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Oral history interview with Kenzo Okada,  
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# Transcript

## Interview

**FS:** FORREST SELVIG

**KO:** KENZO OKADA

**X:** A LADY WHO IS PRESENT IN THE BACKGROUND, SPEAKS SOMETIMES IN ENGLISH, SOMETIMES IN JAPANESE. PROBABLY MRS. OKADA]

**FS:** This is an interview with the painter Kenzo Okada in his studio in New York City. The date is November 22, 1968, and the interviewer is Forrest Selvig. Now we can just talk, Mr. Okada, completely conversationally and forget that we even have this thing here if we can. Mr. Okada, I'd like to start off, as I usually do when I talk to artists, and ask them about the very earliest part of their life. You were born in Yokohama, right?

**KO:** Right. Yes.

**FS:** And when were you conscious that you were interested in being an artist?

**KO:** When I was in what I believe in America is called primary school I used to like to draw. Then when I was in middle school in Japan I used to like to paint. My middle school was a mission school. And one day the teacher was talking about the life of the French painter Jean Francis Millet. And I was so impressed by this story about Millet that I wanted to be a painter, too. And I was so excited I was crying with tears on my cheeks. Oh, I wanted to be a painter. That was the beginning.

**FS:** How old were you then, Mr. Okada?

**KO:** I was about fifteen years old then. When I was nineteen years old I still really wanted to be a painter. It hadn't left my mind.

**FS:** Tell me, was your family in favor of this? Or against it?

**KO:** No. We have no artists in my family. When my father was very young he came to the United States. And he said that in a place in New York City where many artists used to live, in Greenwich Village, I think, he saw many artists who had a very hard time. So when I asked my father if I could be a painter he would never agree . . .

**FS:** He was against it?

**KO:** . . . because he knew that artists had a very hard time. And when he got sick I asked again but he never would give his consent. But when I was growing up he'd look at my painting but he did not agree because he saw that artists had a very hard time. They are very poor. So that's the reason he never consented that I be a painter.

**FS:** In Japan, though, isn't it true, or maybe this is just something one hears, but I have heard that artists are much more respected in Japan than they are in the usual European civilization? Is this so?

**KO:** You mean artists in ancient times in Japan?

**FS:** Well, I mean now, too. Certainly in ancient times it was true I know.

**KO:** You mean do people respect artists?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** If he's a good artist, he's respected. But there are many inferior artists, but not quite all . . . but that is out of the question. But very few people understand when a good artist arrives. Mostly it is after a good artist dies that people understand whether they are great or not.

**FS:** It sounds just exactly like anywhere else, doesn't it, unfortunately?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** I'd like to ask you another question, Mr. Okada, about your father's being against your painting. Another thing I understand is that in Japan the family is a much stronger unit than it is in the United States and that to

go against your father's wishes would be a harder thing to do in Japan than it would be in other countries. Is this so?

**KO:** You mean the family relation with their son, their children?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** In Japan this was so. The parents were very powerful for their children. But today this is greatly changed. I think this is so in America, too.

**FS:** Oh, yes.

**KO:** Today it is a very bad thing. Mostly parents have to follow their children, never say no to anything; that is our trouble. But when I was little, not only in my family but in every family it was very hard to go against the parents. "You shouldn't do that; you should do that." So this was the kind of experience I had.

**FS:** Yes. This is what I was trying to get at, Mr. Okada, that your decision to be a painter, which your father was against, must have been particularly hard for you at that time, no?

**KO:** Oh, yes. Because I wanted so much to be a painter. I was really very upset that my father said I shouldn't be a painter. I never forgot that.

**FS:** Did your father have a business he wanted you to go into?

**KO:** Yes. I have two brothers. And my father intended that we should go into business like Okada Brothers Company, including me. And that was very sad for me. But my father died very early, when I was about twenty years old. So I was free then. But anyway I wanted to be a painter.

**FS:** So then, Mr. Okada, up to the age of twenty, although you wanted to be a painter, you couldn't definitely say, "I'm going to be one?"

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** And then after that period I know you went to art school in Japan.

**KO:** At that time, yes, I wanted to get into the Tokyo Fine Arts University. I took the examination once and I dropped.

**FS:** You mean you failed?

**KO:** My drawing was not good enough to get in. So I went to . . . this is a kind of studio that gives training in drawing for examinations.

**FS:** Oh, like the Academie Julien?

**KO:** The next year I tried the examination again and this time I got in all right. There were about eighty people in the class. I was Number 4, not Number 1.

**FS:** Oh, I see. Well, Number 4 out of eighty is pretty good. But, Mr. Okada, then up until the age of twenty you were still working in painting, probably in a rather hidden way, I assume?

**KO:** No much because it was very hard to get money to buy materials for a young non-professional painter. There were a few cut-out things. But after I got into art school I could get the materials so I painted more. But not much.

**FS:** Going back a little bit, when you were in the mission school, which was the middle school, you say, and the teacher talked to you about Millet, was this a French teacher?

**KO:** Oh, that was a Japanese teacher. But there were many Americans in that school. And there was Mr. Rasha.

**FS:** Oh! He was a professor of mine at Harvard.

**KO:** No, no, no. His father. I met his father many times. His father used to teach in that mission school. So I met him, too, when he was a boy. I learned English and writing, conversation, many classes even in the middle school. But there were more high school above school about for to be priests, or, you know . . . So there were many American teachers.

**FS:** But the teachers encouraged you in the school, I gather?

**KO:** Oh, not encouraged. But there was a painting class and that teacher . . . when students in class trying too hard, but I am not drawing with them . . . the teacher would say to everybody, "Look at this, this is one of the best ones. So look at this on the blackboard." So I would feel very good. This gave me more confidence.

**FS:** Well, now, going on to your entrance into the academy in Tokyo, you'd been accepted; you're number 4 in an entering class of eighty. What sort of instruction did you start off with there?

**KO:** Art History, and about the human body and . . . .

**FS:** Anatomy.

**KO:** Languages and history, and oh, some . . . the painting and drawing was all right for me, but the other classes were very bad, almost zero. I'm failing all the time. So my friend who was in the same class kept asking me, "Why don't you join us and go to Paris?" Oh, that's all right because I almost failed the class. Drawing was all right; but my other classes almost nothing. So that's when I went to Paris with my friend in the same class and two others.

**FS:** But before we go to Paris let me ask you a bit more about the kind of instruction you had in the academy in Tokyo. I presume it would include both the Oriental tradition and the Western tradition?

**KO:** Oh, that was the Western tradition, yes.

**FS:** Completely Western then?

**KO:** I think, yes. Because there are Japanese tradition classes, too. But . . . .

**FS:** Oh, there are other classes?

**KO:** Western and Eastern not same class. So I took the Western class. This is almost the same as a foreign country. This was a Western art class.

**FS:** Would it have been the plan had you remained in that academy to have you take both? Or wasn't it that way?

**KO:** Of course that school gave training in technique mostly. If somebody wants to learn the Japanese tradition he would take the Japanese class. I took the Western class. So there were two divisions.

**FS:** So it would be possible to go to that academy and take only one or only the other?

**KO:** Only one class. For classes there were many things, history, Western history and Eastern history and art history and anatomy and many things. But Japanese tradition and Western tradition are different divisions.

**FS:** Yes. But then you decided to go to Paris.

**KO:** I was very young.

**FS:** How old were you when you went to Paris? You went in 1924.

**KO:** I was 22 or 23 I think. This is very young. Of course, my family did not accept this and nobody helped about money to go to Paris. But I never gave up. So finally my family gave in and gave me a little money to get to Paris.

**FS:** By this time they accepted the fact that you wouldn't change your mind?

**KO:** No, no, no.

**FS:** No?

**KO:** No, I never changed my mind. And of course I thought if I got to Paris if my family would not send me money to stay there, all right, I will get money in Paris. But, oh, it was impossible to get money in Paris. So my oldest brother sent his salary. He used to work for some company. Every month he sent me his salary. It wasn't big money but he was always very nice to me. And, when I received this money from Japan, in just a couple of days it was all gone and then I was without money for another 25 days. I had a very hard time.

**FS:** How did you manage to live? How did you manage to get along?

**KO:** Without money?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** Oh, sometimes I found in the streets in the early morning in the streets. But not always; not much. People never find much money in the streets in Paris. And at that time I had a few friends and when I was very hungry I would go to a friend's house and they would notice and say, "You're hungry, aren't you?"

**FS:** You and your friends from Japan were living together somehow there, were you?

**KO:** No, not together. But still in Paris.

**FS:** And did you attend a school there in Paris?

**KO:** For about a half-year every day I went for drawing and sketching and croquis.

**FS:** Which academy was this?

**KO:** Ranson. I think.

**FS:** Ranson? Oh!

**KO:** But after about six months I gave up. I didn't go any more because I found out how to make paintings. I just started thinking about it. Just sketching had no meaning. I thought that, anyhow.

**FS:** Who was teaching at the Academie Ranson then?

**KO:** There was no teaching.

**FS:** No teaching at all?

**KO:** Oh, maybe I've forgotten. I think it was the Grande Chaumiere. No teachers. Maybe there were teachers but I never met any.

**FS:** What was their system? That you would just work and then they would come in and give a critique occasionally?

**KO:** No.

**FS:** Or not even that?

**KO:** No, nobody. There are many rooms and models in each room. And we could go to any room and sketch.

**FS:** So that, in essence, what you were getting really was a place to work and models to sketch from?

**KO:** Just pay . . . we bought . . . it was a kind of ticket and we could sketch in any of the rooms. That's all. That was very free. There were no teachers. But some other academies, for instance, had teachers, yes, Massenger or Bissiere.

**FS:** You were in Paris from 1922 to 1927, weren't you?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** Now, in this time you had no what we would call official instructors? I mean, no teachers?

**KO:** For me?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** Oh, no, no. At that time I'm just waking up, becoming aware. Even before I got into the art school in Tokyo, when I was going to the academy there were some teachers, but I don't like teachers.

**FS:** Then what was it about Paris . . . ? You learned a great deal in Paris?

**KO:** Oh, yes.

**FS:** But how?

**KO:** Oh, I was just like a young bird in a cage going out to look at everything, this kind of thing, you know. I used to go to the Louvre, for instance, and I saw many things. But I cannot understand. I can feel, but I cannot understand. I was too young for looking at everything, not only for looking at paintings in galleries or

somewhere, but for many things. For instance, I used to meet Giacometti and many others. But he was very poor. He'd just talk but nothing about art. Too young.

**FS:** You were too young?

**KO:** Oh, yes, yes. I was too young. But when I think of the good side of that experience in Paris it was so fresh, just like a kid, you know, a young boy. At that time in Paris I was very lonely and kind of sad. But after many years I think, oh, what a wonderful experience I had in Paris. But at that time I was never thinking about that. About a couple of years ago, I found myself . . . when I look at beauty that came from my foundation when I was around ten years old.

**FS:** In Japan?

**KO:** Oh, yes. When I was around ten years old. My childhood mind was my foundation. For many years I didn't know that. But about six years ago I found that is my basic foundation. It came from my childhood. I think that is so for everybody. Once on the radio I heard Frank Lloyd Wright give a talk and he said that he grew up on a farm somewhere in New England, I think.

**FS:** In Wisconsin.

**KO:** And he said that was his foundation. I understand what that means. At the age of ten the childhood mind is so clear, so pure, so without knowing. Just catches like an antenna does, you know. So that when people are grown up this kind of mind is their foundation; for everybody, I think. So now I understand my best foundation. Just now I remember what I saw, what impressed me. And after that foundation, grown-up kind of experience is just built up on that.

**FS:** But I would think -- now I'm just guessing -- but I would think that in Japan and particularly at that time there would be more things of beauty to see than would be usual in other countries. I mean more insistence on good design.

**KO:** You mean that when I was a child that period in Japan was more beautiful than today?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** Oh, yes, yes.

**FS:** I would think so.

**KO:** Oh, yes, yes. That was very much Japanese. Today some particular place or a temple deep in the mountains is almost the same. But in or near the cities I think it is very much changed. So I was lucky to see the wonderful pure Japanese things I saw. That memory is my treasure.

**FS:** One hears, Mr. Okada, that in Japan there was more of self-training perhaps, a training in sensitivity to these things in those days.

**KO:** For young people?

**FS:** For everyone.

**KO:** I am sorry, I don't . . . .

**FS:** That sensitivity to beauty was trained into people and they felt it more.

**KO:** For instance, it is a very wonderful thing for children to be with nature; this is most important. Next most important is having the chance to look at tradition, you know, making many things for festival or decoration which were made since many years. For instance, Japanese pure house. Oh, that kind of beauty of house cannot be made so soon; it takes a very long time. Today's children do not have much chance to look at those things and that is very bad. So I was very fortunate. I had a very good chance to look at those things.

**FS:** So, in other words, you started off with this background immediately.

**KO:** Not through my drawing or painting. I was so impressed. when I was a little boy I never expected that I would be a painter but I was impressed just looking. When I was very little my brother took me to see the Noh play, classic play, but at that time I could not understand it at all. Since then, I've often gone back to Japan and seen many Noh plays. But at that time I could not touch the Noh play. Do you understand that?

**FS:** Yes, I do understand that.

**KO:** Without knowing, you know, you must catch everything.

**FS:** It was an aesthetic sensibility that you had from the very beginning.

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** I would think that your first impression of Paris must have been exciting but also rather surprising because most Western cities, even Paris, are not as sensitively arranged as . . . .

**KO:** I'm sorry. [Mr. Okada does not understand this question so Mr. Selvig repeats it.]

**FS:** I say I would think that your first impression of Paris must have been . . . ?

**KO:** Oh, my impression of Paris was very good. It was a wonderful experience for me. I spent three years there that time. I only did a couple of paintings. I didn't think so at the time but on looking back I realize that it was a wonderful experience.

**FS:** But mainly you were looking while you were in Paris?

**KO:** It was a kind of training of my mind. That's what was wonderful about it; not through training of my hand, acquiring technique, no. Not the drawing or painting I did there; not my work. My work was practically nothing. I did just a few paintings in three years in Paris. But for the training of my mind there was a wonderful experience. It was just like when I was in Japan all the time I was in a cage and when I got to Paris I was out of the cage and I saw a world that was very wide and very strange and very changed. That was my wonderful experience.

**FS:** And it was a world full of artists from all over, from everywhere who were working and appreciated?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** There were many artists working there. You met Giacometti.

**KO:** Oh, yes, that was a wonderful time, a very good time.

**FS:** Who else did you meet besides Giacometti when you were there?

**KO:** Mr. Foujita was there. You know, the painter who just recently died.

**FS:** Foujita? Oh, yes.

**KO:** And Kisling. And Marie Laurencin. Zadkine. Pruna. But, you know, I never met Picasso. There were many good painters there that I never met. I saw them wandering in the streets, that's all.

**FS:** You knew Giacometti but you didn't discuss art with him much?

**KO:** No. He was very, very poor. I used to go to Montparnasse and I would see him there. Every day he stopped and talked to me. My friend introduced me. He'd always say, "How are you?" Or something, you know. I was too young. But my impression of him was that he was a wonderful man; just a super man. He didn't care about other things. He was just walking around. Very good. But that's one of the things even though I don't know about him. He would say hello and talk and we would take a walk together in the streets but I never appreciated . . . I liked him but I never understood. I was too young. Everything was too hard to understand. That was very good for me.

**FS:** You didn't understand what he was doing, is that it?

**KO:** About Giacometti. No. Now today I understand his work and about himself. A wonderful man but just an artist. He was a sculptor. He understood sculpture but nothing else.

**FS:** But you also knew Marie Laurencin, you say?

**KO:** Oh, at that time, yes. There were many. But I never met them. But I was very poor. I was just like a hungry dog in the street.

**FS:** But you saw her work I presume?

**KO:** Oh, yes, yes.

**FS:** And I presume that the museums and the art galleries and all of these were something that you visited very frequently?

**KO:** Yes. But at that time I didn't want to look at their work. I just didn't want to. I was too busy because I was too hungry. Everything was very haughty and stupid I thought. But today, looking back, oh, I had a wonderful experience in Paris.

**FS:** But then you went back to Japan in, let's see, 1927, was it?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** And when you returned to Japan you were continuing to work as an artist in Japan, too?

**KO:** I was still young. I wanted to make nice paintings. So I should understand and I should learn more to be able to make nice paintings. For many, many years after that, I'm learning my way with color, composition, line, and everything. But after many years I found I'm tired and I lost all my appetite to paint, to work, because between my work and myself there is a wide gap. My concepts made no relation with my work and with myself, I thought.

**FS:** I don't understand.

**KO:** I was tired. At that time, step by step, I began to develop an interest in Western things, in what's going on. Cezanne and Van Gogh and Tintoretto and Picasso. People said about me, "Okada is doing more than the Western people and he's Japanese." And really I did. My mind was always thinking of Western things, what's going on. And a kind of vision, without seeing, you know, just imagining about Western things. And my mind was never thinking about the Japanese tradition and Japanese things. I'm never thinking about them. But because I'm Japanese I understand. So that's why I don't need to learn them. My mind was always on Western things. And I lost my appetite and I was tired. And that's the big reason.

**FS:** That was why you returned to Japan?

**KO:** No, no. This was many years after Paris. About twenty years, I think. I was always thinking about Western things. And I lost my appetite and I was tired. That's why I had to change my atmosphere. That's the big reason I came to the United States in 1950.

**FS:** I see. Yes. I'm curious though, now when you were growing up in Japan before you went to Paris there certainly were museums in Japan where you would have seen Western paintings, no?

**KO:** Not much. But I had seen El Greco in a classic museum, and Cezanne. Not much, but some I saw. And mostly in reproduction.

**FS:** I see. But then when you returned to Japan from Paris -- I'm coming back to this period -- you returned to Japan. Why? Because you were tired of Paris?

**KO:** I was exhausted after three years in Paris.

**FS:** The difficulty of living?

**KO:** Oh, I was like a hungry dog and I was tired. And my brother could not send me any more money. That's one reason. And maybe if I had stayed longer in Paris I think I would have gotten sick. Sleeping in the street, you know, was very bad. And drinking. And not much to eat. And sleeping outside is very bad for the health.

**FS:** Sure.

**KO:** I think if I had stayed one or two years more, I would have gotten sick. So I thought the best thing was to go back to Japan.

**FS:** So when you went back to Japan you still continued to work as an artist. Did you work more as an artist when you returned to Japan?

**KO:** Oh, when I was in Paris I did just a few paintings; practically nothing. But when I returned, oh, yes, I worked for almost twenty years, I guess. X: Thirty years or more.

**KO:** Oh, yes? X: Thirty-five years.

**KO:** I worked lots.

**FS:** And then I take it that if your older brother was sending you money while you were in Paris he believed in you and he wanted you to go on and work like this? You had no problem with your family when you got back to Japan to work as a painter? There was no opposition to your being a painter now in Japan?



**KO:** No. Because I had no paintings to show him, he still didn't expect me good painter, no. Just a young brother, that's all.

**FS:** So now you're back in Japan. What did you do when you returned to Japan?

**KO:** Oh, I exhibited. There are many big artists groups, kind of associations or artists to exhibit. And I got to be a member of one of these groups.

**FS:** Now this is still in the late 20's, before 1930, is it? You see, you returned to Japan in 1927 from Paris and even at that time there were groups of young artists who were painting in this advanced style?

**KO:** Oh, yes. There were many groups at that time.

**FS:** What kind of a following did they have? What did the public think of them? Did they have collectors who bought their works?

**KO:** Oh, no, they were a kind of group doing a show, that's all.

**FS:** Where would you do the show -- in a museum?

**KO:** There is a big building for shows there. Many groups can show. The building in Japan for art shows is so big that one, two, three, four, five groups can show at the same time.

**FS:** How would you describe your style of painting at that time? What was it like?

**KO:** Sometimes it looked like Picasso. Sometimes it looked like Tintoretto or El Greco. A kind of mixture of classic and modern. Before I came to the United States in 1950 I didn't even know about abstraction. I didn't know about it. So before I came here it was kind of in the style of Picasso but not quite. I kind of tried it.

**FS:** But in the late 20's or the early 30's there were collectors in Japan who would buy?

**KO:** There were some. There were many collectors but it was not easy to make a sale.

**FS:** And they had commercial galleries?

**KO:** Yes, yes, they had galleries. And at that time every year I exhibited at the same gallery. but it was not so easy to sell. In Japan if you become famous you have a chance to sell all your paintings.

**FS:** If you were famous, say, in Europe of something? Is that what you mean?

**KO:** No, no. Famous in Japan.

**FS:** I see. The reason I ask this is that in the United States it was practically impossible in those days to sell anything if it was very modern.

**KO:** Yes, at that time it was. X: [Inaudible.]

**KO:** Not much, not much. X: Oh, yes.

**KO:** But very, very inexpensive. X: Inexpensive but . . . .

**KO:** Not much. Not much.

**FS:** Did you make enough to live on when you . . . ?

**KO:** Oh, yes. Living at that time was very easy; not so hard But today it's not so easy. Everything is not so easy. But at that time it was easier than today.

**FS:** Well, the cost of living was much lower.

**KO:** Oh, yes.

**FS:** Another thing I'd like to ask you, Mr. Okada, your painting style then was primarily Western, would you say?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** Now, as we approached the beginning of the Second World War, would there have been any opposition to that style of painting in Japan?

**KO:** I can't understand the connection about the Second World War.

**FS:** I was wondering whether there would be a rejection of Western influences.

**KO:** Oh, yes.

**FS:** There was?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** Would this have made it difficult for you to exhibit then, to show your work?

**KO:** There were many kinds of painters and also many styles. Some were very conservative and kind of classic and some very modern. Just at that time, Picasso was very modern. so there were many kinds of styles. But for modern to sell was not so easy.

**FS:** Well, I wondered whether the same thing had happened in Japan as did happen in this country at one time when we were going into the war and people didn't like to play Wagner, you know, or German music. And I wondered whether Western influences in painting would be considered bad.

**KO:** Oh, during the war, you mean?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** Oh, that was very different. Everything disappeared. And you could not paint except just for demonstration of Army and Navy. Some popular artists were doing paintings in connection with the war to show everybody about the war.

**FS:** Patriotism and . . . ?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** In this country, as you know, during the war many artists were taken into the Army and Navy to paint pictures of soldiers and sailors and battles and so on. Did this happen in Japan, too?

**KO:** [Inaudible.]

**FS:** I'm sure. Were you involved in anything like this? Did you do anything like this?

**KO:** Yes, some. I tried. Everybody tried. I tried but I gave up soon. I was not so good at it. X: We disappeared into the country and he did beautiful paintings, just beautiful paintings, and these were in a show after the war was over and the museums were opened. And these paintings were shown in a museum show and everybody was surprised.

**FS:** Oh, yes. So you were painting by yourself?

**KO:** Yes. Landscapes and nude girls kind of type of thing, just like Botticelli.

**FS:** You know . . . . Have you read Doctor Zhivago, this famous Russian novel? In this, Doctor Zhivago gets away from the Russian Revolution and goes off by himself in the Ural Mountains completely apart and he writes poetry. And this is what you were doing, you know.

**KO:** And fishing every day in the country.

**FS:** Well, nature is very important to you?

**KO:** Oh, yes. Also, atmosphere is very, very important.

**FS:** When you say "atmosphere," what do you mean exactly by that?

**KO:** For instance, this room, this studio with knowing . . . kind of same color and same feeling and in the country . . . New Mexico and Tokyo not the same. Through your eyes everything is changed. If the atmosphere is very bad, it makes very bad . . . .

**FS:** Well, you mean the physical atmosphere, then? I mean sunshine, air, or the social atmosphere?

**KO:** Here and the rest of the country are a little different . . . when look at the painting . . . In Japan very different. Atmosphere means even if you don't go out from a room, even sitting in the room in Japan and sitting here, the

feeling is very different. That's what I mean by atmosphere. Yes. After I was about three years in America, my things are all out and I am exhausted and tired. So I needed a change of atmosphere. So I went to Japan and, after six months there, I'm exhausted and tired. And I came here. And now I'm fresh.

**FS:** Well, going back to the war years, you went out to the country and painted primarily landscapes and figure studies?

**KO:** Yes. Farmers and landscapes and farmer's houses, and some things from my imagination.

**FS:** But this was an evolution then from what you had been doing earlier in Paris and later on, evolving out of, let's say, Cubism or something of this nature?

**KO:** I tried. But at that time during the war I didn't succeed because the atmosphere was very changed in my mind. So it was very hard to work. Just like the romantic side . . . it is almost impossible to . . . . My feelings were very changed during the war.

**FS:** Sure. In this case it would be a psychological atmosphere.

**KO:** Oh, yes, psychological, yes. And in 1950, we came to the United States. So my trouble was that when I was in Japan I was always thinking about Western things. That trouble is gone because I am here in the West. And, step by step, every year my feeling was, oh, I am Japanese, and I was sort of haunted by Japanese traditions. And the feeling always came out, Oh, I am Japanese, and all Japanese things come out without trying. That is a wonderful thing. So I am so grateful to get here because . . . well, before I came here I didn't think much about Japanese things, old things and things of today.

**FS:** In other words, then, when you were painting in the village during the war, your work then was more consciously Western, would you say?

**KO:** Not quite, no. Because in Japan in the country they are all farmers and every day we look at the trees and the rice fields and the farmers, and nothing else. So even my imagination cannot function. At that time I just did sketching and landscapes. But when I returned to Tokyo I started again in my imagination. I'm very romantic.

**FS:** But then at the end of the war you had an exhibition, I gather, in Tokyo?

**KO:** Yes, yes.

**FS:** And this was the first time that your work had been seen for some years publicly, I gather?

**KO:** Oh, yes.

**FS:** And what was the reaction to it then?

**KO:** Oh, they just dirty . . . kind of feared . . . just comes out new . . . trees, very fresh, very poor, but becoming very different.

**FS:** Where did you have the exhibition, Mr. Okada?

**KO:** At that time I belonged to a group.

**FS:** Well, then, this group was composed primarily of artists who'd had experience in the West like you? X: [Inaudible.]

**KO:** Oh, yes. In Japan today I find that almost all artists belong to some part of group. I don't like that. An artist is not like a member of some big company. I'm very sorry that it's that way. The artist should be more independent.

**FS:** Exactly.

**KO:** He should not belong to a company.

**FS:** The exhibition you had in Japan was when? In 1948?

**KO:** I think it was in 1948.

**FS:** What happened in Japan after the war in artistic things, in the art world? Was there a sudden interest in Western things?

**KO:** Yes. Some very few but good artists were going their way. But very few. But mostly people were working

just like Western way. That is very bad. (But I did, too.) Their painting is Japanese painting but they think it's Western way. It's very unnatural. It's not so good.

**FS:** I was wondering, Mr. Okada, at the end of the war there was a great emphasis on Western things in Japan, I believe, throughout the society. And this must also have affected the art world.

**KO:** Oh, yes.

**FS:** A kind of jump out of what had been done.

**KO:** No, at that time was the beginning of abstraction. Yes. So people mostly started abstraction just like in America.

**FS:** And this was in the late 1940's, would you say, in Tokyo?

**KO:** Oh, I'm not good for dates, but . . . X: [Speaking to KO in Japanese.]

**KO:** . . . before 1950 is kind of start of abstraction for some; but not for everybody. But just the beginning. That's why when I came here in 1950 I didn't know what abstraction was. So for the first time I saw many Tomlins and Rothkos. But, oh, at that time I thought it was very strange painting. I couldn't understand it, at that time, any way. I tried to work. But at the beginning here I had a very hard time. I was trying to paint but I didn't paint anything. Mostly I had a very hard time.

**FS:** You came to this country in 1950?

**KO:** Yes. X: [Inaudible.]

**KO:** So in the beginning mostly I was destroying; I did many paintings but I always destroyed them. Today I think I wish I had kept them. But it's too late.

**FS:** But why did you come to this country?

**KO:** I told you already one of the reasons. I was tired, exhausted; I had lost all my appetite to paint. So I had to change my atmosphere. That is my main reason. One more reason: At that time the atmosphere in Japan in the art field was not so good for me. And I was tired, too. And I had to escape. And also I wanted to change. I wanted a fresh atmosphere. That's why I came here.

**FS:** I was thinking of the rise of the New York School of abstract expressionists. It was in the late 40's and I was wondering how much of the knowledge of this, how widely known they were in the world. Were they known in Japan?

**KO:** Not quite. That was too early, I think.

**FS:** But I'm not quite sure when they started to be internationally known.

**KO:** Today, though, it's almost the same. There's no difference.

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** Today, you know, something is happening in New York and goes through to Tokyo to my eyes. Very fast today.

**FS:** So you came here in 1950 and you wanted a change of atmosphere and you began to see Rothko and . . . ?

**KO:** Tomlin.

**FS:** Oh, yes. Bradley Walker Tomlin. And painters like this.

**KO:** And Clyfford Still.

**FS:** And painters of that school.

**KO:** I didn't even know there was a New York School. I didn't know that. Nothing. I was tired. Before I came here, when I told people I was going to America, they said, "What!" They were very surprised. People were used to artists going to Paris. But my feeling about Paris was not so good. I felt something very favorable about America. It was my intuition. I had a very hard time in the beginning and everything. But my feeling about America was very comfortable and fresh and promising. At that time Europe was dead, you know, except for Matisse and some of the masters.

**FS:** Sure.

**KO:** And Europe is worse now today. And America is more up. There's a mixup today. X: Well, Japan is just like Europe. Always the Europeans just like they have to wear something.

**KO:** That is the point. That is a kind of . . . what is it when you wear a costume?

**FS:** Uniform?

**KO:** Uniform. I don't need uniform. I'm uncomfortable. I have to take off my uniform. But it is not so in America. It's so very good.

**FS:** I see. But this is something that's beyond . . . it's separate from you as an artist? Or is it -- the clothes part?

**KO:** Excuse me. Let me finish. Even not at that time. Also today. Last spring we went to Spain for the first time and I liked the country very much. A very different country. I enjoyed it very much, more than I thought I would. But it is too Spanish. And Paris is too French. England is too English. Germany is too German. Italy is too Italian. The too-Spanish style, the too-French style is very bad for me. But in America this is not so. They don't wear a uniform. And oh, that is wonderful! That is what I need.

**FS:** But only in New York.

**KO:** Yes? There is a difference between New York and other parts of the United States?

**FS:** Oh, yes. I also suspect, Mr. Okada, I've noticed this with myself that when I go to a country that is not my own, like Italy for instance, I feel much freer.

**KO:** Oh, yes? You are Italian?

**FS:** No, I'm American. My wife is Italian and we go to Italy quite often. But it's just that it's not my country and somehow all of the conformist things that you know exist in your own society you're not aware of in another country and, because you're a foreigner, you have more freedom and you're expected to have more, I think. But it's true that I think New York is quite an international city.

**KO:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Very good for young people. Wonderful studios.

**FS:** Let's say, now we're going back to your arrival in this country in 1950 and you were impressed by Tomlin's work. I'm not surprised because to me Tomlin has some of the feeling of calligraphy, as we call it.

**KO:** Yes. In a very Western way.

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** And Tobey, too.

**FS:** Yes, yes.

**KO:** But very Western way.

**FS:** Yes. But it's a kind of bridge between the two.

**KO:** Oh, yes, yes. Just like I'm American, a very strange, very funny American. X: [Speaking in the background in Japanese.]

**FS:** When you arrived in this country in 1950 you obviously came to New York. You started painting there.

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** And you met Tomlin?

**KO:** No. wrong. I never met Tomlin but I saw his painting. Mr. Tomlin died at almost the same time that Kuniyoshi died; a week later I think. I saw Clyfford Still and Rothko and Motherwell and many others. But not Tomlin. I never met him.

**FS:** Did you know Kuniyoshi?

**KO:** Oh, yes. His house was very near my former apartment. I talked to him many times.

**FS:** Mr. Okada, how does it work when you are a painter from another country and you arrive in a new country? How do you get to know other artists who are there already?

**KO:** [Does not understand the question.] What does it mean "get to know?"

**FS:** How do you become acquainted with them?

**KO:** What is "acquaint?" I don't know what it means.

**FS:** How do you introduce yourself as a person? How do you meet them?

**KO:** On! First I had to belong to some gallery. I was looking, looking, and finally I found Betty Parsons. And through Betty at an opening, at a party, she introduced me to many artists. And then I met friends of friends.

**FS:** So Betty Parsons took you on right away when you came?

**KO:** She was the first one, yes.

**FS:** Boy! That's really great because she's such a good person.

**KO:** Yes, I . . . .

**FS:** What did you do? Did you just take your work and show it to her?

**KO:** First we went to her gallery. I thought, oh, this is a nice place; it looks so good. No reason, just intuition. And I called her and said how about looking at my painting. She said, "I have no time now, I'm going to Europe tomorrow. But I promise you that when I return from Europe i will see your paintings." We forgot about it. And when she returned from Europe she came to my studio. And that was the beginning.

**FS:** That was good.

**KO:** At that time I was very lucky.

**FS:** Now was this as soon as you arrived in this country you did this?

**KO:** Oh, no, no. After about three years.

**FS:** After three years?

**KO:** Oh, yes. I didn't know anybody. I had a very hard time. I had no money; nothing. No friends; nothing. X: [Speaking in the background.] Walking and walking and walking to galleries, etc.

**FS:** Can we repeat this again for the tape? I don't know that we would get that on the tape. Let's see, so in other words, you had called Betty and she said she was going to Europe. And then you forgot about her. And then she called you and said, "May I come down?" X: Well, you see, I think it was in September or something we called, the end of September, and she said, "I'm busy, I'm going to Europe, but I'll call you when I get back."

**FS:** And she did call back?

**KO:** And she promised to . . . . X: She promised to, but we didn't know whether she would. We were not sure. And then she came back in the summer. Oh, it was in the spring that we called her, maybe May. She was going to Europe for the summer, everybody goes for vacation. And she returned maybe in September or later. And she called.

**FS:** And she came down. X: Yes. she said, "Will tomorrow at ten o'clock be all right?" We said, "Yes, yes."

**FS:** And she came down and looked at your paintings and said these are wonderful, marvelous, and she wanted to have you in her gallery? X: Yes.

**FS:** And that was after you'd been here for three years working?

**KO:** About that, yes. X: I think it was about 1953.

**KO:** About that, yes.

**FS:** And did you have a show in her gallery soon after that?

**KO:** Yes, at about that time the next year.

**FS:** And for these three years in New York you'd been painting constantly?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** Tell me about the effect of New York on you in those three years. You went, I'm sure to many of the museums and the galleries?

**KO:** My impression of New York in the three years?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** Oh, we went to museums and galleries but it didn't fit well. It looks far from me. And also I was busy trying to paint myself. So everything did not fit well. But anyway I was very comfortable here, and very free. That was a wonderful condition. But my problem was where am I going? I don't know where I'm going. I had a very hard time.

**FS:** But I take it . . . I understand that when you looked at Tomlin and Rothko . . . ?

**KO:** I couldn't understand them.

**FS:** But you found them very interesting. Did you find them a kind of opening of a door or anything like that?

**KO:** No, no. Before that I cannot understand. I found them a very kind of a new thing. I never saw such a thing. You see, I didn't even know about abstraction. And that was . . . so that is abstraction. But I am very bad for this kind of knowledge. I just . . . only my imagination and my intuition makes my world, you know, not other things.

**FS:** But, Mr. Okada, would you say though . . . have you felt that you have had some influence from other people?

**KO:** Oh, yes. And I started to understand Rothko and Tomlin, etc. I started to understand that kind of thing. And when I understand something, that thing bothers me.

**FS:** When you understand it?

**KO:** For instance, I started to understand Rothko's work. So Rothko's work bothers me. so I have to get rid of Rothko first. Sometimes it comes out from another painter. so I have to get rid of him. But when I'm not so good, it always bothers me. And today I don't need the knowledge of things. So how to get rid of my knowledge is my business today. Before when I started my painting I made a kind of an idea in my mind. But today without idea is a wonderful condition to start painting.

**FS:** Without an idea?

**KO:** Yes. So before it was how to make a painting. But today how to make it is the worst thing for me.

**FS:** You say how to make a painting is the worst thing for you today?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** Now you mean a concept, an idea before you start painting?

**KO:** Yes. Kind of like if the canvas is "O" and myself is "H2" together it makes water. If there's too much water, it's very bad. It never becomes fresh.

**FS:** Do you approach a canvas then with no idea?

**KO:** It's more complicated than that; it's very hard to explain. You know, getting progress or having object always bothers me. Progress or object is not important. Direction is more important than object. If I find something before I find direction, it's very bad. Without knowing the best way to go to find right direction. But ,after some experience, I can feel I'll make it this way. So I do it this way. But this is very hard to tell. If I'm going that way it's very uncomfortable and I don't like that. So I prefer this way. But if I catch something before working this is always not so good. But it just happens that to make something is the only way to work.

**FS:** Well, in other words, this is what they call "action painting."

**KO:** Oh, no, no.

**FS:** No?

**KO:** No. This is a vitamin; this is a kind of knowledge. Taking different vitamins is very good but if it's just a hungry boy eating food, this is the best way. So without knowing what kind of food but just taking a taste, this is very good. I want to paint that way. Oh, this is very good for me, today I need a vitamin -- this is not so good.

**FS:** Well, in relation to the painting, I can't quite make the translation into painting. Do you see what I mean?

**KO:** Something I understand always bothers me. So without knowing is the best way, even I myself can't tell which way I'm going, you see. It's very difficult to explain.

**FS:** When you start working on a painting?

**KO:** For instance, if I start something with yellow and I think I'll finish it in red or blue. But I don't know which I'm going to do. Yellow is always the beginning or the end. Yellow makes me very uncomfortable. There is no meaning for me about yellow. So if, without knowing and just going and get yellow, then this is a very good yellow for me. You have a wife?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** Now before you got married she is wonderful. So you got married. You got married just one time?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** Oh, yes? Are you sure? And now, after many years you forget about your wife. Now you understand what your wife is much more than before you saw her, don't you think?

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** I take a fish. Oh, this is a fish. It tastes wonderful. But if without knowing, oh, this is a fish, it tastes very good. Oh, this is a fish. It's much better if, before eating, oh, this is a fish and eat, it's not so good. There are even many wonderful things in my painting that I did but if it doesn't fit well, it has no value, no meaning.

**FS:** Yes, I think I understand. It's all one part and fits together.

**KO:** So you are not thinking always about your wife and so that is the real wife. If you think about her too much, it is not real. There is something wrong. If you are very comfortable, that is the real wife.

**FS:** Mr. Okada, you told me also that when you are in America you feel more like a Japanese painter. Is this right? And then . . . ?

**KO:** No, I cannot turn myself to Western people. I am Japanese but completely different. But when I am staying in Japan it's very bad conscience to find myself.

**FS:** Why?

**KO:** Because, just like your wife, if you're always together with your wife, you never think of your wife. That's the trouble. If you're going somewhere . . . . When I was with my mother in Japan I wasn't thinking about her. But when I came here to the United States, I thought about my mother all the time, without trying. So this I found myself when I came here to the United States. Not trying it just gradually comes out in myself, yes. As I said about a child ten years old, for everybody this is the real foundation, I'm sure. He has many experiences and knowledge but no meaning. But if fellow . . . this foundation comes out when one is mature and it makes a wonderful fellow. Dr. Nishita is a very wonderful Japanese philosopher. He is now dead. He studied with the German philosophers, Kant, Hegel, and many other Western philosophers for more than thirty years. And after that he found his own Oriental feeling about his Nishita philosophy. So, by going in the opposite way, you can find your own thing. If trying to find only myself, I never can find out. If I can touch or make a red color and trying to -- digging red maybe a while life and never finding it, never touch red. But if . . . found out of red you can find the red.

**FS:** Well, talking about . . . is it Dr. Nishita?

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** Who was the philosopher you say that he studied -- Hegel and the others -- and he came back eventually to what he thought . . . ?

**KO:** He studied the German philosophers and the French, Bergson, you know, and Goethe and Schopenhauer, and many philosophers. He studied them for many years, perhaps more than thirty years; and finally he found his own Oriental philosophy.



**FS:** I don't know his work but I would ask you this: whether his experience would not be that of re-evaluating his own background in the light of insights that he got from Hegel and Schopenhauer and so on. In other words, I'm relating it to you in this sense to ask whether your Japanese . . . ?

**KO:** Western philosophers, some have a different kind of thought from Oriental people. But if you learn some of these Oriental philosophers can graduate this kind of thought and then understand Kant's philosophy, and after that they can find themselves in a kind of opposite way, first going to the opposite way and then finding their own way. So it seems for me, too, I think the same way I find the other way. Because, since I always ate Japanese food since I was a boy, I never thought about Japanese food and I wanted to eat Western food (that was one reason why I came here). Now I understand Western food and now I understand what Japanese food is.

**FS:** Well, would it be right to say that someone like you or like the philosopher would be a person who has developed an international mind? Or an international . . . ?

**KO:** Oh, yes. Bach is. And Cezanne is very international; he is very French but very European and also very Oriental in feeling. But, you know, Bach is too big to . . . no offense to you or anything . . . Bergson is some kind of Zen, you know, Oriental religious feeling. It's a kind of Zen feeling that Bergson has.

**FS:** There have been examples of American artists who have been influenced by Oriental philosophy and Oriental thought.

**KO:** Yes. For instance, Tobey.

**FS:** Tobey and Graves.

**KO:** Tobey is a kind of . . . he likes that Oriental feeling but his way is very different.

**FS:** Well, he's approaching it from the other way, from your way of developing, no? I would say that Mark Tobey went to the Orient and studied the Oriental philosophies and Oriental styles.

**KO:** Yes.

**FS:** And this helped him to develop his way just as you going the other way around, going from the Orient to the West, have developed yours.

**KO:** Yes, yes. That's a wonderful thing. That's why the opposite direction. If eating rice every day I lost my appetite. But if I took different things, they were so good, so tasty. Now, after tasting and you have found other kinds of food, you can find one food. So Mr. Tobey also learned Oriental things and he found himself in his way, I think. He saw. I came here and I found myself. If I stayed in Japan it would be a different way, or it would take a longer time I think.

**FS:** Even though it seems to me . . . Today there are several museums of modern art in Japan; there's a big one in Tokyo, isn't there, now?

**KO:** Yes. Yes.

**FS:** A huge one. And certainly the influence of the Orient on Western art has been tremendous, starting with the Impressionists and going on . . .

**KO:** You're talking about the building? X: No.

**FS:** No. So art is becoming more international and less . . . ?

**KO:** But this is very interesting, you know. As a human being maybe your ancestors are Italian and Scotch but a mixture including many things. I know a wonderful American lady who can one son; she's very thoughtful with her son. At very young age, she took him to show the other countries, Oriental countries, and Egypt and Pakistan and everywhere. She says it . . . you think too much about America; it's not too good to understand only what America is. So that is very great. I came here to the United States. That's why I found myself.

**FS:** But you found yourself more here than you did in Paris? In Paris you were too young probably?

**KO:** Oh, too young. Everything too young. But now Europe smells Europe. In England, oh, too much British. Smells too much of English type. Spain is very Spanish; oh, it smells too much. Italy, too. French is very, very bad, kind of stinky. The United States is, oh, very comfortable. Not much style. New York is . . .

**FS:** Only New York, I think.

**KO:** No, I don't think so. New York is a little different but it's an international city. But it is also America, I think. Oh, yes, I think so. And a very good city. Wonderful studios for young people, young students.

**FS:** Here you say you're more aware of, you appreciate Japan more when you're away from it. Is that what you're staying?

**KO:** Oh, yes, yes. Some of my friends say about me you are like a foreigner, like a tourist. You like too much about Japan. That's what some of my friends say to me. It's very strange. Just like a foreigner. So I appreciate Japanese things. But mostly Japanese think about Japan.

**FS:** But Japan has changed a great deal since the war?

**KO:** Yes. But this is only on the surface. It's still there. Not much change.

**FS:** I was thinking, for instance, of these shows that the Museum of Modern Art has had recently of Japanese paintings that Bill Liberman has put together after his trips over there. And it certainly seems to me that there are a lot of revolutionary new things coming out of Japan.

**KO:** Oh, this is more quickly than America, faster, very quick, just like telephone company. Very quick, very advanced work. But this is Japanese way. X: I think after the war, all countries, France and Italy and all over, came to show in Tokyo, you know. We noticed a change. We can see everything in Tokyo.

**KO:** And very fast. Everything is coming very fast today. Pop and Op and everything comes very fast. Now I think people start . . . after many years I think abstraction is West and East meeting each other. Two completely different things meeting, making each other Western and Eastern abstraction. That's why it takes a long time. And then some people think a kind of big epoch will come, has already set in I think today. But this is before stage opens. It's kind of doing things Op and Pop. Many things are being tried. But now people are a little tired waiting too long for opening stage of big epoch . . . will be soon. We will see what will happen.

**FS:** Sometimes I'm not so sure it's going to be good. The way things have been. But we certainly are living through a great change in this country.

**KO:** For instance, Giacometti since he was young and until he died and in even the last couple of years, he did very modern things. But he worked his own way; always through his way till the end. That was wonderful. so there are no new things. Somebody keeps asking me what is the new thing? Nobody can explain what are new things. There is no new thing in the world. Giacometti took his own way till the end. That's the real way. Many times I saw his work but at last I understand what he did.

**FS:** You know, looking at your paintings, Mr. Okada, it seems to me that I feel a sensitivity which I would say is Oriental.

**KO:** Some.

**FS:** And yet using terms which are international. Would you say that this would be so?

**KO:** You know after seven years past, I went back to Japan. And in Japan many things had changed. But I was not surprised at all. I myself have changed. Myself has not changed but my thinking had changed. I talked with my old friends and the family and I found there was quite a gap.

**FS:** How had you changed?

**KO:** Democratized.

**FS:** Democracy you mean?

**KO:** Kind of thinking, learning to think, everything is thinking, kind of . . . Americans are used to thinking and working fast and so different. America has all this definition, you know; yes and no, it's very clear. I like that. In Japan if you say something so directly and clear it's very dangerous for everybody. Somebody may lose a job. You are so very careful, like a diplomat, you know. But Americans are very serious. They make an appointment and come here, "How are you," and then start talking business. But in Japan talking business is not so good; you talk of many things and just before saying goodbye, "May I ask this kind of thing," and then talk about business. Too fast is not so good. Too many people looking. So this is kind of not so good. But Americans are too good. That's the trouble.

**FS:** Too good?

**KO:** Having too much definition.

**FS:** Well, that's very likely our great problem.

**KO:** No tricks. That's the American trouble. But it's very comfortable for me. So Japanese people, also artists, are not having definition and are very kind of wishywashy. That's is a very terrible trouble.

**FS:** But they've gotten along for thousands of years.

**KO:** Well, that's different. But the Japanese do well with other's ideas. For instance, Germany, France and England -- I'm not sure in America -- but other countries import some goods. But these kinds of things are not for my country. They refuse to import. But Japan has everything like the import. So it's very strange. Concrete and iron and plastic and everything, you know, with the bamboo. What a combination! I'm worried about Japan's . . . . But this is kind of surface. Even the Red Chinese today -- somebody said that the Chinese culture is gone. Three French said that some time ago. But this is not true. There's still China and the Chinese. The government and everything is changed but the Chinese have not changed. The culture is 3,000 years old. Just a couple of years or ten years or a hundred years is impossible to change.

**FS:** Yes.

**KO:** America is a little different because there are many kinds of people but not many styles. So this is a very kind of strong vitamin. You have a very strong vitamin. Japan is very pure. That's the trouble. But I am not worried about Japanese things. They're still there.

**FS:** The new constructions, the new architecture and so on in Japan I've seen pictures of some of it and I find it rather disappointing. For instance, the Imperial Hotel, the new one that's going up looks like any hotel anywhere in the world.

**KO:** It's nothing. It's terrible. But there are many old temples and shrines so don't worry about that. Even big expensive buildings after about thirty years are destroyed and changed. But a shrine stands for a thousand years. Because it has a different meaning. The big buildings are like a kind of dress, thirty years is long enough to use them. Hotels, schools, office buildings.

**FS:** We hear so much about Tokyo as being the swinging city now. All that's happening. And novelists, painters, everything.

**KO:** Oh, everything is mixed up. I like Spain very much. We were there three weeks and I enjoyed it very much. But Tokyo is very different because everything is mixed up. You know, it's just like bread with yeast. Something good happens, a kind of feeling. It's very exciting. Very mixed up. Everything is confusing but very interesting and exciting.

**FS:** Now you go back to Japan quite frequently, do you?

**KO:** I went last spring and I will go next spring.

**FS:** And when you go back to Japan you feel sort of not quite at home any more?

**KO:** No.

**FS:** You do feel at home?

**KO:** Oh, yes. Now I've lived in this room for more than fifteen years and when we're here it looks like home. But Japan is home, too.

**FS:** I was wondering whether the years of living in the United States have changed your ideas.

**KO:** Yes. I just did a little thinking and worrying about it before I came here; if I'm staying too long in the United States. My feeling is I'm not Japanese, I'm not American; I'm kind of Nisei or something. But this is a big mistake. This is a very big mistake. When I was in my studio in Tokyo I was very much at home. This is almost twenty years in the United States. I'm very much at home, very comfortable. And in my New York studio and the Tokyo studio there is a different atmosphere but I can work with no trouble.

**FS:** Now, for instance, the painting that you do in Japan now, would it be different from the painting that you do in New York?

**KO:** Oh, yes.

**FS:** It would be?

**KO:** Kind of more sensitive.

**FS:** More sensitive?

**KO:** More delicate. This country is kind of more . . .

**FS:** Liberal?

**KO:** Kind of rough or big, kind of heavy, more strong.

**FS:** I see.

**KO:** But very sensitive in Japan. The atmosphere makes that.

**FS:** In other words, would I be correct in saying it this way? In this country it's less subtle, less delicate than it would be in Japan. X: [Inaudible.]

**KO:** Oh, I have kind of nervous strength in United States. But Japan is not getting nervous but very sensitive, very delicate. The atmosphere makes that.

**FS:** Now I would assume that in Japan, however, it would depend on where you were, too. I would think that probably in Tokyo it would be more nervous than it would be in the country.

**KO:** No.

**FS:** No?

**KO:** No.

**FS:** I find, for instance, that I feel much more full of energy in New York than I do when I go out to smaller towns.

**KO:** I understand about the Japanese changing a lot. The American government or many things happen maybe makes a little nervous. Oh, when John Kennedy, the President, was killed, people in Japan were shocked. That was a kind of international feeling.

**FS:** Oh, yes.

**KO:** Oh, yes. Today it's more like a priest that talked with you today. We didn't touch on some things but we make some atmosphere. I'm glad.

**FS:** Well, we'll talk on some more, I hope.

**KO:** Talk more maybe?

**FS:** Yes. I'd like to because I want to continue this, if I may, with you at another time.

**KO:** No. If I talk too many nice things I think it's not too good. If I talk too much it's not too good.

**FS:** Oh, I think it's very good. This is exactly what we want. We want your feelings about life, everything.

**KO:** When some Japanese businessman or engineer or somebody comes to the United States for a short time to look at, to learn about things in America I give advice to them, don't look at too much so seriously. You can see more in the United States. Good advice, eh?

**FS:** Oh, yes. Well, this is true anywhere, don't you think?

**KO:** If you have too much sharp eyes you cannot find anything.

**FS:** Yes. You have to get the impression of a place.

**KO:** And you found something and take a note but this is not important. Without knowing when you return to Japan, you found something what you never thought in the United States. If before starting some intention or purpose or idea, if having too much, it will never succeed.

**FS:** Well then, how would you explain, how do you face the canvas?

**KO:** That is a secret.

**FS:** Well, if you put it on the tape nobody will ever know unless you let them know.

**KO:** That's a secret. Some young lady angel found her and why don't you invite her to heaven and return to earth so she understood everything . . . . Pretty soon he returned to human again. to understand everything is not so good. Without knowing, without understanding is the best way.

**FS:** In other words, you don't attempt to rationalize or to explain what happens to you when you face the canvas? You don't attempt to define for yourself what you're doing when you face the canvas?

**KO:** I'm sorry. [Doesn't understand question.]

**FS:** You don't investigate in your own mind what you're doing?

**KO:** Of course I do.

**FS:** You do?

**KO:** I do. But if I find something I want to paint but it never comes out, it is my experience that means before doing something this is very unnatural; this is not the real one. So even with knowing found some this is the real one, I want it that way. Before eating food, ah, this is . . . I never taste, you know and, oh, this is a kind of fish. So that's all right. I understand this, without eating I understand this kind of taste. So this is not real one. But if you are not looking, just eat, it's all right with your painting. Looks like real but nothing comes out. That is very bad. But even not so looks nice but comes out just like Cezanne's painting, you know. Always look at Cezanne painting but never the same. Comes out like nature. That is secret.

**FS:** But Cezanne started with a landscape or with a figure.

**KO:** Oh, yes.

**FS:** But you don't.

**KO:** But feeling is there. For instance, if a straight line and the color is right but different but if going more no difference. And even between black and white no different. There is black color in white. Some Chinese scientist found in electric, he found minus in plus and he also found plus in minus. Same way one to the other. Black and white is no different, but different.

**FS:** Now that I would say was . . . .

**KO:** See, I talk too much.

**FS:** No, no. I would say that what you were saying about the difference between Americans wanting to say yes and no to define things and your saying that the Orientals do not define them that adequately. If you say that black is somehow white and white is somehow black, well, this immediately throws out a whole other concept that there is such a thing as black and there is such a thing as white, no?

**KO:** Very interesting. Americans and Japanese are very far apart but face to face. So that is better than very close but back to back.

**FS:** Right.

**KO:** That's why I'm very comfortable, yes. I think that the people of many countries came to the United States and became Americans and live together very comfortably and very nicely. I think this is very good.

**FS:** I think I might end this tape here but I would hope to do the other side of it with you sometime soon.

**KO:** The other side?

**FS:** Not tonight but make another appointment with you to talk further if I may.

**KO:** Oh, yes. If you ask me the same things I will tell you on the other side.

**FS:** Okay. Fair enough. Okay, I'll take this off. [END OF SIDE 1] [END OF INTERVIEW]