fact that I'm now a rather elderly gent. That the kind of ideas of I'm getting have more to do with—well, less to do with politics and more to do with some cosmic notion about God knows what. I don't know. I haven't tried to think too much about all of that. I just let it happen, you know? Let it happen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. As you continue to absorb, I mean you read a lot, don't you, or do you read the news [cross talk].

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I don't read as much I used to. Although I—you know, I read the papers and I watch the tube, almost any stupid thing. You know, visually, I just look at everything. I think a lot of artists could be destroyed by TV because we're visual types, [00:44:00] you know? You just stare at the damn tube [they laugh] no matter what idiotic thing is on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Okay.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I go to the studio virtually every day.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And that keeps me, more or less, on an even keel.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is that the place where you—all your work—?

HAROLD TOVISH: Pardon me?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is the studio where you do all your work, or do you sometimes do it here?

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, pretty much only in the studio.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's there?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. I might make a few little sketches here but nothing serious. It would be at the studio.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. So, there's a need to be in a special place dedicated to that? [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, yeah. You know, sculpture is a messy business, and it requires a lot of equipment. And drawing, God bless it, you can do anywhere, and I've done it anywhere. But in general, in the studio, I like to work in the studio. It's my little haven, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah [Laughs].

HAROLD TOVISH: In fact, most artists probably feel that way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure. Yeah. Yeah. You've, several times today and other times as well, mentioned Marianna as commenting on your work or saying, Well, try that out, go with that idea.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, you know, we had this curious relationship. I mean, here we were both serious sculptors working side by side for year after year after year. And we had made an agreement that, uh, you wouldn't volunteer comments or criticism on the other's work. You have to be asked. We stuck to that pretty well. And Marianna was a very, very intelligent critic. She could easily have been a—you know, a professional critic, wonderful head on her shoulders. [00:46:00] And occasionally, she—she would have some comment about something I was doing that was, uh, very pertinent, you know, and I would see that. And I hope it worked the other way on occasion. But we had a good working relationship and that—that was great. I—it's wonderful to have somebody you can, uh, talk to all the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: We used to talk about this, that, and discuss artists we admired and others we didn't, and you know, it was—it was just good.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yet, though your studios, you were together, you were able to keep separate, slightly separate spaces, right?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, in the early days when we couldn't afford to have two studios, we used to work in the same studio, and then it was kind of funny. We talked about it. We kept backing into each other, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs]

HAROLD TOVISH: When we were just married, backing into each other was kind of fun [they laugh] since we were crazy about one another. But after a while, it began to be a bit of a nuisance. [They laugh.] So, when the time came, and we could afford it, we decided we would never work in the same, uh, space. And the studio we have up in Porter Road, we divided the studio in half with a wall—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —connected by a little hallway, and that was it. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: How long have you been there, in that studio?

HAROLD TOVISH: We purchased that place in 1978. Although we didn't move into it until '81 or ['8]2, I forgot.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And we've had it ever since.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that's been your essential work spot then for going on quite a few years.

HAROLD TOVISH: For a long time, yeah. Yeah, quite a long time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. You've, uh—[00:48:00] you know, we now have your papers, and I was just looking at various people who have written you. I mean there's fairly interesting names, uh, certainly in the '50s into the '60s, into the '70s. Arnason, H. Harvard Arnason, who was your department head at Minnesota and then he went on to the Guggenheim.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, he was also the head of the Walker Art Center.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Walker Art Center.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Minneapolis, yeah. Comment a bit about him?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, uh, H. Harvard Arnason, it's kind of intimidating that name, isn't it?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Isn't it?

HAROLD TOVISH: H. Harvard Arnason.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: He was actually quite a nice man. Uh, well, he was so helpful to me personally that I've always felt a certain amount of gratitude towards him. I also had a rather peculiar feeling. Well, let me—let me dwell on this a little because it's really quite interesting. The generation in which Marianna and I grew up as artists, had a peculiar, uh, culture, which involved very definite mores, you know? You had nothing to do with critics.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You didn't go around trying to seduce, uh, museum directors or you—you didn't pursue your career on the basis of your contacts with people of consequence. You didn't do that. It was a kind of almost—I don't know how the hell I would put. It would be like we—we were a bunch of, uh, priests who took a vow of silence or something, you know? And for the most part, a lot of artists I know—well, not a lot but quite a few artists I know—grew up with that kind of idea about how you carried on. You didn't push your career [00:50:00] in the way, for example, things have gone recently. You see young artists doing all kinds of things in order to get their—put themselves before the public. And—and for that reason, you know, you stood around waiting first to be noticed. And Arnason was a wonderful guy in this respect that he came to us. We didn't go to him. And in fact, everything that happened to Marianna and to me, in terms of career, happened without our lifting a finger to do it. Now, you know, that's—that's pushing your luck. And we realized now or, uh, that—that we were extremely lucky. That somehow or other, our work was in a place where somebody could see it, and then say, Look, I wanna show this work, and then that would happen. But we didn't wanna have anything to do with critics,

or with museum people, or—or any of that kind of thing. Now, in—in Minnesota, the art community was a fairly, uh, small one. And there was no way you could avoid having contact with people like Arnason, especially since he was my boss—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —at the school. And he and his wife were very affable and very nice to both of us, but it wouldn't—it really didn't weigh heavily on me the contact we had with him. For example, I like Bob Taylor. He's a very nice guy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The Globe, the former Globe—

HAROLD TOVISH: The former Globe art editor, and I think we could have been friends but, uh, I didn't do anything about that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Because it just didn't seem right, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: [00:52:00] I don't think it would have made a damn bit of difference one way or the other, but that's the way—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. So, Arnason, uh, fulfilled a role—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, yes. Well, Arnason was a great admirer and, you know, who—who can resist great admirers? He—I'm sure he helped me. You know, he gave me a one-man show at the museum. Uh, he tried very hard to hold on to the job when Marianna and I left for Italy. He wanted us to come back, but apparently, the legislature was cutting down and my position disappeared.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, and when he got to the Guggenheim, I think he may have had some role in my having a show there. Although, it was Tom Messer who, uh, offered me that exhibition at the Guggenheim.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And he was the director at that time, right?

HAROLD TOVISH: I don't know what. I'm trying to remember—Harvey was—he was still connected with the museum.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But I—I don't know what position.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, I think they were both there at that time. Um, had Messer come around to look at your work? Did he approach—?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, remember that Messer, uh, part of his career was here in Boston. He was running the ICA for some years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's right. He overlapped here.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes. That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He came here, and he was—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —still with the ICA.

HAROLD TOVISH: And he had seen a fair amount of my work over the years when he was running the ICA. And he—he popped that question to me one time, I almost fainted. What happened? We went up to some school. There was some kind of panel discussions, and I and Marianna were invited there, and Tom Messer was there. And after one of the discussions, he came up to me. He says, uh, "Harold, how would you like to show at the Guggenheim?" My God. [00:54:00] [Laughs.] I said, "What?" He says, "Yeah." "Are you sure?" [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh.

HAROLD TOVISH: [Laughs.] You see what I mean?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: That's the way it happened.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, that's wonderful. Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Lucky, very lucky.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that a—that was a major challenge then? An opportunity?

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, that was a big, big challenge. But I had a body of work and I was ready to show, so you know, I went ahead and did it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you, uh, adjust to that space, that ramp was [cross talk]—

HAROLD TOVISH: I hated that space. I hated it. I think Frank Lloyd Wright hated art. [They laugh.] I think he thought architecture was the only art that should exist. All the rest should disappear. Well, you know, I'm being facetious. But to show a sculpture on those slanting surfaces, there was no escape from it. I used to feel so sorry for the people who had to, uh, put on exhibitions there, you know? Because, you know, they had to cut the pestles in such a way it wouldn't tip over.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

HAROLD TOVISH: [They laugh.] And, you know, when you walked and looked at—at works of art, you'd have those ramps that were always seen at an angle. And the works were seen quite differently.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And you can get headache looking at that. [Laughs.] And when I—I helped install my own exhibition, and I just sat there. I remember saying to Tom, "God, you people must go absolutely insane." He said, "It ain't easy." [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I also mentioned the—well, there's some letters to you from Philip Guston. Was he at one point or another you—

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —were fairly close to or knew a bit?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Well, you know, Guston, uh, [00:56:00] I had known Guston's work when I was a young man.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: He was doing work—

[END OF SIDE A_01.]

This is cassette two of four, Side A2.

HAROLD TOVISH: Helped to install my own exhibition, and I just sat there. I remember saying to Tom, "God, you people must go absolutely insane." He said, "It ain't easy." [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You also mentioned the—well, there's some letters to you from Philip Guston. Was he at one point or another you—

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —were fairly close to or knew a bit?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Well, you know, Guston, uh, I had known Guston's work when I was a young man.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: He was doing work—you know, it had a kind of political, a quasi-political quality about it. Because at that time, you know, just about every artist was, you know, at WPA. He was a very good draftsman.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And I remember his work as being quite elegant, beautiful really, even though the subject matter might be—might be political in some way. Oh, and he did, uh, things of children, I remember with the funny little hats on. And—and when he turned up here, he had gone through that phase of what they called Lyrical Abstraction, of which he was, uh, I think the leading exponent. And by the time he came to BU, he had undergone this incredible change where he just dropped all of that. And now was going and doing, uh, these wild images of Ku Klux Klan guys where there's a gauze of people sitting in an empty room with just a bulb over their heads, I mean, really, the depressing imagery. And I remember when he had his show at BU, I was really overwhelmed by it. I—I thought that this guy had taken on something [00:02:00] of such depressing nature. And that he had the—the stamina, the psychological stamina to go ahead and produce these images, which were full of despair, terrible despair in them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And what a way to look and to see the world that way, wow. So, I wrote him a letter in which I told him how deeply impressed I was. And since the general reception to this new phase of—of his career had been really very bad, negative—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: I remember my favorite critic Hilton Kramer—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Who had given you your—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. He gave me the works—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Cross talk.]

HAROLD TOVISH: —but, boy, he really worked over, uh, Guston. I remember the headline of his review, "Mandarin"—something like this, "Mandarin becomes a Stumblebum."[Laughs.] He had gone from this elegant lyrical abstraction to these cartoonesque, crude, brutal images.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, in general, the reception was poor. And it—when his work was shown at BU, uh, people were courteous to him, but he wanted responses, and nobody was responding to him. So, my letter to him apparently meant a great deal to him. We became fairly good friends, but I wouldn't say we became very close friends.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: We were both too busy to be close friends. But I liked him a lot. It took a lot of guts to do what he did, a lot of guts. He won in the end, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: That's what's great. He won in the end.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yeah. Yeah. And his sort of, uh, what you would say, cartoon-like imagery sort of—it didn't sweep the field, but it certainly infused the work of a lot of much younger people.

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, yes. Yes. [00:04:00] He had a great influence among lots of younger artists. But, uh, he was unique, one of a kind. The young artists who were influenced by him, they're never—at least none that I've seen, you know, attained anything close to the intensity of his work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Still he was a healthy influence, I think. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You, uh, there were also letters from, I think, the '60s and '70s, maybe later from Doris Lessing. How would you—?

HAROLD TOVISH: Now, that was charming that—that whole—

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you get to know her?

HAROLD TOVISH: —Doris Lessing thing is really amusing. Uh, when Marianna, and I, and our—and our daughter,

young daughter Nina went to Hawaii where I was a visiting professor, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: For one year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The late '60s or so.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Sixty-nine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I read a book of hers. It came into my hand called—what the hell was it called? Uh, *The Four-Gated City*, something like that. I was very impressed by it. So, I did something I rarely ever do. I wrote her a fan letter, and I said in the letter, I said, uh, "My wife and I are gonna be coming home through Asia, and we're gonna end up in England, and from there, we will go back to Boston." And I said, "Would it be possible to—to say hello?" To my absolute astonishment, we get a letter back about two weeks later in which she says, "Sure, come by." [They laugh.] And we turned up—when we got to London, we turned up at her place, and we were both really quite shocked when we walked in there. She said, "Well, you haven't eaten lunch, have you?" And I said, "Oh, no." She says, "Well, [00:06:00] sit down. We're gonna have lunch." And she had cooked a leg of lamb for us.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow.

HAROLD TOVISH: [Laughs.] I said to her, "You don't who we were. We might have been the most boring characters you ever met in your life." I said, "Why did you do this?" I said, you know, "We're glad you did, but weren't you taking some kind of a chance, you know?" She said, "Well, you know, I've had requests like this for, and I said—one day, I said to myself, Why don't I just say yes once in a while?" [Laughs.] And we kept up a correspondence for some years, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, she was very interested going on—on what was going on in the States with the Vietnam War, and she was always, uh, quite a political figure. I think at one time, she belonged to the communist party in South A—

[END OF SIDE A2.]

This is two of four, Side B.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, you hit it off right away?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. We—we hit it off. But, you know, eventually what happened? We—we just drifted apart. There wasn't a sufficient amount of personal contact, uh, to keep the relationship alive. Although we—we, uh, wrote to each other maybe 10 times at the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. You did—you have said earlier, you did—you don't care particularly to travel, and your travels, in fact, have been reasonably infrequent and, you know?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —extended. You go for extended stays to places.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, and Marianna loved to travel.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah?

HAROLD TOVISH: When she was a kid, her parents took her on trips around the world, she and her brothers. And uh, it was enormously influential in terms of her career because she saw Greek art at—in Greece.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow.

HAROLD TOVISH: And she saw Cambodian art in Cambodia. You know? And, uh, it's just terrific for a little 12-year-old girl. And mine came mostly from museums and from art books, you know, the way any New York kid,

and we had great museums. But traveling, for me, was always an iffy proposition. I—I—first of all, I would get sick at the drop of a hat.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And just the change of water would wreck me. And, uh, when we went to Hawaii, one of the ways I was able to persuade Marianna to give up working in her studio, I said to her, "Marianna, I'll tell you what—what I'll do. I thought going to Hawaii would be fun. We'll eat out every other night, and we'll go back through Asia." And I said—she said, "Hmm." [They laugh.] [00:02:00] And she said, "Okay," and so we went there. But that trip to Asia, which was wonderful, was also, uh, devastating for me because I left Hawaii in the best physical condition I had been since I was in the Army, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: We got back to Boston, I had to practically crawl up the stairs to go to bed. I'd lost weight. I was a wreck.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: So, uh, and I hated the airports. I—I just got so sick of going to airports, of sitting around.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And going through customs. And Marianna loved it. It was the only source of conflict between us.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: She really would like to have done much more travel. We never went to Mexico. She wanted very much to see the great Mayan ruins, and, you know, Aztec, and that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I would love to have done it too. I said, "Marianna, if we go to Mexico, I'm gonna come home in a box, and you'll be sorry." [They laugh.] So, we never did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You got to go through Asia at the time of the Vietnam War, then? Wasn't it around that time?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes. The—the war in Vietnam was going on. This was 1969, 1970. We had wanted desperately to go to Cambodia, but we couldn't go because the war was raging there. But we did go to Bali, and Java, and India, and Thailand. We saw it, we saw it and Japan. We saw an awful lot of stuff. We went to Tehran, you know, and Cairo.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, did these things affect you? They must have a great deal.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I mean—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or were you feeling so poorly? [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: You can't—you cannot see some of the great, great, great art without being affected in some way, yeah. Whether it turned up in my work, I don't know. I don't see any obvious connection, but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —it was [00:04:00] wonderful. I can't imagine, I mean, doing that with the—imagine people going through all those places and never looking at the art. I can't imagine it. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Must happen, I know—

[END OF SIDE B.]

This is cassette three of four, Side A1.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is April 7, 1998, at his studio, 46 Porter Road, Cambridge, MA. Robert Brown, the interviewer. [Audio break.] We're here at your studio in, uh, Cambridge, and I thought maybe we could talk first

about, uh, you've expressed to me a—the great importance of living and working, uh, with Marianna Pineda. Uh, maybe you can talk a bit about that. Was it, uh—in terms of the working, your work, and her work, was there a cooperative arrangement? Was it, uh, very—did you get to be quite diplomatic? Did you have a clear understanding from the beginning about how that would work out?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, early on we—in fact, I think we've mentioned it earlier in one of the tapes. Uh, we—we made a—a kind of condition between us whereby no criticism unless asked for.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And one time, I ventured a criticism without first asking permission. Uh, Marianna let me have it, so to speak. [They laugh.] And I never repeated that sin. And in that way, we, uh—we had a good working relationship. Because when—when criticism was asked for, whatever she would say about something I had done, I took very seriously because she has a very good eye, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And apparently, uh, that was pretty mutual, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: I don't recall ever saying anything to her about anything she did that would have radically affected her situation and vice versa. So, [00:02:00] we worked that out early on, you see?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, the other thing is we didn't go in much for, uh, patting each other on the back a lot. You know, I didn't say to Marianna, You've made a towering masterpiece, and she didn't say the kind of thing to me. In short, we both—I think—I can only speak for myself but I'm pretty sure we shared this sentiment—the point was that we, uh, respected one another. From before, you know, along—before we were married I—I knew her capabilities. And she knew mine, and so, therefore, it was not to be something to marvel at if you did something reasonably decent, you see?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: So, we didn't go in much for that. Uh, well, with the exception, let's say, if she won some kind of an award and, you know, I would congratulate her, which she would do the same. Kind of normal stuff when you think about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: That's about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, when she, uh, lit into you, when that one time you, uh, volunteered a critique without her asking, what were her grounds for saying, "Don't you do that again?"

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, uh, first of all, I was breaking a rule that we had determined already.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I mean, you know, and I did it without thinking, obviously. And she could be pretty damn severe, Marianna, when she got irritated.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Ordinarily, she was the most, uh, sweet-natured and, uh, accommodating woman, almost too accommodating. But when it came to that, uh, [laughs] "It is not ready to be looked at," she'd say, punctuating each word very carefully. [They laugh.] Oh, she was something, Marianna.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well now when, for example, you moved toward trying, uh, working with kinetics, uh, [00:04:00] in the '60s, it—as you would make a major move, I think you've—you've said earlier, some time you began maybe subconsciously, and it sort of coalesced towards something—but nevertheless, was there a point where you turned and said, "Marianna, would you, uh—what do you think," that sort of thing, or—?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I—I did ask for her criticism very often. Uh, in fact, you know, as I sit here, I'm trying hard to remember her ever looking at a new piece I had done and saying, Red that is terrific. We didn't go in much for that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, at one point in a tape that I have heard of hers, which I guess you made—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, no, no, she wrote this in one of her journals in which she says, "Red thinks that the *Defendant* is one of the best things I've ever done." So I obviously must have volunteered that piece of information with her, I guess. Where the heck is the *Defendant*? I don't see—I don't see the *Defendant.*

ROBERT F. BROWN: And so that did, uh, mean something to her, you know?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I mean, you know, who can resist praise even coming from your husband or wife? [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. But you would be—uh, you would frequently ask for criticism, but of what [inaudible] —

HAROLD TOVISH: No, I wouldn't say frequently. We didn't—we didn't do that frequently, you know? Most of the times, Marianna asked me to do the heavy lifting, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: You, meaning what?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, to pick up a piece of sculpture that was too heavy for her or move something—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

HAROLD TOVISH: —you know, that she couldn't do it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: That sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. Well you also, uh, told me that you wanted to talk about the fact that, uh, you—there were some competition between you?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, competition is not quite the word to use in our case. [00:06:00] Uh, it might be described as competition, uh, but I would never—I never thought of it as competition. Uh, envy might be more accurate, or I'll give you an example. When—when we were in Italy, Marianna got a letter from Hy Swetzoff. You know, who Hy Swetzoff is?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, a dealer in Boston.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Asking her if she'd be willing to join the gallery, and, of course, she agreed. And what had happened was he had gone to a conference in Minneapolis of museum directors. I guess dealers do that, I guess, you know, to make contact with them. Whatever the case, he had seen a show of Marianna's. It was a one-man show of hers at Walker Art Center, and was very impressed. And as a result, that call came—I mean that letter came, and she agreed, and we were in Italy for three years, you understand?

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's about the '50s, right?

HAROLD TOVISH: And meanwhile—that's right. It was from '54 to '50—no, '53 to '57, or something. Well, anyway, we were there for three, four years, and we were both producing work rather well. And her work was going to the gallery, and—and I was sending her work everywhere, I mean, you know, west coast, Chicago, all over the place. And, indeed, during the course of those three years, she had won, uh, money prizes, and had had things purchased by collectors and museums. And her career was burgeoning, and mine was in an absolute dead stop. Now, envy would be much more [00:08:00] a way to describe it than to say, uh, you know, we were in competition with one another, and I was losing the competition. [Laughs.] You see what I mean?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, but I never—I mean, I—I'm at least happy to say that I never expressed that envy in any way, which would have, uh, offended Marianna. And it was not the kind of envy that, uh, ate at my gut or anything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: It was just a sense that, God, where the heck am I going? What's gonna happen with all this?

You know, I mean most artists go through this kind of thing. It doesn't have to be their wife. It could be just, you know, an artist, another artist in the neighborhood.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And this relation with, uh, Marianna, was presumably a very important part of your development, the sustaining of your work, you, yourself, and your work?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, how it could not be? I mean the fact of the matter is that, uh, the kind of influence we had on each other would be very, very hard to measure. Um, Marianna's work, the kind of vision she had was very different from mine. And perhaps, it was part of our—our attraction to one another, that we were really very different. Uh, her work had a certain kind of lyricism, and she was more traditional, much more, uh, enamored of, you know, the human figure, mostly the female figure, uh, which she became quite masterful in dealing. [Audio break.] [00:10:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, I, uh, wanna talk a bit now about more—some of your more recent work. And, uh, it's one reasons we came to the studio that we could talk about it—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —a little more here. Um, you know, by the—by the '70s, uh, you're working in, uh, I don't know about New Media, but by the later '70s, certainly you are. And we talked somewhat about that. Uh, we talked about that interesting show you had in 1980 at Boston University of, uh, the unit of measure, like the heads and working with exploring your expressive qualities of every variation.

HAROLD TOVISH: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Um, was—were the later '70s and into the '80s, were they a time of, uh, fermentation or change for you?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. One of the things that had always, uh, intrigued me was optical illusion. Now, optical illusion on a—on a two-dimensional surface is one thing. But optical illusion in three dimensions is really, uh, I think, that much more, uh, intriguing and mystifying, and, uh, that interested me very much. So, you know, that piece I did call the *Tenant* where I had these, uh, masks on a wheel—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: —which you pushed a button, and the wheel would be turning and—and then a strobe was timed so that each head would appear in the window that you could look into. And the heads were made in such a way that there was a sequence where the head changed, things happened to it. [00:12:00] Well, of course, that wasn't really happening. It was an optical illusion, and it was well, very intriguing. Uh, the only flaw in the piece, at least I thought so, was that with the kind of, uh, minds that we have now, so interested in technology and all of that. Uh, one of the first questions people asked about it was, How does it work? [Laughs.] And they all want—they all wanted to open up the back and look at it, and see how it worked like it was a car engine or something. And I was always very irritated by that. Because the point of it was called *Tenant,* and I had this sort of face, which was cut into slits, uh, breaking up and then coming back together, breaking up and coming back. Now, I was trying to suggest something about the kind of tensions that people lived under in our time. And this guy's answering the door, and he's obviously a total wreck. [They laugh.] At least, you know, metaphorically speaking.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Um, I'm not saying nobody got it. But the point was that I found that a detrimental aspect of it, that the mechanics, uh, were very intriguing to people. And I think the—the piece itself got lost in the process for a lot of people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh. Was that a cautionary, uh, lesson for you?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, yes, it was. And in fact, one of the things I—I remember writing, uh, I don't know in what context. But I—I wrote either a letter or something like that in—in which I said that I had observed that kinetic art was, uh, fatiguing. That the faster the movements, the more fatiguing and the—and the more, [00:14:00] uh —people were surfeited very quickly with it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: It was not something you were gonna stay and then watch for hours, you know, look at it. It was over. And that, too, bothered me in that particular piece. Now, I didn't make some kind of vow to myself, I'm not gonna do that kind of thing anymore. But the kind of kinetic, uh, kinetic art that I had found interesting were Calder, whose work moved very slowly. And then the Belgian guy—what the heck was his name? He was quite

famous for a while. Where everything he did moved with incredible slowness, but it moved.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: How could I forget that guy's name?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Pol Bury.

HAROLD TOVISH: Exactly, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And his work I found very interesting. It was slow. And then I said, Well, I'll take it one step further and let's forget movement entirely, or to do sculpture, which implies movement. And—and I did, you know, this piece—what the heck is it called? This one. These two, for example.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This is *Vortex* of '66 and *Accelerator* of '66, '68.

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right. We're talking about an earlier period, but already you see, I was dealing with that issue, um, in a static form. I think much more effective. Uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And this, you, uh, began like this sort of horizontally-split head or in the *Vortex*—in the case of, uh, *Accelerator,* the implication of a head moving through space?

HAROLD TOVISH: Exactly. You see, I like the paradox. I mean [00:16:00] for example, in the, uh, *Vortex*, you had the—an image of a human head in the middle, absolutely still, eyes closed. And then what we did—what I did was make a template of the profile. And just as you might make a pot, you know, on a wheel—that thing was actually done on a wheel. Uh, I made this form, which is an endless profile, so to speak, uh, of the head. And because of the way the light hits that polished form around that absolutely still form of the head, uh, created a funny kind of motion. Also, all the people moving around in the gallery, or everything was reflected in it, so that there's always this peculiar sense of movement somewhere. The other piece, however—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The *Accelerator*, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —uh, which was, obviously, inspired by particle—you know, the scientists trying to discover what happens to particles, and they collide them and see what happens, that sort of thing—the whole idea of the *Accelerator*. And at the other end of—that head is moving through that glass tube.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And at the other end is a mold of that face that's at the head of that moving form.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And then what I—at least, what I was implying was the idea that the quest for knowledge always ends up with, in a certain kind, being trapped by one's self. That in the end, you have to face yourself, you know? That all of human effort has certain consequences, [00:18:00] uh, which affect human, humans. Now, whether that conveys all of that, I don't know, but that's what, uh, pushed me to do that piece.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Here—here is this head, uh, moving at like, seemingly great speed and yet confronting itself, I guess?

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, where it's just gonna slam into its own matrix.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: [Laughs.] And that's gonna hurt.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: On the other end, uh, if you looked at the other end, you'd see the back of his head.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right here, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You left his brains behind. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, did you do this at the time with considerable seriousness, not with whimsy?

HAROLD TOVISH: Oh, no, no, it was—it was quite serious.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

HAROLD TOVISH: At that time, I'd, uh, I—I was at MIT.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Or had just come to MIT.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, the Center—the new Center for Advanced Visual Studies?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, and—yeah, and I was very interested to be among, uh, scientists, who are an interesting breed, you know? The thing I was—you know, that was very amusing, the thing. You know, those guys had a certain awe of us who were at the Center. And, of course, it was—we had an awe of them because what they were doing was way beyond anything we could do, and they, of course, looked the same way at us. We used to have occasional meetings, you know, where we would, uh, talk to one another and try to make some kind of communication. I don't think we were very successful, but it was enjoyable.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, that's good.

HAROLD TOVISH: [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, that was part of the idea of the Center, wasn't it?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: With MIT? Well, you let—you were given pretty free rein when you were—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. The irony of it is while I was—I had done these pieces before I got there. Kepes who, you know, ran the Center, had seen these things, and that's why he asked me to join them. And the beauty of it is that when I joined the Center, I never did anything like that. [Laughs.] I did only, [00:20:00] uh, very traditional stuff. I think Kepes was quite disappointed. [They laugh.] I had certain—you know, I had finished it. I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I don't—I rarely belabor an idea. You know, I—I don't like to do that. In fact, I think in terms of one's career, the fact that I don't have one kind of continuous, stylistic quality in my work has probably worked to my detriment. Uh, and yet, there's not a damn thing I can do about it because I've always simply surrendered to my imagination. If my imagination comes up with an image, I don't give a damn if it has nothing to do with something I did last year. If it's exciting to me, by God, that's it, I'm gonna do it, and that's all there is to it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. Well, you could—you could detect that, uh, recipe for success probably or even when you're a young man that those who stuck with something that—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, you know, I often—I mean we talked about earlier, I've often envied the—the kind of, uh, concentration of—the focus. Maybe concentration is not the word—the focus. And Marianna had that from the very beginning. It was quite clear that the human figure, particularly the female figure, was really her central vision, and the kind of things that affected women's lives and, you know, that sort of thing. She made her life work out of that. Uh, any exhibition of a lot of my work has a certain problematical look about it because of these abrupt changes. But what can you do? I'm stuck with myself, right? Nothing I can do about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. You wanna look, uh, talk about anything back in the '70s? Uh—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —getting along or jump around a bit?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, you asked about after the—you know, we were talking about the last things we discussed in earlier tapes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: By the way, this—I made this at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: This *African Queen*?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, it's definitely, yeah. Well, bas relief [inaudible].

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, but you can—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Cross talk.]

HAROLD TOVISH: You can see that they would be mad about that over there. And then, I did a whole series, a thing called *Ceremonial Ax Heads,* in which I almost coronally [ph] did certain kind of, uh, manipulations of the human skull and made them into shapes that were ax-like—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: —and quite beautiful, you know? I mean, you know, it's a word I often don't employ related to my work. But those ax heads had a kind of elegance about them. You know, the—that basic shape. [00:22:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And on the next page is another one.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. This [inaudible].

HAROLD TOVISH: And I did a whole series of those, about, I don't know, eight, something like eight of them and then I dropped it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And those sold, you know? And the temptation would have been to go on making them, but I —I didn't wanna do that. I just don't do it. I get bored with it, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But when you go into it, you're very excited?

HAROLD TOVISHW: Well, yes, yes, and the excitement—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Excitement.

HAROLD TOVISH: —expends itself as I accumulate sufficient things, so I'm not just repeating myself, you know, the same thing. But I'm, uh, making changes [00:24:00] and doing things which have, uh, different qualities about them, and so on. It's into the '80s, I think, that some rather major things began to happen. So, here's some—more ax heads.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You can see how much I can do with them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were becoming much more reductive, aren't you?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, from the original—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —skull-ax shape.

HAROLD TOVISH: It's when I get into the '80s that a major change begins to occur. And that's a series, uh, beginning *In Memoriam*.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right. In 1983, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. I mean there's nothing, uh, particularly subtle about that piece. Uh, obviously, inspired by the Village Green and lots of, uh, New England and Southern towns.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, the stacked cannonballs, usually a memory of either the Civil War or WWI. And, uh, what I did, in this case, was to imagine. I mean it almost sounds childish. Maybe I shouldn't even tell my—I mean [inaudible] make it sound like a—an idiot.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Please.

HAROLD TOVISH: But I—uh, I had the—imagined the situation where somebody from another planet came down and found that, that particular—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Stack of cannonballs.

HAROLD TOVISH: —stacked cannonballs with—with cracks in 'em and these faces, bits of faces, an ear, a nose, an eye, uh, sticking out [00:26:00] at all different kinds. You know, I—I was careful to put Orientals, and blacks, and whites, and children, and old people. You know, I—I covered it all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: And he would be there, and all humans had disappeared. And this was like some kind of archeological find. And what had happened, obviously, is some crazy in—atomic war had happened, or they had dropped anthrax all over everything and everybody had died. And this was all that was left is a, um, a mem—memorial of what had happened to humanity. That's it. [Laughs.] I mean, but in the end when you look at it, I don't know whether all of that occurs to people. But I don't see how anybody could look at that without that—that slit in each of cannonballs and seeing human faces without needing [ph] to—what the hell is he getting at, you know? I mean that—I don't see how they can avoid getting some reaction.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. I think it's true of most of your work. It's—it's got a degree of [cross talk].

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, that particular time in the '80s, a lot of things, which were apparently stewing in me, began to emerge as images. Why don't you get to next page?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, we're looking at the catalogue of your '89 retrospective.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, that was the retrospective at the Addison Gallery in Andover. Uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is it *Downfall* of 1984?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. And—and—the—one of the things that pleases me about that whole series of things, again, we're dealing with optical illusion, you know? Those mirrors, you have a one-way mirror, and then you have a standard mirror—mirror, a conventional mirror working together to produce [00:28:00] an endless image.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And *Downfall* was a good example of that. Now, what I like about *Downfall* is that, you know, we're talking about like, uh, some kind of vague reference to Dante, the *Inferno* and people going into hell and that sort of thing. But at the same time, you can easily look at this as people rising. You know what I mean? I called it Downfill [ph] like—uh, *Downfall* because I guess I'm just a pessimistic character. But a lot of people called it the—you know—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Ascension or something.

HAROLD TOVISH: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And it's the same cannon or spheres with—?

HAROLD TOVISH: With the same spheres cracked with faces inside. [Laughs.] And what was so fascinating to me was with such simple means, to be able to get the kind of image that had such an impact. You know what, I think it's going to infinity, those reflections. And in the second piece called *Institution,* you have one of those cannonballs with—split open, and there's black man's, uh, face in it. And he's in a—a prison cell with, you know, bars on a—on a pallet. Uh, normally, a guy would, you know, sleep. And there's a television camera pointing at him, an absolutely frozen image and he can't move, but they're monitoring it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And, of course, that, too, is repeated endlessly. And it had to do with the whole idea of the institution.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this—the, uh, technical—[00:30:00]

HAROLD TOVISH: Extremely simple—

ROBERT F. BROWN: — is really very, very simple.

HAROLD TOVISH: Very, very simple. Very simple. I love that part of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: That was, uh, immensely satisfying to me. And then in '84, I do a piece called *Region of Ice*, in which one of those heads in that, uh, peeking out of this split sphere is sinking into a sea of glass. And what the heck I had in mind when I did that piece, I really don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But the isolation or—or an—an extraction of just a very small part but the most, uh, expressive part of the human seems to be sticking really throughout. This very obviously does, this whole series?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, uh, I don't—you know, I don't have any specific notion about this piece as to what I'm trying to get at. But damn, it's, uh—it's an image that you don't—you know, you—you can't forget it. At least I can't forget it. And then the *Witness*, which I did a year later, uh, was much more easily comprehended in terms of what I was getting at, I suppose. I mean it was all these things about the—disappeared. You remember what was going on in Chile and places like that, and Argentina, and all over the place? And the whole idea of, uh, dumping people into cells and leaving there, you know, what did they—what did French call that? The oubliette. Remember that term?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: They put them down there and forget them. And here, you have, uh, a corpse in a cell, in such a way that his image or her image is reflected and repeated [00:32:00] on and on and on to infinity. Because historically, this is nothing new, is it? Not at all. And to end that series, I did a piece called *Site* [ph], in which I imagined the—the—uh, the worst, and that was the complete obliteration of everything, and all we're left with was the desert. That photograph doesn't give you any idea what it looked like. But you—did you see that show?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Do you remember that?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I mean this thing is stretching there with the same cracks in the earth and all the rest of it. And that was where the, uh, where I stopped in that retrospective, of that 1988—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you also—

HAROLD TOVISH: —piece.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —more or less ended your, uh, repetitions of, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Side conversation.] Just wait in here.

HAROLD TOVISH: Hey.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Audio break.] Yeah, in '85, the series we've been talking about—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and then this last thing was '88, and it's sort of towards the end of the line.

HAROLD TOVISH: So you see, the whole thing, uh, I would say between 1983 and 1985 or maybe even 1982, I did a series of things that had to do with these optical illusions. And people looked—here's what's so fascinating about it. People looking at these things, knew what was going on, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Because the—the technology involved was infantile. I mean there was nothing brand new about one-way mirrors, or mirrors, or any of that stuff.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They didn't try to look behind—

HAROLD TOVISH: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —it. Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: They—they knew. But the effect was irresistible. You—you could not look at some—at least that's what I feel. You could not look at those things and, uh, dismiss them, unless you were a living, breathing freak. [Laughs.] [00:34:00] So, I had done all I wanted to with them, and if I had made more, they would have ended up being kind of novelties and no more than that. And I certainly was not interested in that. I just felt I had done all I really wanted to do with the idea, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, did you get quite a lot of feedback from these?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes, I got a lot of feedback, and you'll be happy to hear I own every one of them. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

HAROLD TOVISH: Except *In Memoriam*, which, uh, a woman bought and now is in the National Gallery of American Art. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Otherwise, people enjoyed them, looked at them, found them interesting but, uh, purchasing was another matter. Nor did museums, uh, express any interest. And I think the major reason being that they required darkened rooms, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: You couldn't have it in a well-lit gallery. It wouldn't work because the, uh—the thing about one-way mirrors is that the light on the inside has to be brighter by quite a bit, 50 percent at least, than it is outside. So, when I showed those at the gallery in Boston, the Alpha Gallery, that poor guy, Alan Fink who runs the gallery had—was in dark for almost a month. [Laughs.] It must have been depressing. [They laugh.] And I was told that people coming in off the street, you know, had to adjust their eyes to—to all this darkness. Oh, well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Still, it's—I have no regrets having done them, uh, although I own them. And I—in fact, I'm gonna try to give them away because I—I—what am I gonna do with them? What are my kids gonna do with them? And the question is, will any museum, uh, take them because of the limitation [00:36:00] that it requires, you know? We'll see. We'll see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What came after that series in your sculpture?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, it's been a pattern of my life as a—you know, my professional life—is that whenever I finish one of these series, uh, and don't have any urgent images I want to do immediately, I draw. Now, back about that time, in the late '80s, uh, I began to have attacks of vertigo. They're quite serious attacks, to the point where I really couldn't drive for fear that I would, uh, get vertigo while I was driving. And when I say vertigo, I'm not kidding, the world turns upside down, goes into circles. It's horrible. And, uh, the first time I had the attack was kind of, I guess, amusing and then perhaps not so amusing. Uh, Marianna had gotten up and was getting dressed, and I was lying on my face as I—uh, often do when I sleep. And then what happened was that I, uh, woke up and then I turned over. And I turned over, and I looked up at the ceiling, and suddenly, the whole room started to turn very slowly and then got faster and faster. And Marianna looked at me, she said, "What's happening to your eyes?" My eyes were going back and forth like this trying to catch up. Oh, man, that was terrible. And I got up, and I closed my eyes, and then I opened them and, thank God, it didn't go on. But for about four or five days, I was having attacks. So, she said, "You better get to a doctor fast," so I did. And the doctor said—he looked at my ears, you know. It's an inner ear problem. [00:38:00] Had some kind of gadget in there with controls, balance or something.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And they—they, uh, said that I had to have an MRI. What is that? What did they—uh, how did he—well, MRI something. Uh, put you in a—they put you in a tunnel, and take pictures of your brain, and they look for tumors, you know, the usual thing. Well, I came out okay on that. But as I was leaving this laboratory where they have this fantastic instrument, which by the way is like the *Accelerator*. It's a tube. [laughs.] And there I was in a tube. And I'm somewhat claustrophobic and poor Marianna, I said, "Get me out of here." And I said, "Bring my wife in," and she—and she had to massage my foot, so I had some sense of contact with the outer world. It was really—I am claustrophobic. Whatever the case, uh, as we were leaving, I looked at the

screen of a TV set that they had, and the last image that they had taken was on the screen. It was fantastic. And I said to the—to the guy who had, uh, done this process, I said, "Could I get copies of this?" He said, "Sure, just go down there and a week from now, they'll have them." And you pay a certain amount of money and—which I did. And I did a whole series of drawings having to do with the human brain, and making them, uh, everything from kind of decorative images to one in which I had the brain, and in the brain was a cockroach. [00:40:00] [Laughs.] Uh, I was sitting here with Kafka, you remember the wonderful stories of the stories of *The Metamorphosis*?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And I was saying, you know, My God, that's Kafka's brain, he has a cockroach in there on his brain. Uh, I did a whole series of things in—and which were really kind of fantasies. And I liked those drawings, but, uh, we had to show them at Yezerski and, uh, although people apparently found them fairly interesting, there were no purchases. I can't understand why everybody didn't want one on their living room wall. [Laughs.] But they have a kind of ominous quality about them, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Mortality and that sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Things people don't wanna think about.

HAROLD TOVISH: No. Well, I was hoping people who—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

HAROLD TOVISH: —care about drawing might buy them, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: But it didn't happen. Poor Yezerski, [laughs] poor me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your drawings, uh, continued to this what you've just talked about there.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I mean your—

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —your drawings were a sort of a spontaneous thing?

HAROLD TOVISH: The drawings have always helped me move into the next, uh, phase of my sculpture. I didn't do anything in sculpture having to do with those MRIs because they don't lend themselves to sculpture, you know? At least I couldn't find a way to do them. But what did happen was I began to think of the issue of anatomy, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And then one day, it occurred to me that it would be kind of amusing to take the human anatomy and to use various parts of the human body, uh, as decorative elements in architectural settings. And I did a whole series of those. Uh, I'll show you some of them in—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —in the studio [00:42:00] including this intestinal thing, which was I think it's called the *Swave* or—they had some word for these things I have forgotten.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. An architectural element, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Freeze or something.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, which is meant to be decorative, uh, and so on. Uh, and there was a certain satirical intent, you know, because so many of the younger artists had been doing things with body parts, you know, people like uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —what's her name? Uh, boy, I'm—I'm really getting good with names. Uh, her father is a famous sculptor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, Kiki Smith?

HAROLD TOVISH: Kiki Smith, exactly. Good for you. That's a hard name to remember, Smith. [They laugh.] And, uh, I just thought it was kind of fun to, uh, to take these anatomical parts and make the purely decorative elements in them. Part of the intent was that psychologically when you reduce things as, uh, elemental as what keeps us alive, to me, a decoration in a certain sense, you neutralize—you know, you neutralize the heart, you neu—neutralize the intestines, you neu—because they become just decorations. And I—I liked that idea. I don't know why. It's kind of perverse. But the notion that you could take something as vital to all of us and—and turn them into decorations, which is what we've been doing with nature in architecture for centuries, you know? The medieval artists, [00:44:00] the [inaudible] with the vines on it, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yup.

HAROLD TOVISH: I'm an artist, you know? And I did a—a—you know, a whole series of those including a—in one part, I did a brain, a cross-section of the brain. And I thought that would be wonderful for a neurological institute, the floor all composed of little squares with brains. [They laugh.] But architects have no imagination. Not one architect approached me—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, no? But some—

HAROLD TOVISH: —to do it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —saw these?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I don't know. I—I told my dealer, "Okay, get a hold of architects. See how—what—what might happen," nothing. And again, I had a show and I sold one piece, so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What show was that? Where was that?

HAROLD TOVISH: At Yezerski.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At Yezerski, still.

HAROLD TOVISH: I think it was 1989.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, um, one sold, architects not interested, but you hadn't done it primarily with them in mind. Or is that not true?

HAROLD TOVISH: No, not really, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I had done them. I would have been absolutely delighted if some architect says, I gotta have that, you know? I—that didn't happen but c'est la vie.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you worked on this series for several years, huh?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, actually, it didn't take that long. It was a lot simpler than the—the only thing that took time was in some cases, I would make the same image, you know, 20 times, 40 times because of the—when you do, uh, decorative things, repetition is often the key to it. So, I had to make a lot of fingers, a lot of toes, you know, a lot of body parts, hearts, vaginas, penises. You know, I did all of that [00:46:00] crazy stuff. And I put them together. Uh, I made a large thing, uh, what they call a medallion for the ceiling where you hang down a chandelier and, you know, that kind of thing, and [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Well, what—what body parts were in them?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, let's see. There was, uh, fingers, vaginas, penis tips, uh, and in the center around, sort of, tondo with the heart, and veins like, you know, swimming out all over the place. It was very handsome. You know, it was really pretty. And that's what I was interested in. Produce these things, decorations, so that when people looked at them, they weren't shocked. Oh, my God, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And some would look at them and then suddenly, it would hit them on what it was about, you know? I found that interesting. It's sort of perverse. I have a perverse mind, there's no question about it. I should be in a hospital. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But in the end, I mean, what you were trying to create was just something, which you—as you said, was beautiful.

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right. These things had an elegance and a precision about them that could not be faulted on that level. But in the long run, you know, there was a certain trivial aspect to it. Because, you know what, uh, we're dealing with something here that's, uh—well you know, the purely decorative in art, it doesn't have much status. Uh, although a great deal of wonderful art has had mainly a decorative function. You know, I'm talking about work in cathedrals and so on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Where all conscious things were done to engage—engage [00:48:00] the viewer, regardless of what the subject matter was, you know? Well, that was over with and, uh, I—I as I say, usually, I do a certain series and then I feel, okay, that's enough.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. So, it just sort of subsided, hmm, your intense interest?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I've done all I felt I could do with it and—and maintained my own interest. And that's the—the criteria I use. If I'm interested in it, I'll go ahead with it, but if I'm not, that's it. It's finished. I won't give a damn if the dealer said, Geez, you make more of those, I can sell them. The hell with it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And the reason being that, you know, I'm—I'm very conscious of time. The other thing is that if you look at my history, you'll see that I've had—for a guy who's been in it since he was a kid, I've had very, very few one-man shows.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, I've had shows, which really were just repetitions of another show. You know, the way you travel, the way you show the same thing. So, you know, while there might be a long list of exhibitions that I had, uh, very meant—often they're simply using the same pieces I had done and, you know, I go from one place to another. And the reason being, that I—I have to be absolutely enchanted by some kind of image that simply has gripped my imagination, and, uh, I've got to do it. And this doesn't happen to me with tremendous frequency like Picasso, you know? [Laughs.] Who apparently has an endless, supply of imaginative images, which he—it just pours out of him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Do you think that's generally the case with—

HAROLD TOVISH: What do you mean?

ROBERT F. BROWN: —with many artists, with particularly many sculptors?

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, I really cannot [00:50:00] speak for other artists because I really don't know what—you know, what prompts them to do this or that. I really don't know. I—I often think that artists who do abstract forms, abstract forms, uh, have an endless possibility because manipulation of forms is something you can do endlessly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: But artists who do, uh, a sort of figurative imagery, I—I would have a hard time finding affinity with some artist whose work I know pretty well, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You have a hard time finding affinity?

HAROLD TOVISH: With other artists. You know, I admire them. Like an artist like Giacometti, I've always admired Giacometti. And Giacometti, you know, once he seizes on an idea, he labors over it, and repeats it, and repeats it, and repeats it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, presumably to get them better or to get them—I don't know what. But he goes on and on doing because he has some notion in his mind, which is not satisfied by what he did. He has to do it again, you

see?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: So now, you know, we're actually getting, uh, pretty much close to, uh, our own time. Ninety—we're here in '98 and the last show I had at, uh, Yezerski, I believe, was in '92, and it was a show of drawings. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And with that was probably a time then, sort of, fermentation for you? Is that right? [00:52:00]

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Yeah. I—I, uh, I began to do drawings, which I haven't shown, uh, fooling around in. And like I say, the drawing business seems to be a kind of a catalyst. I don't know why. It's really quite mysterious to me. It's as if the drawing, in some peculiar way, stimulates my brain to come up with something. I don't know why, but that seems the way it's always worked. And, boy, you better—you better listen when, uh, when your mind comes up with images that have obviously come out of something. Yeah, they're not just, uh, you know, dreaming. They—they've got to be based on some kind of experience, and I'd be damned if I can tell you what the experience is. I don't know. I'm very mystified. But I've been told by other people that there's a certain—I don't wanna use the word 'odor' for fear you'd say, You mean they stink? [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: But there's a certain, uh, mode, a mood about my work, a certain underlying something, which seems to be fairly consistent, you know, that runs through the work a certain. Marianna said that I'm a—my images have a darkness about them. That's the way she put it. And the irony of it is that I'm not a particularly unhappy man. I had a wonderful marriage, and I have terrific kids. And I—I don't think I'm considered a glum character at all. But [00:54:00] there's obviously a part of me, a part of my history or something, which is expressed through these images.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And maybe that's what saved me from being, uh, God knows what. Although, I don't believe in art as a therapy. You know, I—I mean you couldn't keep this up for a whole lifetime on the basis of I'm—I'm undergoing a treatment, you know? I'm treating myself. It's just my way—I guess it's my way of really trying to make some sense of my own life. You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: What I feel about things and that's the aspect of it that I can only express in—in drawing or sculpture, period. It doesn't come out in my personality. I don't think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Although, there were times when you were extremely serious and with—about social—in your social concerns?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I mean, after all, that's not that unusual. There's nothing freaky about that. The point about it being that I was brought up, uh, by poor people. And I had a history in which my sympathies would almost—it would have been unnatural for me, uh, to be anything but leftish in my political beliefs. Because I grew up during the Union Movement in this country, and uh, so on and so forth, and I was active against the war in Vietnam and all of that. There's nothing unusual about that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And my work is not overtly political.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

HAROLD TOVISH: It really isn't. It's indirectly poli—political, but certainly not overtly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. Yeah, uh, and people who tried to tag you with that, uh, were a bit off the mark, aren't they?

HAROLD TOVISH: They—they can tag me with it. I don't find it an insult. I just—I don't think they're being particularly accurate.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. [00:56:00] Yeah. Well, yeah, I'm looking here. In, um, '89, Abram "Al" Lerner wrote a tribute to you in this retrospective you had at the Addison Gallery.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh, it almost immediately reflects your social concerns, yet your sculpture is firmly rooted in the aesthetic imperative. And I think—which I think you've expressed, uh, in various ways throughout our interviews.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, I mean, you know, uh, look, one thing about this whole business and a lot of people really, uh, don't particularly understand. Why should they? But when you get into this business of painting or sculpture, it—it's complete self-indulgence. Really, it is.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And—and the self-indulgence can—can lead to somebody like, uh, Cézanne who spends his life doing these wonderful landscapes, and still lifes, and portraits of people. And then in my case, the self-indulgence comes out as you've seen, I mean, you know, the work I've done. And in every case, an artist who's had a long career, the self-indulgence becomes justified on the basis of what they have done, and how other people have reacted to what they did, if they have left a mark on those who've seen the work. And since I've had so little, uh, financial reward—I mean, really, I have very little financial reward for all my labors—what I have had is very satisfying, uh, responses from people, you know? And I'm not talking about critics. [00:58:00]

[END OF SIDE A1.]

This is cassette three of four, Side A2.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I think you've expressed, uh, in various ways throughout the interviews.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. I mean, you know, one thing about this whole business and a lot of people really, uh, don't particularly understand. Why should they? But when you get into this business of, say, painting or sculpture, it—it's complete self-indulgence, really it is. And—and the self-indulgence can—can lead to somebody like, uh, Cézanne who spends his life doing these wonderful landscapes, and still lifes, and portraits of people. And then in my case, the self-indulgence comes out as you've seen, I mean, you know, the work I've done. And in every case, an artist who's had a long career, the self-indulgence becomes justified on the basis of what they have done, and how other people have reacted to what they did if they have left a mark on those who've seen the work. And since I've had so little, uh, financial reward—I mean really, I have very little financial reward for all my labors—what I have had is very satisfying, uh, responses from people, you know? And I'm not talking about critics, although most critics have been very good to me. I'm talking about people who write you a letter, I saw your show and I was very moved by it, you know, that kind of thing. What more can one say? [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Well now, most—most recently, you—you've moved away. You're [00:02:00] back into sculpture, aren't you?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yes. And now, I'm about—as you know, I've been working on this Copley project, which for me is a first.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And maybe you can talk a bit about that.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I'll tell you what happened. I mean it's—it's—I don't think it's a common story, but what happened was this. Our upstairs neighbor, a woman, uh, whose name is Stella Trafford, who's a very active, uh, citizen, passionate about Boston and its historical aspects, its architecture. And for example, the, uh, Commonwealth Mall has been a project of hers where she was very instrumental in saving the elm trees.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And she's like that—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Along Commonwealth Avenue—

HAROLD TOVISH: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and Back Bay?

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah. There was this elm tree disease that, uh, would have killed every damn tree there, but there was a treatment for it. And she forced the issue and apparently got it done. At least that's what I understand. Well, she knew about this, uh, commission. Apparently, an ancestor—do I mean an ancestor? No. What's the opposite of ancestor? [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, descendant?

HAROLD TOVISH: A descendant—thank you very much—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —of Copley, a man named Mr. Taylor, uh, agreed to put up money to make a monument in Copley Square to his great, great, great whatever it is.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The painter Copley, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: John Singleton Copley, early American painter. And, uh, Stella told me about this and asked me if I'd be interested.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Now, Marianna was already a sick woman when that happened. And I told Marianna about it, and she said, "Red [00:04:00] I want you to take that commission. If they'll give it to you, take it." And I said, "Gee, Marianna, I've never done one of those things. You know, I've had—I'll have to, uh, try to satisfy people when I'm just not used to doing that." That's what I mean by self-indulgence, you understand? So, she says, "No, Red, you should be able to do a damn good thing. Go ahead and do it." Well, all right, uh, I agreed. I said, Okay, I'll do it. And then later on when I thought about it, I realized that what Marianna really was trying to do, she figured that she was going to die, and she knew it and I knew it. That if I had a project, which was gonna require a great deal of my time, and effort, and thought, that I wouldn't sit around bemoaning my—her fate and my fate.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, she was wrong about that. But the point was that she, obviously, wanted me to have something that would keep me busy. So, I've been working on that for a long, long time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see.

[END OF SIDE A2.]

This is cassette three of four, Side B.

ROBERT F. BROWN: On it for a long time?

HAROLD TOVISH: I have been working on the Copley Monument for a long time, and I finally submitted a scale model to the Friends of Copley Square who are the ones, I think, who may have instigated it. And, uh, Mr. Taylor being the one who is going to put up the money.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And, uh, I'm now waiting for the park department and the art commission, you know, the city institutions to look at it and say, yes, or no, or change it, or what. And all I could say if they—any of them say, Well, it can't be that high. It's too high, you'll have to lower it, and I'm gonna say, uh-uh [negative], and—and bow out. I'm not gonna do it. I am not gonna spend a year of my life on something and then, uh, give them my best judgment at the age of 77, and have them say that won't do. If they don't like it, that's it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I'm not gonna do it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now what is it? What—what did you come up with?

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, it's a shaft of stone that's about six feet high, and on the top, is a three-dimensional head of, uh, Copley. I didn't wanna make a barley.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: I thought that if it was going to be a monument to Copley in Copley Square, we were not going to be so modest as to make a little nice, a little relief of him, uh, and that would be it. It would look like a tombstone, you know? So, you've got this slightly over-life-size head on top, and under it will be a bronze, sort of, plaque giving you some information about his life. And that's it, simple. [Clears throat.] And, uh, the uh, Friends of Copley Square and Mr. Taylor have seen it [00:02:00] and liked it apparently. And now, everything is waiting on these other city people to see how they respond. However, that is taking a lot of my time, and if they

approve, it's gonna take a hell of a lot more time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because it's only in the model, a full-scale model but—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, it's a half-scale model.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Half-scale. What did you—uh, this was—this was a new ballgame for you?

HAROLD TOVISH: Boy, was it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, that's why it took me so long. I had made all kinds of false starts, you know, and—until finally, uh, I got this image of—of the three-dimensional head. And as soon as I had that in my head, in my own head, I said, Well, that's the thing to do. That's it. Because you see, from any part of the square, you can see it. If it were a relief, that would not be the case, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

HAROLD TOVISH: So, I mean it's Copley Square, why not? Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, it's out there on its own?

HAROLD TOVISH: It's gonna be out there, and it will be the commanding image in Copley Square. Won't overpower the church, I very much doubt it, but [laughs] you know what I mean.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I remember that.

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: You know what I mean.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Meanwhile, I'm on to something else, which, uh, I must say, I'm dying to get at. And I, uh, it really troubles me that this Copley thing is taking so much of my time and energy because I'd like to be doing this other series. I'm gonna start doing a series of—of sculptures, which I'm tentatively calling *Mutations.* And I'm sure that that notion of doing sculptures, which, uh, suggests some kind of strange [00:04:00] mutations comes out of all the stuff the I had been reading, uh, about science, what's happening in science. You know, fooling around with DNA.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Uh, the cloning, uh, introducing human DNA into animal DNA. I mean, you know, really there are some very, very, very strange things going on. So, what I've done—what I'm planning to do is to take that whole idea to the point of utter absurdity, I mean almost lunacy. So that, for example, I have one of a broken, uh, boulder that's been split in half, and lo and behold, on the inside, it seems to have an intestinal tract. [Laughs.] You see what I mean?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Totally, insane.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: But it—it becomes a kind of a—well, it if it were in metaphor, for what's going on, you see. And another piece I made drawings of are called *Heart of Stone*, in which you know, how, uh, the weather, and wind, and rain will—will poke a kind of hole into a stone?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And inside that hole is gonna be a heart, and the arteries and veins coming out of the heart will go up into the stone and then out on top, and the veins will crawl all over the stone, *Heart of Stone*. That's the sort of thing I'm talking about. And I have another one, which I really should show it you because it's really quite amusing. In fact, I'm gonna go get it. But one of the things I'm planning to do, and what I've done is take—is take a chicken's egg, poke a hole in the top and in the bottom and then blow out the insides. [00:06:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yup.

HAROLD TOVISH: And then pour water in to clean it out, and then put earth inside. And I'm gonna plant a seed in it, yeah. And these things should sprout—instead of little chickens, they will sprout little plants, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

HAROLD TOVISH: It's one of my [laughs] mutations, lo and behold. That sort of thing. You get—you get—you get the drift?

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you're gonna translate this into—to metal or anything, or—

HAROLD TOVISH: No. That'll be, you know, chicken egg.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay. [Laughs.] And that boulder with the intestinal tract, is that literally a—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I'm going to probably—I mean, it would be too expensive to do it in metal. It would be, uh—they could be done in concrete, they could be done in, uh, plaster. I don't think it would be appropriate in metal.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I mean I want it to look like stone. I'm going to make, uh, an effort to make it look like stone.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, you're moving from drawings? You're doing drawings and models [cross talk].

HAROLD TOVISH: Yeah, I—I've done—I've done the drawings. None of them very elaborate. Uh, I've got another piece that I'm planning to do, which I'm gonna call *Ecosystem*. And it's gonna consist, uh—consist of a head on top of a Plexiglas box. And there will be a hole in the top of the Plexiglas box, and from the bottom of his neck will come a tube, which would suggest the air tube going into the lungs, and there'll be a heart. And, you know, I did a piece earlier, which—which was part of that body, you know, the—the decorative scheme called the heart—the *Angel of the Heart and Lungs* where you see the lungs, and the heart, and veins coming down. And what's going to be—happen is that behind his head I'm gonna put a—a 10-inch diameter tube up about [00:08:00] three feet, a little more high, which can be filled with leaves, growing leaves, except they'll be artificial. You can buy those now. And there'll be caps on the bottom and on the top.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And out of his nose, is gonna be coming two tubes, which will go to the top of the thing and be hooked in. And out of his mouth will become—two tubes would go to the bottom of the thing. The idea being that this mutation [laughs] breathes the oxygen that the plants produce and exhales carbon dioxide, which the plants need. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wonderful.

HAROLD TOVISH: So, I'd call it *Ecosystem.*

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: And the idea there being that if things go on the way they are going, in the end, who knows? We may actually have some—the only way you're gonna keep alive is if you have your own oxygen supply. [They laugh.] And you can keep it alive by breathing in and out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd be total—mutually, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Splendid.

HAROLD TOVISH: Which is actually the case, isn't it?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Hmm.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were expressing [ph].

HAROLD TOVISH: And that's what I mean by the whole idea of carrying something to the point of absurdity. But

the absurdity has a kind of, uh, impact. There's a—a—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —a basic kind of truth in it, which says something about, you know, the possible predicaments that—that we're making for ourselves.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, that's—

HAROLD TOVISH: Now, would you call that political? I don't really think of that as political.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pessimistic?

HAROLD TOVISH: It's—it's a kind of a lunatic prophecy, you know, because, obviously, nothing like that is gonna actually happen. It's just that it—it becomes symbolic of something that—that we can prevent. And which somehow [00:10:00] because of human frailty, uh—I mean our lumber industry has to go on. They don't give a damn about anything because they've gotta earn a living and that's the excuse for doing anything—we've got to earn a living. And, you know, who cannot appreciate that? But the consequences, that's the big problem, what the consequences are gonna be. You know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: So, that's what I'm working on now, when I get finished with Mr. Copley. I hope I live long enough to do some of these things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And Mr. Copley is going to be a conventional head, isn't it? It's not gonna be a, uh, one of your heads like *Vortex* or—

HAROLD TOVISH: No, no, no, no. Mr.—it's gonna be straightforward.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Straightforward.

HAROLD TOVISH: Very straightforward. No, no. Listen, I'll tell you something. One of the things that I went through with that Copley project, it was something that, you know, required quite a bit of thinking. When we look at portraits of people of the time where they had—with their rather charming hairdos, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

HAROLD TOVISH: Little curls and all that, and the kind of clothes they wore—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: —there's a quaintness about them. They're quaint to us. But this was a very serious artist, you know. And I want to present to him as a—as a human being who—who had made a major kind of accomplishment. I mean nothing quaint about that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

HAROLD TOVISH: And that was the thing I had to avoid. And I remember I did a barley—well I'll show you one, you know, when we're finished—in which I had them looking in a canvas and so he—as if he's holding his jaw, you know, chin saying, Hmm, as he looked at the camera is that. And he's got his outfit with—with the pants tucked into the stocking and that sort of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: I said, That's too quaint.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And I turned—you know, I rejected it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: And, you know, that's the—it led finally to what I'm gonna do now. See, I wanted to avoid that at all costs [00:12:00] because I—uh, you know, you end up not treating that period as if it involved real people, you know?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: Real people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Cross talk.]

HAROLD TOVISH: They become like, uh, cartoons in a way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would denigrate his—instead of more accomplished, huh [ph]?

HAROLD TOVISH: There's no intention to denigrate them. It's just that the distance between them and us makes them seem almost like another species, you know? They're different. Not that different, you know? That's the point, not that different.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But now, your concern like in the—the absurdity within this other series this, uh, when you take them seriously—is this the sort of thing, you think, you can look way back and see who's—you were interested in or what's operated within you maybe subconsciously? You think—

HAROLD TOVISH: Well, I don't know. I—I—you know, really, I think it would be very foolish of me to attempt to find, you know, some basic connection between all the things I've done because I think I'd be hard put to do that. But I—I think in general, when—when you look back and I look back at the—that series I did where I used the one-way mirrors. The connection seems to have to do with, uh, apprehension, kind of apprehensive quality about them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD TOVISH: If there is a connection, it—it's more that than any other thing. Because formally, these things are gonna be very different from what I've done before, you see? And the whole issue of form in an age of formalism, uh, I've really gone against the current. I always have. [00:14:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: It has not done a hell of a lot of good for my career, no question about that. And Marianna, in fact, one time said something very perceptive. Still, to this day, I'm not sure I was being flattered or criticized. But she says, "You know, Red, in a way, some of the things you do are like, uh, high-class cartoons." And I said, "Damn it, Marianna," and then I said, "That's pretty good, a pretty good way to describe some of those things and I'm not sure I like it." But you see what she was getting at? You know, that, uh, like a very serious political cartoon.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD TOVISH: Except they're not overtly political. Yeah. So, you know, the whole, um, career when you'd think about a career, it unfolds. I look back in all those years and all those things that I've done over all these many, many years, and—and I feel I've been very lucky, I really do. It's not that I haven't been recognized and I haven't been—earned a certain amount of respect. And it could be that, uh, in the end, what really counts is that as you're getting older, the fact that you're still able to work, and that you're eager to go to your studio and—and do something, is a kind of reward that's given to very, very few people. You know? And I, uh, console myself in my lack of universal fame and untold wealth [laughs] by recognizing that. And I think, [00:16:00] uh, lots of artists who have not achieved great success in terms of reputation or money, but who really are still working, uh, I think would agree with what I say. I think so. Yeah. Any more questions?

[END OF SIDE B.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]