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Oral history interview with James Brooks, 1965 June 10 and June 12

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Transcript

Interview

DS: Dorothy Seckler

JB: James Brooks

DS: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing James Brooks in East Hampton, or near East Hampton, this is actually Amagansett Springs. And this is June 10th, 1965, I'd like to begin by filling in some of your background, your early years, your childhood, where you were born, and so on.

JB: All right. My father had been a schoolteacher. I think he was born in Georgia. Then he ended up with a school of his own in Tupelo, Mississippi, I believe. I don't know the sequence of events after that. He had been married once before he married my mother. In the meantime he had turned into a traveling salesman of soda fountains. And they met at the Fair in St. Louis, I believe, the Louisiana Purchase Fair maybe. And they were married there. Then he was traveling around a good deal. There were four children, my older brother, myself, and two sisters younger - my older brother was born in Burton, Arkansas. I was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1906; one sister was born in Oklahoma City, and another was born in Denver, Colorado. I left St. Louis when I was five months old so I don't have much knowledge of St. Louis except through visiting. I went to many schools, I never went to any school long enough to finish out a school year.

DS: Was that pretty difficult for you?

JB: I don't think so at the time. It was maybe a little uncomfortable getting acquainted with people all the time but I started out well and did well in school when I was in grade schools, anyway, and skipped several grades. So by the time I had gone to Dallas in high school - I finished high school at fifteen - it didn't seem to bother me. We lived in Denver quite a while; Shawnee, Oklahoma; Oklahoma City; visited in Illinois a good deal and lived in Colorado Springs; summered in Cripple Creek once in a while; and went to Dallas when I was about eleven, I think it was. And then things started getting a little tough. Soda fountains didn't go so well I guess so my father became a traveling salesman around that territory in Texas for dry goods and then it really got pretty tough and we were pretty poor for a while. So I was working nearly all the time when I was there, after school and in the summers. I delivered packages in drug stores regularly. Then I got a job as office boy at the Simms Oil Company, which was a Texas oil company there; and for a few months became enamored of being a businessman. I used to imagine myself behind a roll-top desk writing out papers. That's the only time that I had any thought of doing anything else but drawing or art.

DS: Had you started drawing as a child?

JB: Yes, I had drawn all the time, steadily.

DS: I suppose your family didn't take you much around in the orbit of museums, but you saw pictured images in other places, in magazines, I suppose, if nothing else?

JB: Yes, I was raised on magazine illustration mostly, I think. My family weren't museum-goers and weren't educated in art so I just picked up from comic strips and magazines. Finally, a little before I came to New York, I started studying in Dallas. I started to study drawing at the Dallas Art Institute. At the time I made no separation between illustration and fine arts. They all seemed the same. I liked Rembrandt and Pruett Carter and Raleigh, all illustrators. When I came to New York I realized there was a difference.

DS: That's fascinating. You were just saying you saw very little difference between fine arts and commercial illustration and I have noticed with many other artists - naturally American artists - that this was true. I know it was true of me in my own background, too. So you then were going to art school in Dallas?

JB: Yes. A commercial artist came down from Chicago to start an art school with a landscape painter named Olin Travis in Dallas. They had gone to school together in the old days. The commercial artist's name was James Waddell. He was a pretty good figure draftsman. So I studied there, I was their first student. The school got along pretty well for a while. But then Waddell decided to come back to a big city and get going again. So he was going to New York. I'd had in mind to go to either Chicago or New York all the time. In the meantime I had been working for several years at Woolworth's - I used to work there after school and Saturdays. Mabel Cook, who did the show cards, quit; they knew I liked art and so they asked me to do them and I gradually got pretty proficient at it. Then when Brannan, who did show cards around town - had a pretty big shop - wanted to get their business, he asked me to work for him and that was a good opportunity for me. I did show fronts around town

for quite a while, until I left. Which was when I was nineteen, in 1926. Waddell was coming to New York, in an old Moon automobile which looked pretty good then, actually it was pretty handsome. So I drove up with him. That took care of my first few weeks here pretty well because he knew a few people he had known in Chicago. So he and I with two friends who came a couple of weeks later got rooms in a rooming house up on 77th Street and lived there for several years. I started studying when I came here at the Grand Central Art School with Pruett Carter, the illustrator, whose work I liked a good deal. I painted for several months there at night.

DS: What kind of painting were you doing at that time?

JB: There were clothed models posing in kind of illustrative poses and I was working them in pretty much - what would you call it - Post-Impressionist, or John Singer Sargent and William Merritt Chase sort of, tempered by Pruett Carter, kind of a luscious paint. I did a good many paintings.

DS: You were working in oils at that time?

JB: In oils, yes. I had studied a little in Dallas before that with Martha Simpkins, who had studied with William Chase in New York. She's a woman who lived in Oak Cliff where we had lived for quite a while, and I did still-lifes with her for several months, and very interesting. I gave them all away down there. So I had painted a little and had drawn some by the time I came to New York. Then after being in Pruett Carter's class for a while, it did get a little dull. You know, it seemed too easy. We produced pretty effective figure painting but I was getting around just a little. The class next door, which was just separated by a partition, the drawing class, was run by Arshile Gorky, who had just come to this country. I didn't know him then. He used to come in and sit around in the class before it started, and I was generally there early, and he would talk about the difference between colors and color, and odds and ends, you know - not anything definite enough for me to get hold of, but which made me wonder a good deal. And I was already dissatisfied. So I quit Pruett Carter's class and went to draw, which I needed more of, with Nicolaides at the League.

DS: How did you like Nicolaides? He had, of course, an enormous reputation.

JB: I liked him pretty well. I could use him right then, I guess. I liked his method of teaching. It was very personal, and then that finally smothered me. I felt that it was a kind of implication that you might be a genius, you know, and it was pretty subjective approach to teaching. He did teach you to draw. He didn't make any, or even intimate any transition from drawing to making a picture. We were left pretty much in the dark that way. I stayed with him, I don't know - a year, I suppose. Then the next time I went back to the League, the next year, I studied with Boardman Robinson because he seemed more externalized and more interested in how pictures were made. Particularly the Renaissance pictures, and he talked about them once in a while. It was a completely different approach to drawing, which I liked for a change.

DS: What particular things did you get from him that were formative to you?

JB: Boardman Robinson?

DS: Yes.

JB: I think a more conscious feeling of the designing of areas and spaces. Nicolaides was all intuitive and had no relation to that - what came out was fine if it was felt. Boardman Robinson attacked it a different way, a formal derivation from what he thought the good muralists of the past were doing, or something like that, you know. So they were quite different, mainly a difference between the completely introspective life and the more objective life, you know. During that time when I first came to New York I got a job lettering at a display company and then practiced pen-lettering so that pretty soon I was doing pen-lettering for advertising which is very interesting, and which I did to make my living from then on until I was able either to teach or make some living off painting. So I did lettering and I got so that I could make some living, then take a half-year off each year for a few years. When I saved up enough money, a friend and I who had worked together when I first came to New York, at an art service - he was painting all the time rented a lift on 17th Street near Fifth Avenue, a manufacturing loft. We had just gotten Max Doerner's book on techniques and were very interested in murals at the time because the big resurgence in Mexico was just happening.

DS: Was this before the Depression or after?

JB: This must have been after the Depression, but it was before the Project, a little. I guess you'd call it the Depression.

DS: Yes.

JB: During the Depression I made out pretty well. I hardly knew it was there except in my own personal life because my lettering was getting better and selling for more money all the time so it didn't affect me. So Bert

Goodman and I went through the book pretty much and tried all kinds of glazing techniques, under painting, stuff we hadn't known about before. We entered some mural competitions and I won the one I entered, which was for the Hempstead, Long Island, Post Office, a good-sized job - five big panels, I don't remember what it paid.

DS: This had nothing to do with the WPA Project at all? It was a private commission?

JB: It was called the Section of Fine Arts, in Washington, run by Olin Dows, and I've forgotten the other man's name.

DS: But you hadn't had to get on the WPA Project at all?

JB: No, I hadn't been on the WPA Project. In fact, the Project was just starting. I've forgotten the year, but it was around the time of the WPAP probably, or one of those things, you know, I had hardly heard of them.

DS: Would it be about 1931 or '32?

JB: No, a little later. Because in '31 I was in Woodstock, I know, and working at lettering at that time. So it must have been pretty close to 34 - I don't know. But anyway, I won this competition, which they felt a little bereft about because they had expected this important commission would be won by a name artist that they could be sure of a product from. And I had never had any experience in murals, and the sketches were small. They asked me to do a larger one so that they could tell more about it. Which I did. They probably didn't like it so much, and so they called it off. It was pretty nasty in a way, but I know their feelings. As a matter of fact, I was kind of glad not to get it by then; I was a little frightened.

DS: Who actually called it off?

JB: It was a government thing; it was for a post office. And it was the Section of Fine Arts in Washington who was running it.

DS: The decision was made in Washington by the Section of Fine Arts of what-the Section of what...?

JB: I didn't know anything about it except it was called the Section of Fine Arts. And they handled mural jobs, mural competitions for post offices that were being put up around the country.

DS: Were they also supervising WPA Projects at any time?

JB: No. That was unrelated.

DS: Completely unrelated?

JB: Yes.

DS: It's interesting. It's the first time I've run across this.

JB: It is? Well, there were many, many jobs done around the country . Most of the government jobs were done by them, the post offices and so on, I guess, until later when the WPA had some of them. There was some money allocated for building decoration and so they commissioned the murals from that - always by competition.

DS: Was the allocation something that came about as a part of that whole reaction you know, that also brought about WPA?

JB: I was thinking about it. I think that's probably what it was, yes. I think it must have tried to fit the same need kind of, except that it could handle some artists who wouldn't be on WPA or weren't able to be, or maybe more established artists. I don't knowù But it was a big operation. Anyway I had won that mural but not gotten it.

DS: They didn't give you any money or anything?

JB: No, they didn't give me anything. They felt pretty bad about it because they gave me another job. They felt guilty about it, and they gave me another small job later, just gave it to me, at Little Falls, New Jersey. Then later on they recommended me as one of the combat artists in the war, which was just an outgrowth of that too; they felt they still owed me something, I think.

DS: But you did later, of course, an important mural at LaGuardia?

JB: That was WPA.

DS: That was after - well, we don't want to rush ahead.

JB: All right. Well, let's see, I jumped from when we had our loft, Bert Goodman and I.

DS: Yes.

JB: Well, I did win this mural competition. And then - you're right, the WPA was going then because Diller, who was one of the Project supervisors, got in touch with me - I knew a friend of his - he said that they needed some non-relief artists to supervise projects. They didn't have quite the right talent to really handle the big jobs in some cases so they were taking on some non-relief. So he offered me this non-relief thing. Which was fine. The money that I had saved through work was gone then, on this loft, and I was glad to go on the Project instead of going back to lettering.

DS: Were you put on the mural project immediately?

JB: I was put on the mural project immediately because of the mural competition I had won.

DS: Did this introduce you to a new circle of artists?

JB: Yes. It introduced me to about the only artists I had known really, except some at the League when I had gone there and had seen occasionally afterwards. But I met more actually working artists on the Project.

DS: What year would this have been roughly - - about 1935 probably?

JB: I guess `35, probably, or `36. Let's see what I did. I was given a project at the Woodside, Long Island Library, and given assistants, and I painted a mural about seven feet by twenty-seven, and then an extra panel later.

DS: What was the subject of the mural? Did you decide it?

JB: It was called the Acquisition of Long Island. I think I decided it, yes. We were left pretty free about that. It was more or less a historical, episodic sort of thing, you know, the Indians and the settlers fighting a little and then them being friends, and the tilling of the soil.

DS: In what manner were you working at this time -- sort of post-Boardman Robinson?

JB: Well, let's see, now. Through Boardman Robinson I was able to organize a little more clearly or more cleanly, you know. It wasn't painterly, exactly, the way I was working.

DS: It wasn't, however, schematic or stylized, was it, or would you say it was somewhat stylized?

JB: Not very much. Not very much. But kind of organized compactly in a way. And at that time, as I remember, I did I believe a clay model of the thing before I painted it.

DS: You did!

JB: I think that was from a kind of loose association with Benton students. Benton did that, too. Yes, Bert Goodman had been a Benton student and I was being kind of infiltrated with the Benton doctrine at that time. And the Mexican renaissance was affecting us a great deal, all of us. At first I liked Diego Rivera, as most of us did. Then, it was Orozco completely, who was a much superior man, I thought. And then I started studying through Orozco, or Giotto, whom I think he drew from pretty much. The mural was not too interestingly organized actually, it wasn't too interesting a thing. After it was finished I did sketches for various places. I spent a good deal of time on a sketch for a high school in Queens, but when I took the sketch over to show it to the art teacher who had to pass on it, she said that she had not had that in mind - perhaps just a ground with golden birds flying on it, you know. It was silly to spend that much time silly, you know. But then LaGuardia Airport had just been built and I was given the space running around the rotunda of the Marine Terminal, which was 235 by l2 feet, three inches. An enormous space, very exciting, and so I started to work on sketches and finally the wall had been prepared.

DS: It was to be in fresco, then?

JB: Well, I did it in fresco secco. It could have been in any way, but I like the tempera medium pretty well.

DS: Had you used that medium in your previous mural in Long Island?

JB: Yes, I used a casein mixture - casein and glyptal at Woodside.

DS: Does that mean that you're not working in fresh plaster?

JB: That's right. You're working as if you were - it's gesso. They put up Belgian linen on the wall, then coated it with gesso and then sanded it well. Then I worked right on that just like a gesso panel, you know.

DS: Are such murals removable?

JB: Well, I - I really don't know. They should crack easily, it seems to me. Both of these murals have been destroyed. So I don't know just what condition they're in. Woodside Library was taken down recently and I didn't know anything about it until the wife of the man who demolished the building called the Kootz Gallery, asked them if they were interested in panels from the Woodside Library that I did; that they were his property because he had torn down that building. Can you imagine that!

DS: Good heavens! Well, what happened -- did you get any of them, or --?

JB: I didn't do anything about it. I didn't want them but I thought it was a pretty stupid situation.

DS: Oh, yes!

JB: The LaGuardia murals, I walked in there years later -- I had heard they were gone -- and I walked in to see and there were just white walls where the mural had been. They just painted over them, I guess.

DS: Without notifying anyone?

JB: Without notifying anyone. No. I don't know who did it, whether the Art Commission sanctioned it, or whether the Port Authority didn't need anybody's advice. But that such things can happen I think is really criminal. They don't give an artist a chance to remove it. He might, or somebody else might want to some time, you know. Just to destroy work that -- I spent four years on that mural.

DS: Four years!

JB: Yes.

DS: That is criminal.

JB: Yes.

DS: Not that it's the same thing but there was, I assume, some kind of pictorial record? Do you have color slides and that sort of thing?

JB: Yes, I have color slides and photographs.

DS: Of the entire mural?

JB: Yes.

DS: I'm asking the question because documentation would be of interest to the Archives.

JB: Yes, I do have color slides of that, and black and white

DS: Of course, that happened much later.

JB: Yes, that's right.

DS: How long ago was it that the LaGuardia murals were destroyed?

JB: Well, actually pretty recently. It must have been five years ago or something like that.

DS: When you were a name, you know, an internationally-famous artist. This is another thing that makes it so fantastic.

JB: Yes.

DS: Well, after the four years on this, it must have brought you close to 1940, I suppose?

JB: It did.

DS: What was your life like during those four years? Whom did you know and what were your ideas? Were your ideas about painting itself changing a good bit? Were you having much chance to think about it in terms of your own work?

JB: Well, soon after I came to New York - I came in 1926 - say, in '28, '29 and '30, I was pretty deep in looking at Picasso and Matisse and various French painters who were being shown over here, and a few Americans that interested me.

DS: Well, who particularly among the Americans would you say?

JB: I'm trying to think who they were. Rehn Gallery I used to go to a good deal.

DS: They had George Grosz.

JB: Grosz, Marsh, and who's the man from Buffalo that did the watercolors?

DS: Oh, yes, Burchfield.

JB: -- and John Carroll Beckwith and - I don't know - they had a number of people I was interested in. And then Speicher and Blanch.

DS: You did go to Woodstock, though, a couple of summers during this period and worked?

JB: Yes.

DS: You had a studio there and --?

JB: Well, I went one summer. The first place I worked in New York where I did pen lettering I met -- a friend, Julian Mansfield, who had gone to Cornell, I guess, with Bradley Tomlin. So he introduced us and we became friends. He had been going to Woodstock and that summer I went with him and we shared a studio there, a barn, and worked. That was the only time I went to Woodstock except for short visits to Tomlin or to Guston, or someone, you know.

DS: Who were your close associates during that WPA period? Had you made some important new friends? Tomlin, of course, was one.

JB: Tomlin was a little before the Project days and I didn't see so much of him actually during the Project days and I didn't see so much of him actually during the Project. I don't know just what he was doing then.

DS: He had been somewhat affected by Cubism. I don't know whether it was at that stage or not. Were you interested in Cubist art at this time?

JB: Very much.

DS: Of course, if you were looking at Picasso you must have been.

JB: Yes. Very much affected, very interested in the whole thing.

DS: And it had entered in, I suppose, to some extent of the way you planned the murals?

JB: Oh, yes, I think so, although it didn't show up too much. I wasn't able to successfully combine them. I was influenced primarily in my mural by Orozco and I guess a little by Benton, who was quite different, you know, and so it was a little mixed up. I though I had some vague idea that I could get both things in, a kind of a Renaissance organization of painting and then some of the other modern stuff integrated with it somehow, or not integrated in a real way but in a different places in it, you know. But it never quite worked - I couldn't do it. My closest friend on the Project was Phil Guston. We saw each other a good deal. He was on the mural project. He had just come from California and I met him through the Pollocks who had known him out there. And so we became very close friends. Also Jackson's brother, Sandy McCoy, who worked on my mural with me for a while.

DS: Jackson Pollock's, of course?

JB: Jackson's brother - Jackson Pollock's brother.

DS: You did know Jackson Pollock. I wasn't quite sure.

JB: Yes. So I knew the Pollocks, and Guston. Guston I guess at that time as well as anybody. And -- well, many other people.

DS: Would you think that your way of approaching a mural, and Guston's at that time, shared a good bit in their general approach?

JB: I think so, you see, Guston was much more developed than I was as a designer. He had done some murals in

California and he was a pretty highly developed, skilled student of Renaissance and everything, A marvelous designer. And so I did learn from him. I was actually, as far as organizing something at that time, a kind of a baby, you know. END OF SIDE I SIDE 2

JB: The Project, of course, was a great stimulus to all of us who were on it and I had not known many painters before. My lettering had thrown me into another world, and the whole experience of the Project was one of great ease of exchange and great interest and great comradeship. Part of the comradeship of poverty, I guess - we all got twenty-five dollars, or twenty-two dollars a week, or something like that. But we all got that and we lived on it well enough. Lofts were pretty cheap at the time. We had big places that were fixed up nicely and were working on something that interested us a lot and there was great community interest in the work.

DS: Did you paint in your own studios along a different line or were you more completely absorbed in your work for the WPA?

JB: Well, I was completely absorbed because it took all my energy to do murals. And particularly on this last, large one. I would draw at night, have models come to my studio at night to draw so I could work on the design and on the mural, and during the day I was out at LaGuardia painting and then trying to do some designing with the mural. The subject matter of the murals I worked on was completely decided by me. The first one was the Acquisition of Long Island at Woodside. That just seemed like a kind of a natural subject to me for the place, that's all. The other mural, a more important one, at LaGuardia was an idea I worked up myself, just Flight in an abstract sense, developing ideas of flight before and after it actually happened. There was never any interference at all. Never any. They were even careful to keep suggestion away. There was a great attempt made I think, at least on the mural project, which was under Burgoyne Diller, to give the artist complete, free rein.

DS: Was it Burgoyne Diller who had the job of approving or deciding anything?

JB: I think that the final approval of the mural was always -- let's see, the Art Commission I'm sure had to approve of it.

DS: Do you know who was on that?

JB: Dean Cornwell was on it for a while, and the others I don't know. Whether he was on at the time mine started I don't know. He might have come on later. General Somerwell, or Colonel Somerwell then, and I had to go up to city hall to see LaGuardia to show him the sketch of this mural. He was very particular that something good went into the building. He just said, "You know, I love the building and I hope you do something good." There were others. I think Audrey McMahon -- I doubt if Diller, Audrey McMahon or anybody on the Project could approve or disapprove. I think it was up to the people who were going to use the murals, or whose buildings they went into.

DS: That was why the art teacher in the case of the high school mural had a say in it.

JB: I think so, yes. Yes. That must have been very unusual. I never ran across that before. But some people may have. Every once in a while the school had given it into the han

DS: of the art teacher who was sometimes probably very illiterate.

DS: In the various stages of the execution of it, were other people involved in it at any point? Did you have a whole corps of assistants? What did you do?

JB: I had many assistants. We had a group of assistants working with Herbert Mulestine preparing, mechanically blowing up the sketches on paper to the size of the mural on which I'd draw again and then trace down. So there were a good many assistants working all the time. I had five or six out there on the scaffold with me and Mulestine had five or six or seven in town at the pier. I was never able to let anybody else paint on the mural. It was kind of sad but nobody worked quite like I did and I was just too jealous of the job, so I had to do all the painting myself on it. But the general feeling was one of respect of the artist's integrity and decision and intelligence, as far as I know. I never got any pressure to change anything. I'm sure things happened around. It just occurs to me that there were pressure groups on the outside who objected to many ideas that were in murals, and objected to WPA generally and made trouble for it whenever they could. The only thing I got was just snide remarks, such as, "Why is it everybody in your mural is left-handed?", you know. They thought I was working in some kind of ideology there that was subversive.

DS: Really! Oh, who on earth thought or said that?

JB: I don't remember who it was but there were all kinds of things like that. They expected us to be doing very sly things, you know, to get across some message, and so they would jump on anything.

DS: Signals from the Kremlin or something like that, probably.

JB: That's right.

DS: Would this have been just other workmen out there, or people milling around the Terminal -- was it in operation at this time as an airport?

JB: It was in operation when we were working on it. And we were out there in their way all the time when they were starting to use it - for a couple of years as a matter of fact.

DS: Yes. But the people who would make this kind of remark, were they just tourists, or what kind of people were they?

JB: Well, I don't remember now. I just remember one remark, which wasn't that kind of remark, but I heard a hostess on a plane talking to the pilot as they were coming through the front door, and she was saying, "And he comes in every day and paints one bird and leaves." So there was a general feeling that we were no good, I think, you know. And they would like to see it terminated. The scaffold was in the way and people were bumping their heads on it and it was kind of a nuisance. And they didn't have any respect for the thing. Except the heads of the company, Pan American, who was operating it, were nice about it, interested. Among some of the clerks around you got a very sympathetic attitude. But others I guess just hated WPA or hated artists who worked for WPA, that kind of thing, or hated art; I don't know.

DS: I suppose that all during the period there were, of course, political activities being organized, you know, picketing and the Artists Union and so --

JB: Yes.

DS: Were you involved in some of this yourself?

JB: Yes, I was involved in it. I was a member of the Artists Union and was on their picket lines or sit-downs. I was in one sit-in they had when -- I think the Project was on 42nd Street at the time -- when a man whose name I don't remember was more or less held in his office all night because there were layoffs, or they wanted him to make some certain kind of decision. We were all pretty active, you know. I wasn't as active as many of them. I was never an officer in the union but I was very sympathetic to it.

DS: Did it seem to you that it played a generally constructive role?

JB: As far as I can tell -- I wasn't very hip politically and so I don't actually know what could have been happening in ways I didn't hear of -- but I think it was very constructive for the Project. Yes, as a matter of fact, I think it helped the administrators of the Project because they were forced into things, doing things that they were really sympathetic to, but forced not to do because they were administrators and actually the opposition to the artists in a sense, you know. It was their job. I think the activity of the artists in the Union forced them to make concessions which they would like to make for them, you know.

DS: Yes.

JB: I think it was very active, and it was very interesting, too, at the time.

DS: Well, at the conclusion of the mural, what did you go onto next? This has brought you up to roughly what year?

JB: Well, the draft board was after me for quite a while. They kept deferring me -

DS: Because of the mural?

JB: Yes. One man on the draft board, I remember, questioned me, he said, "Why can't you let somebody else just take over your mural and finish it the way a novelist does?" I never got the point but that's what he said.

DS: Were you married at this point?

JB: Yes. I was married all that time to my first wife, Mary McDonald. No, not all that time. I guess we separated and divorced about the time I was working on the Woodside mural. I don't know exactly what that date was. But I was single from then until after the war, when I married Charlotte Parks. Eric Mose was a good friend of mine on the Project. I don't know whether you knew him or not.

DS: No.

JB: He did murals there, and very good ones.

DS: Were you involved with the group that later became the Abstract Expressionists to any extent? A good many of them were on the Project together.

JB: I didn't know them, then. Phil is the only one I knew who later came in that. But I didn't know Gottlieb. I don't know whether Motherwell was on it or not. I can't think of any of them that I knew.

DS: De Kooning was I think briefly, wasn't he?

JB: That's right, he was. But I didn't know him at all. Never even saw him until after the war. He had a loft up near where I had one but I never ran across him. Through working at the Airport I heard about the Civil Air Patrol, which was actually out of the Army -- but they were training men over age, over flight training age, over twenty-seven, to be pilot trainers. They wanted us to be teachers and teach flying. So I went into that when I finished the mural.

DS: So you left the Project to do that -- right?

JB: Well, that was the end of that mural, and the Project was just about gone by then so I left the Project. There must have been some Project left but it was just about the end, and I would have had to leave whether it was going or not. I had to go in the Army. I was drafted and they had let me go until I finished the mural, so I was a Civil Pilot Trainee for a while in New Jersey and then in Pennsylvania. There were three sections to it and I quit the second. Flying just scared me to death, you know. I learned to fly pretty well when I became a pilot but I just was too nervous all the time. Then I was taken into the Army. I was at Mitchell Field for quite a while in the Engineers.

DS: They didn't put you to work in any art capacity in the Army then?

JB: The Mitchell Field thing would have been in an art capacity, map making and so forth. That happened later. What I meant to say was that after I left the Civil Pilot Training I went to basic training in the Air Force at Atlantic City. Then I was drawn from Atlantic City into the Engineers at Mitchell Field and then after I was through with another basic training there I was called into this Army art project, which the Section of Fine Arts was organizing for the government. That had been started by George Biddle, as I remember. Congress didn't know too much about it evidently because when they really found out that it was half civilian and half soldier, and that we were given a free hand in what we could paint, they cut it out.

DS: What kind of things were you painting?

JB: In the Army?

DS: In this particular thing under Biddle. I mean what kind of work did they assign you?

JB: Well, it was very free. For instance, here's one of the strange things: Biddle had written the orders here that we were to carry to show the different units we were attached to. We were to show these when we came in to the commanding officer who would know what our duties were. And I remember it said in part, "You're free to carry a camera and photograph secret installations, to enter such and such and such and such." So we had entry everywhere, and then it said, "Paint with the romanticism of a Delacriox, with the savagery of a Goya, or, best of all, follow your own inevitable star." That would astonish these commanding officers.

DS: I would think so!

JB: They were -- or left it about as vague as it could be, which was the intention.

DS: What were they going to use it for?

JB: A record of how artists react to war, really. And possibly documentary if it worked out that way. But they were interested, and Biddle was interested in letting the artists react and not even to paint if they didn't feel like it; that was the idea but they cut it out. The civilians were taken over by Life and some other magazines. The rest of us were sent abroad, but sub rosa, kind of. I hear that General Marshall liked the idea so he sent us over without telling anybody what it was about. There were two of us in each theater. I think it worked that way. And we were all "tech" sergeants. We had painting equipment, cameras and everything they had given us. I was there with a man named Jansen -- Richard -- I'm not sure of the first name -- Jansen, anyway, from Milwaukee. We lived in Cairo and we would go out and take pictures and paint a good deal. But we had no place, no attachment in Washington, and no attachment in the Near East. We were just there piling up our paintings.

DS: Did someone collect your paintings?

JB: No. The people in Cairo thought we were in communication with Washington all the time, sending our work back there, and getting orders from them. And the people in Washington didn't know we were there. And so it was a very strange hiatus.

DS: Oh, it's a beautiful story!

JB: We were there eighteen months and finally the last people we were attached to in Cairo were Intelligence and they had evidently their ear to the ground. They found out that we had no connection with Washington so they shipped us to a camp near Cairo from which we were to embark for home. We stayed there a while.

DS: What stage of the war was this -- the very end of the way by now?

JB: Well, it wasn't the end; it was, let's see --

DS: I'm curious as to why they shipped you back home. They didn't want to put you into active duty?

JB: Well, I don't think we'd have been very good in active duty at our age, probably, and weren't trained for it. It was in 1944 -- so I have forgotten just what happened. But they kept us there just kind of loafing around for quite a while. I had a studio in an abandoned barracks out in the desert. It was outside of Cairo. I used to go there and work and then the service club got up a burlesque show to show around the English camps. I was stage manager for it for a while. Then we were shipped to Dix at home where I was put in baker's school; they didn't know what the hell to do with me, you know. I'd seen friends who worked on Yank and who worked at OSS in Washington. Eric Mose, who I had known on the Project, worked at 0SS. I saw him. And then I had friends on Yank and later both said I could work at either place -in New York or Washington for them. I thought it would be nice to go to Washington, which was such a green, pleasant town after the war. I worked for OSS there in their presentation department, which was an art department, for a number of months, six or eight, or less; I don't know. That is where Charlotte was working - where I met her.

DS: Charlotte (Park) had been a painter at this point, had she?

JB: Yes.

DS: She was doing similar work there in Washington?

JB: Yes.

DS: And then you were married then?

JB: No. I was thrown out and came to New York and she came up later and we were married here after a while.

DS: How was the postwar period in New York -- getting back from Army life into civilian life, and getting into painting again?

JB: Very, very difficult. You couldn't find a place to live, in the first place, you know. And then I met a man who had a class. He had been at Cooper Union. His name was Wallace Hoarrison. He was a painter and he had classes, his own private classes, and pretty good-size work space. He offered to let me come up and work in his studio. I worked there for a while. Then I got enamored of teaching and everything. He was a very interesting man. He liked Cubism particularly and all the French School. So I stayed there and worked and took his criticism for a while, too; studied with him for a few months. That was a very nice thing for me at the time, just coming back. I finally found a place to live. Jackson and Lee Pollock were moving out of their place on Eighth Street - they were coming out to East Hampton for the first time. His brother on the West Coast, Jay, was taking the place but they said they'd let me have half of it if I'd find them another place. So I took the front part and worked there for quite a while; lived and worked there, had a studio. It was a terrible period for artists coming back. They couldn't find a place to live; there was nothing to do about it, no help or anything, you know. And all your furniture was gone - you'd given away practically all your stuff - so you had to really start over. And of course it was difficult because a good many painters hadn't been in the Army and during the time we were in the Army Peggy Guggenheim's Gallery had started, other galleries had, and there was a whole new established art scene. Most of the men who are pretty well established now had already made their names by the time we came back. They were pretty well known by that time.

DS: Who were the ones that seemed most in the saddle, let's say, when you came back?

JB: Well, let's see, there was Pollock, Motherwell - I don't know whether Rothko was getting along pretty well then -- I think he was known by that time; the early Kootz Gallery group, whoever they were. I can't remember all the names.

DS: It seemed rather closed to you at that point?

JB: It seemed already pretty organized. We didn't feel it was closed -- it was closed in a sense that they were already set, you know, and we were just starting again. We couldn't just pick up coming back. We had to work for a couple of years before we could get going and kind of catch up again, you know.

DS: Did you think of yourself by this time as being sort of avant-garde or in a very advanced position as far as conventional art was concerned?

JB: No. No. Right around that time I was working with a kind of a low tone, rather strict form, for quite a while.

DS: Your work was still representational at this point?

JB: Well, kind of. It was actually pretty close to -- well, it was a synthetic Cubism, I'd say; it was pretty far away from representation, but, yes, it had figures. And then there was this whole invigorating thing in the air which these guys had produced, you know, and were showing.

DS: What was your reaction when you saw your first Pollock?

JB: Well, I'd seen him change so gradually that I didn't have any -- it interested me a good deal. I remember right before I was in the Army, right before I went away Phil Guston and I were down at Jackson Pollock's place and he was doing some very strange stuff. I thought it was very interesting, a little hard to get but --

DS: What was he doing -- She-Wolf?

JB: Well, it was a little before that, I think, but not too far from it. These were smaller things and not brought to such complete form as that.

DS: Had you been affected at any point along the way here by primitive art? Naturally, Mexican art coming in had some effect, I imagine. But other forms of primitive art, had they affected your work?

JB: They'd only come to me through other painters and through the European painters who had used it, you know, African particularly, but I wasn't affected by it, as I remember, or interested in it particularly. But the whole environment was a very enthralling one when I got back from abroad; and very invigorating -- the work that was happening. There was a kind of metamorphosis in my work through seeing this work, just a breaking loose into using my unconscious a little more, so that I was able to work much more freely.

DS: Was there a good bit of talk at this time among you and your friends about the origin of the -- well, that painting should have its roots in the unconscious? Were some people being psychoanalyzed, or how was this unconscious factor coming into play?

JB: Well, I had heard something about it, I guess. It was about time for Freud's seeds to really ripen, you know, and it did among the painters, and they trusted their unconscious more and were able to free themselves. I suppose that's the genesis of it. At any rate, we were able to use ourselves more spontaneously than we had every been able to before, cast off some of the very strict Parisian Cubism that we had. Of course, some of the Parisians had done that, too, Breton, and some of the others, -- Masson.

DS: Well, how do you feel about Surrealism? You must have seen it at Peggy Guggenheim's, I suppose?

JB: Yes. Well, it varied so much. When Surrealism had enough of the meaty form to satisfy me, enough of what I consider the painting interest, I liked it. I considered it a very important influence and really a kind of free- ing influence. But I never was particularly interested in the Surrealism that wasn't mostly painting or mostly sculpture, what I'd call sculpture, you know. The thing you spoke of, the change in form and what we consider using the unconscious more - I wasn't consciously doing that really, it seemed to happen more or less naturally. I think it was very much abroad in the air in all forms of art. It must have been because it seemed to grow and it seemed a natural thing to do. As I remember, none of us thought of ourselves at all as doing anything revolutionary or anything that new. It didn't occur to us. Other people said it once in a while, but it seemed quite a natural development. We seemed to be using the knowledge we had learned in the past, you know. And as a matter of fact, in criticizing each other's work, work which seemed pretty far from Cubism or any of the strict dogmas, Cubism was used. I mean those principles were used in talking about Cubist work or even talking about Piero della Francesca, or something like that, pretty much, you know. It didn't seem that different. It didn't seem like a break.

DS: It didn't! That's very curious. During your period of work on murals you were a highly structured artist and now this was a kind of anti-structure thing.

JB: But it was kind of an anti that structure, I guess, yes.

DS: But you felt there was another structure involved?

JB: It seemed to have a structure. Had to have a structure or something to satisfy.

DS: I see. A freer structure, but it was still a structure?

JB: Freer. Yes.

DS: You didn't feel that this was like, as we heard at the time, that some artists were taking the stance that this was a complete break with tradition? I have the feeling it was more from critics than from artists, that this was like kicking over everything that had ever gone before. This was not a position as far as you were concerned?

JB: No, I wasn't. And I doubt if it was with the other artists -- except maybe for making some declamatory statement or critic's statement, you know. Critics may have said it, but I don't think the artists felt it. I don't think they could have worked very easily if they had. I think they felt very much part of tradition, and had great respect for it, too, you know. That's the interesting thing about it. It didn't seem like that kind of a thing, at least not to me. And I wasn't conscious of it in other artists. It seemed a flowing of tradition on through, rather than a break. I wasn't conscious of any of that revolutionary aspect of the thing at all.

DS: The work you were doing at that time - were you entertaining accidental effects and that sort of thing? Were you beginning at that time to allow paint to flow - using stains --?

JB: That's right, yes. To sudden recognition that the accident meant a different thing than it had once, you know; it was a part of a person's activity and they'd done it and it was to use if possible.

DS: At the time that you were working with - beginning to work with the accidental element, you were, of course, at the same time using the conscious element after the accident was made? In other words, it wasn't completely a matter of accident obviously?

JB: There were many changes and corrections and so forth, you know. It was a matter of recognizing more of that side of your person than you had before and trusting it a little more, I think. But the other side of you was used certainly, but I think it's such a delicate matter of balance. You have to think in a conscious way, but you have to think the other way too and try to let yourself flow and somehow they've got to come in some kind of a very delicate balance. END OF TAPE l JAMES BROOKS - TAPE 2 - JUNE lO, 1965

DS: This is Dorothy Seckler continuing an interview with James Brooks on June lO, 1965 at East Hampton. In our previous tape we had broken off at a point when you had returned from having served in World War II and were going through a period of adjustment in which you found a number of artists fairly well-established in New York and working in a freer style, entertaining more accidents in painting, and we had been talking about your easy acceptance of this as seeming to be not a rejection of tradition, but a new tradition or a continuation of it. I think that's a particularly interesting thing to explore for a moment or two because there has been a great deal of misunderstanding about it. Some assumptions have been that the artist had worked deliberately trying to make a complete break with tradition. It seems rather unreasonable, actually. And I think just before we broke off our previous tape I had asked you about any possible influential data coming from Hans Hofmann and you had said you had not worked with him and that this did not enter into your own position particularly.

JB: Yes. Well, I imagine Hofmann was very influential in setting the climate, getting many people working in a certain way, or thinking in a certain way. I heard a good deal about him but I never knew him and still don't know his principles too much, although I know his work. I know many of his students and they are very attached to him and it's given them a great impetus to work I know, all the way through. So I'm sure he set a good deal of the tone for that whole thing, although at that time he wasn't doing the work which produced the climate. He was teaching at that time almost completely, I think.

DS: Yes.

JB: Later on I think he went to Kootz, didn't he, when Kootz was on 57th Street? And he was one of their artists there.

DS: Well, we're dealing with the period now between 1945 and '5O roughly --

JB: Yes.

DS: Now how would you have approached painting at this point? I assume you did get settled down, to some extent. How did you make a living? -- I guess we ought to settle that to some extent at this point.

JB: Oh, yes. Let's see, now, when I first came back - I don't know how I did make a living. I started teaching pretty soon after I came back, at Columbia. Harry Cornahan had been a friend in Dallas High School and he was at Columbia in General Studies, I guess it was, where the Art School was. So he wanted to know if I wanted to teach a night class. Which I did. It paid twenty-five a week and that held me for quite a while. I got along that

way until I started teaching lettering at Pratt Institute, which was a day and a half a week, I believe, and which I enjoyed, although it was hard work, physically. I taught there for I guess about ten years. That's the way I made my living from then on

DS: You had a studio and you were painting on your own at this period?

JB: Yes.

DS: The last time we talked about it you said that in your work there were elements of representation but mainly it was the latter phases of Cubism.

JB: I would say, yes. I was affected very much by, say, Picasso's Three Musicians -- that whole area of tonality and composition. I would say it was closer to that than anything else.

DS: And then at this point it was much loosened up or did you begin entirely without any reference to imagery, specific imagery?

JB: Here's actually the way it started, in a mechanical way. When I went to Maine one summer, `47, I did some paintings on paper, on building paper. Then I wanted to make it a little more permanent so I put a black adhesive on the back of them to glue them onto cloth, a Bemis cloth, which is a bagging cloth. And then I discovered from the back that very interesting things were happening. And so from then on I would work more or less accidentally on this Bemis cloth, which absorbed the thing. And then I would either finish the painting, complete it on the front or the back. Quite often there were more interesting or strange suggestions coming through from the back. And so many of the paintings were done from the suggestions that came through on the back. So I worked that way on the absorbent Bemis cloth for a good while.

DS: The thing that you would begin with on the back, were they figurations of brush strokes, or did you actually spill paint on, or drip it on, or --?

JB: I would spill it on and then squeegee it on with a piece of cardboard, or drip it on, or whatever occurred, you know. Anything that wasn't brush stroke or that wasn't a habit or cliche, or the way I had worked before would do.

DS: Were there any elements of the bare canvas in these paintings, or was it entirely covered with the pigment?

JB: Well, both. Quite often I would cover a whole canvas with a color, or a tone.

DS: Stain it, or paint it?

JB: Stain it mostly. At least it was still very absorbent, and then I worked into that; or directly onto the unpainted or untinted cloth. But it was just that the absorbency of it created a going in to the fabric which made the surface more real, I guess, than it would have been to me if I had been using a sized thing; I don't know exactly how that happened. I know Pollock worked on unsized duck a good deal, with enamel. His generally stick out a little more.

DS: Were you working with enamels at this point?

JB: Enamels a good deal of the time, yes, because they flow in a different way and are more likely to make a line that won't break. So it was a matter of just that discovery and the development of that, I think; and possibly the fact that Jackson was using that at the time. I don't remember when he started using it. He must have done it before I did. So just what that interchange is I don't know; how much I got from it, or what the sequence is, you know.

DS: I remember one -- I suppose it comes from a slightly different period which was circular. I remember it was shown at the Whitney at that time.

JB: Yes.

DS: Then I remember another one from the Whitney which was just a long stroke -- very spare.

JB: Yes. That was probably the one in blues and blacks on just a linen-colored cloth.

DS: There was one with grays in it, I think, and then another one -- I remember a splash of black and red.

JB: Oh, yes. I know that, yes.

DS: But I suppose that came closer to around 1950?

JB: I think so, yes, Before the war and earlier, after Woodstock, I had shown at odd places, little galleries, you know; and then I hadn't shown. When I came back from the Army I showed some at Mortimer Levitt Gallery.

DS: Well, how was that received at that time?

JB: The gallery or the work?

DS: I mean the press and the people who came. Did you sell well, and so on?

JB: No, I didn't sell. Nobody seemed to be selling much. And this Mortimer Levitt just had a combination of work, and my work then was still pretty restricted and tight, or whatever it was. I hadn't broken through into the other thing. Bradley Tomlin was at Rehn's and so I went up to Rehn's, but it was still a kind of synthetic Cubism sort of painting, you know. Then it looked at the time that Rehn was going to modernize the gallery and get in a lot of new blood. But he didn't. So we left and I went to Peridot, which was Just starting, and turned out to be a very nice little gallery for a while. Do you remember it?

DS: It was down on 12th Street?

JB: Yes.

DS: Yes, I do remember it very well.

JB: So that was nice. By then my work had changed and had a different look to it.

DS: Then, as I recall, there was a period during which you had a new approach to color. In a way, the first things seemed more tonal, perhaps?

JB: Yes.

DS: And then you began to go more into colors, oranges and yellows and violets, and the much more luscious colors.

JB: Yes.

DS: Do you remember any of the circumstances then or what inspired you to make that change?

JB: I don't know. I think I just tired of the other thing and the low tones and it may also have been accounted for partly when I started sizing the canvas. Then the paint stayed more on the surface and retained more of its primary brilliance. I don't know which of the two; it's probably a combination of the two.

DS: You were then working in oil color again, were you, when you went to color?

JB: Oil color' and enamel both.

DS: You mixed them together?

JB: I'd mix them together or use --

DS: Has it held up pretty well?

JB: Yes, they seem to have held up pretty well. I wanted more brilliance and less absorbency, or a clearer line, for one thing. And then I got the feeling that maybe the things I'd be doing wouldn't be permanent. I kept being told that the oil paint or the enamel put on unsized cloth would rot and break up. That's what everybody thought. Some people had different opinions.

DS: Has it proved true or not?

JB: Mine have held up pretty well, although they tend to crack pretty easily, you know, if they're thick enamel on cloth. Even thick enamel on a sized cloth is liable to break.

DS: How are the Pollocks holding up today, do you know?

JB: Well, I don't know. Various ways, I think. I think generally pretty good but where he had pretty thick enamel I think they have had to be restored a good deal -- broken, you know. It isn't too flexible really. Maybe some enamels would not but most, I think, get pretty brittle; they're made for solid surfaces.

DS: Then did you go back to more completely working in oil for a while, or did you continue in this --?

JB: Well, I continued to mix pretty much. It didn't matter too much. I had to use quantities of paint so I didn't want to use two colors. I would get Ballin's oil colors in cans or enamels, or mix the two.

DS: Did you continue to apply them in these various ways -- spilling them on?

JB: Well, I generally start my canvas on the floor with some general ideas, but very vague, and try to get a good deal happening that's unintended, so that it will lead me into ways that I wouldn't normally go, you know. Just anything to get me started in a new direction that will flower into some kind of new, imaginative thing. So I think that's the constant plan of the artist, that destruction of his habits and cliches, you know. Probably the importance of Pollock's work was that he did find a method of destroying those. It was very courageous, I think.

DS: I suppose that's why his example was so fruitful, for a generation.

JB: I think so, yes. It was pretty frightening, you know; it's frightening to do that. I know he was frightened, and his work scared him, and I guess everybody's work scares them if they do something that goes a little out that they don't get or understand. But that's what they want. That's what it's all about.

DS: Did you have a sensation at certain points of being frightened, too, I mean frightened in terms of "I don't know where I'm going, it's all too confusing," or frightened in terms of "This is what my unconscious is and it's terrifying?"

JB: Oh, yes. Quite often.

DS: Which one? Or both?

JB: Oh, I'd say both. I'd say both. Because you live a constant life of not knowing where you're going, it's a kind of frightening situation, which you court. Which is a strange thing. And then the revelation of your unconscious frightens you. But that hasn't been as much a thing with me as the other "not knowing where I'm going." But it's part of the same phenomenon, I think.

DS: At some point then, faced with this "I don't know where I'm going" thing, did you resort to any other techniques as a discipline or an intermediary stage of doing something else? Were you drawing a good bit during any of this period?

JB: Not much, no. If I did drawings they were other things, you know -- not drawings in preparation for painting. And since then I've never done any preparation for paintings. So it's a constant search into an unknown place, which I've accepted as a fact of being a painter, and I think everybody does that.

DS: Have you found, even when you completely throw off any conscious restraints and work as far as possible away from your habit, that certain -- well, figurations tend to recur? I mean, with some painters it seems to me there are certain things that seem to be built into --

JB: Built in. I think so, too, yes. It's impossible to avoid and probably what a persons painting is really like what it is, you know. That's the glue that holds this whole production together no matter how much he thinks he's changing. Because artists work a good deal on the paintings in one show not looking alike, not looking like one person's work. But it always does, you know, because it's them. They can't help it. I like what Braves said, I think he was quoting in the introduction to one of his books, probably The White Goddess - he was quoting Alan Lewis, a Welsh poet - he said that "A poem" -- which he was speaking of and which would apply to painting, too -- "must have a mixture of the exhilarating and the frightening." It seems very clear to me that a painting has to have the pleasurable or the exhilarating to keep people with it long enough to let them look at the rest of it, which has to be frightening, has to give people a feeling that there's something coming and they don't know what -- it's an unknown. In other words, it throws them out of a familiar world and frightens them a little. If a painting doesn't have some of that decorative aspect, or the exhilaration of the pleasant, I don't think people could look at it, they couldn't take it. That must be what it's for. But it has to have the other or it's pure decoration, you know. It has to have that frightening entry into a new place, an unknown place.

DS: As I recall, your painting actually shifted from one of those emphases to the other around the period of the early fifties. There was a period, I seem to recall, when there was more of an all-over effect in your paintings, and when color was quite -- well, to me it was exquisite, not candy box exquisite, but really exquisite. But I felt at the time, when I talked with you then, that you were somewhat dissatisfied and were trying to get away from the all-over effect. And then obviously in the next few years you did increasingly move toward a bolder massing of areas and a stronger, more active handling of the paint with an almost kind of barbaric strength to the directional energy in the painting.

JB: Yes.

DS: Was that effected in a step by step way or were there particular revelations on the way?

JB: I think it was step by step. I had felt a need for it pretty strongly but I couldn't do it immediately, you know. I just struggled for it. Well, it seems to me that, for instance, when I first started showing at Peridot I was doing the more unconscious in the scheming of the work, you know, the all-over work; and I realized when I did it that that was not what I had intended to do, or the kind of painter I had intended to be, and wasn't like the kind of painters I had admired. But it was closer to me than anything I had done. So I realized I wasn't a painter that I'd want to be necessarily, I wasn't going to produce the kind of form that I liked best; but I produced what was me, you know. It might not be characteristic. But then I realized that there is that pull back toward the Piero or the Giottoesque that is a thing that I love, and every once in a while I feel the need for that, you know -- the larger, simpler, bolder, expressive forms. So I think there's that constant pull back and forth.

DS: Then to some extent Giotto was presiding over that change from these fluid stains and graceful waltzing forms into the other? That certainly would be astonishing to some of the people whom I imagine were sort of rocked back on their heels by your strength. They might have been the least expected to be related to Giotto.

JB: I think so, probably, yes. And there was actually a different -- away from Giotto in a sense that it was a kind of thing that occurred despite my love for Giotto, you know. But there is still the necessity to pull against, or pull into a kind of more monolithic movement, clumsier movement, you know. And if you work one way it's nauseating you develop a nausea and it's tiresome, it's cliche. And then you go the opposite way. So I was interested in negating that, I guess, consciously, but also there was this constant pull back to the loves of my youth - the figures. Probably that tension that makes the forms change once in a while, you know, what I can do and what I like to do.

DS: This, of course, brings us into the period when you were showing at the Stable. When did you leave Peridot?

JB: Let's see. I went to the Borgenicht after I left Peridot. I don't remember the year. I had one show there and I was to have a show the next year. But we had a hurricane out here that destroyed the paintings and the studios and everything.

DS: You had a studio then at Montauk, didn't you?

JB: Yes.

DS: And you lost a whole studio full of work?

JB: Yes. And Charlotte lost all hers too.

DS: What year was that?

JB: I'm trying to think. It was `54 probably, or I don't know - `52, `54, I guess. It was Carol or Diane. So I didn't have another show with Borgenicht. I was with her I guess about a year and a half, something like that. Then went to the Stable. I don't remember just how long I was there either. But I had several shows there. I guess that's about all I can take today. END OF TAPE 2 JAMES BROOKS - TAPE 3 - JUNE 12, 1965

DS: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing James Brooks in East Hampton on June 12, 1965. Jim, when we finished our earlier tape we had actually gone ahead a little bit, I think, into the fifties, but I'd like to go back into the period of the late forties and into the early fifties when you were associated with a group of artists in New York and shared to some extent attitudes and ideas and discoveries. Some of that no doubt was defined or discussed a good bit in the meetings of The Club. I'd like to have your impressions of the, well, the meat of some of those discussions and exchanges, and what it meant in your own work.

JB: There's not much point in talking about The Club or any such thing because I think that's pretty common information.

DS: Well, mention it at least briefly.

JB: The Club was organized on a pretty loose basis. It wasn't given a name because it was felt that it might develop into anything, as a painting might. So it was just a place to meet and where ideas might be thrown around. A few writers and poets and musicians and composers were brought in. Mostly, however, it was painters and sculptors who shared a very loose but a very intense interest at the time.

DS: This was the 8th Street Club now as distinguished from the other one that Motherwell was in?

JB: Well, I don't know of any other one really, you know.

DS: That simplifies it.

JB: Yes. There has been some talk about it lately, but there was a school called "The Subjects of the Artists," which was running on 8th Street.

DS: Yes. Well, we'll just keep that separate.

JB: All right.

DS: We're speaking about the 8th Street Club.

JB: The discussions - I don't remember too clearly, honestly -- they ran kind of the whole gamut. We were concerned with - interested in the breakdown of the recognizable image, and the explanation by some of the artists of their changes, which were never satisfactory. The panels ended in indecision generally and they were valuable in that the peripheral sidelights or unconscious suggestions that came out were important. The artists' explanations of their work or various things were not so important generally, as a rule. But I can't recall now any of the definite things - except what artists always get together and talk about, you know. It had to do with what is discipline in art? Nobody knew what it was. What is the image? Nobody knew that except that they knew it was in the making all the time and a coming process. There was no feeling against figurative art at all that I remember.

DS: Really! That's very interesting. Because usually--

JB: Yes. I think there must have been on some people's parts, but I was never conscious of it as a general thing because everyone felt that they should be able to move back and forth, that art isn't contained by any of those dogmas. And some of us were doing, or some of them were doing partly figurative work to various degrees, and some wandering around through that area.

DS: Even at that early stage of the late forties and early -- would you say around 1950?

JB: I think so.

DS: The reason I bring this up is because there's been some feeling that at the time when deKooning did his Women it was considered renegade. And this is not your impression, I gather?

JB: I think that he was doubted a little, or slighted a little because of that, yes. So there was some of that feeling. But nobody questioned that seriously as I remember; they were surprised and perhaps a little disappointed in him. But they didn't think he was wrong necessarily. There were no dogmas at The Club that were used much or intended much. There was a recognition of the different bias of every painter there, I think.

DS: Was there a very strongly-expressed feeling of wanting to get Europe off your backs? I think I've come across that in some places.

JB: I think that occurred once in a while with some people; but I don't think that it was a generally accepted thing. Gottlieb I know was very strong about throwing off the European reign, but I don't think it occurred to most of us because I don't think we felt that much of a break, even if it might be recognized as from the outside. This is all pretty much from my viewpoint. There are a lot of things obviously I didn't get, or participate in, or didn't share. I'm sure all those things you mentioned existed. But the whole tenor of The Club wasn't that.

DS: There's one other thing I have a feeling may fall in the same category -- a feeling that's been emphasized a good bit from people looking back at The Club and at the beginnings of the New York School -- that this group of artists wanted to vehemently reject any connection with a mass audience or with culture in any official sense. It was sort of turning its back on all the things that later art movements then turned around and embraced; you know, turning its back on the commercial world, on the Establishment, in a sense. Absolute rebellion against the Establishment and all its values seems to have been, in some people's minds, implicit in the early stages of it.

JB: I don't know that. It seems to me that we were already out of the Establishment and there was no necessity of making any steps that way.

DS: You didn't have to do anything about that. That's a very good point that you didn't do it. You were outside the wall, anyway.

JB: That's true. It already existed. And so there was no thought, very little thought of being in or out of the Establishment, or of selling work. Work didn't sell then.

DS: Was there any feeling against exhibiting?

JB: None at all that I know of. We all liked to go to the shows and were glad when any exhibitions did occur of our work. And we organized some, of course. We were anxious enough to show and we got galleries when we

could. But we didn't expect sales and we didn't expect to be liked except by our fellow artists who shared our viewpoint.

DS: Do you think that had a good bit to do with the quality of the work? I mean, do you feel that later on when sales and all these other concerns did enter into it, it affected the thinking and the work pretty much?

JB: I think so. The commercialism, or the sales rather, that came later separated a good many artists. Some artists sold and some didn't. They didn't like to embarrass each other by talking about their sales. Various things occurred, so it split up that close group and artists became more and more on their own as the whole market opened up. Which I think we all expected. We all really knew that there wasn't quite that much of a community anyhow. But it did have to exist then and it was very pleasant. When it disintegrated it was expected, I think; but it was sad.

DS: I think that's a very interesting statement of your relationship to it. While we were discussing some of the ideology things, apparently from your point of view the Zen or existentialism wasn't too important?

JB: I think it was important. I think it existed. Zen came in pretty strong to The Club and a good many members were very receptive to it because it emphasized the pure confrontation of things rather than intellectualization. I don't think The Club was ever anti-intellectual at all but there was the deep felt need to confront things in a purer way without bias, or as innocently as could be done.

DS: Yes, that word "innocent" became very important in some ways, didn't it? I recall in some of the discussions when I was there "innocent" and "pure" were both words which were used a good bit.

JB: Yes. There was a recognition that no such thing did exist but there was the necessity to be conscious of it, or to make a real attempt to see things or to experience them simply. So Zen did take quite a hold, or rather we had a great many talks about it. A great many people were interested in it. I certainly was at the time. There was a general feeling that we couldn't quite do it, that we were too Western. Some people thought it was silly, but I think it was taken pretty seriously at the time.

DS: Do you think that has changed in recent years?

JB: I think so. I think that there doesn't seem to be any particular interest in it. I never hear much talk about it, except from a few people like Lassaw who has been pretty close to it for a long time.

DS: Yes.

JB: I think it affected us all, too, though, in our general attitude, whether we thought that we accepted it or not. And the same with existentialism which was talked of a good deal there, which we all knew existed pretty strongly before we did Zen. We accepted it as a thing that was affecting our lives and it was very important. I never knew exactly what it was, or much about it, but I got the general feel, as nearly all of us did.

DS: Was that more or less true of most of the artists? I mean there weren't too many of them that were really reading a great deal and, for instance, practicing Zen exercises and that sort of thing, were there?

JB: No. No, there weren't. I think not many of them read about it, it was just through discussion; an attitude already existed, of course. It had started with this work and it was encouraged by this or illuminated a little by its being talked about, or by its tenets.

DS: How about psychoanalysis? You know, we said yesterday that the Freudian idea was very pervasive and in the air in so many ways that it was very hard to pin down. But would you have thought that in the early days a number of artists were in analysis or very much aware of trying to bring out material from the unconscious specifically through paintings and drawings?

JB: I don't think so.

DS: Automatism wasn't a particular word that was very important?

JB: No. It was never used much that I know of except very early. And psychoanalysis was never spoken of much. People were always very conscious of it but it was never brought in consciously and talked about much. I think the artist would probably generally shun it, considering it an invasion of their mystery.

DS: Yes.

JB: It isn't necessarily that but I think that they don't embrace it ordinarily unless they're forced to.

DS: Yes. According, of course, to Pavia - he sees a great deal of what went on as a kind of crusade against

surrealism. Others have differed with him on that.

JB: Well, Philip Pavia is a crusader by nature; a number of people are; and a lot of people aren't at all. They consider the tradition more or less unbroken. I don't think it matters what they way they're doing, or whether they say they're crusaders, or that they're carrying on the tradition. Actually their work matters and I think the artist's reasons, his explanations, socially, of why he works, or what has happened to his work are always very suspect to me. Because the work of two men can be equally spontaneous or free, or expressive rather, and one will be very conscious of being revolutionary, and talk about it a great deal and the other will say that he's not at all. He's carrying on tradition.

DS: And their work is almost the same.

JB: Sure.

DS: I was thinking of the role, which has been emphasized in certain people's development, of the European emigre who came here after the war, but I would gather from the fact that you haven't mentioned this, that it wasn't important in your case. That you had very limited contact with Mondrian, or Masson, Chagall, Leger, any of these people who came over?

JB: That's true. I didn't know them. They were here during the war, as I remember. By the time I got back the Americans were a pretty strong group. didn't see them too much. They didn't come to the Club. That was, of course, later. I think, however, they had a very important effect on our painting. In fact, they were one of the prime movers in weaning us from regionalism and from social realism and all the things that bound us down so badly. Being here they brought the tradition of painting, which had been centered in France, closer to us and made it more believable perhaps. I think our accepting the French tradition was what made it possible for us to paint even if some of the painters say the releasing of ourselves from the French tradition is what made it possible.

DS: You first had to get it before you could release it, in any case.

JB: I think so, yes. You see, in the early days Benton had fought anybody looking at French painting even. He thought it was effete and distasteful. And there was the whole thing in America of repelling foreign influences and being proud of ourselves and our grass roots. And that was broken down, partly by the war maybe, but largely by the - I don't know what it was that happened - but I know the surrealists coming over had something to do with it.

DS: It was almost as though the grass roots thing emerged in a new form through Pollock because he became kind of a rough and ready Westerner and was doing this more revolutionary thing. But it was still anti-European in its breadth and unstructuredness in a sense.

JB: Well, I wouldn't be able to say it that way. I don't know -- he admired most European painters, obviously developed from Picasso largely, and I don't know who else. But it's true he was very affected by Benton's attitude toward America and his anti-European attitude, but Pollock wouldn't have been able to develop at all if he hadn't been very close to the European painters, or hadn't revered them.

DS: Yes, he undoubtedly needed them.

JB: But his attitude was grass roots American I think, so he brought the two together perhaps.

DS: It just occurred to me -- you were talking about Benton and this Benton through Pollock thing is kind of interesting that his pupil would have in a way erected a new kind of grass roots expression.

JB: Yes.

DS: Well, to come back to your work more closely, which is what we're mainly focused on here, in the period of, let's say, `49 and `5O, would you like to come back to what you were involved with at that time, how your work was developing and changing? I haven't been asking you too much about the way you actually worked or changed from the time when you would paint through the back sometimes and then bring it around and use the unexpected forms, gradually getting away from the all-over into the more massed areas. I think we stopped about there.

JB: I don't know how to carry that on because I don't know how to describe the changes or the reasons for them, but I don't -- it was certainly just a gradual movement toward a simpler, more massive form, and the belief that the things I was doing didn't satisfy me any more. They interest me on looking back at them. I couldn't do them again. But at the time they seemed -- well, they got repetitive and in danger of being elegant or charming, you know. And so I was pushing toward a simplified form, or a more monolithic form.

DS: Were you still proceeding in the same way? For instance, I believe you mentioned that you often began on the floor -- is that right?

JB: You're right. That's true.

DS: And you had at times poured paint on and then used a squeegee?

JB: That's true, yes.

DS: Were you continuing with that way of working?

JB: I continued starting in that way, switched from an absorbent to a sized canvas but started them on the floor and got them a little developed and then put them on the wall and painted. The paint became thicker and more opaque although I've always been interested in the play of the transparencies or translucence against the opacities. But generally the work became heavier and rougher.

DS: Very rugged.

JB: Yes. But that was the general thing. I moved back and forth from a more structured thing to a looser thing, I guess, to find myself or maybe to keep a certain amount of sanity. But other than that there have been no central ideas.

DS: Were there any other mediums that you became involved with during this period of -- around the early fifties? I mean did you have any ventures into sculpture, printmaking, wood cutting, or anything of the sort?

JB: No enough to mention. I did one or two lithographs and two pieces of sculpture way back, say, 1952 or something like that; but no more. I'd always been interested in water paints and I did the murals in those and a tempera. Lately I've been using acrylics, emulsions, instead of oil, for the last three or four years.

DS: Using them exclusively?

JB: Yes, almost. Sometimes I over paint in oil. And I've been thinking lately about working in oil again. But I have used the acrylic because it produces a -- will, a way of working in washes sometimes. It's a little closer to tempera or a wash.

DS: Is that the main reason for using it from your point of view?

JB: The main reason I've had a peculiar bias toward what the water mediums do, whatever it is.

DS: Yes. Transparency.

JB: Yes. And the dryness, rather than the oiliness, I've always liked it. This is the first time we've had a medium that is flexible and holds well, and will do that on a flexible canvas.

DS: Then what is your reason for considering a return to the oils now? Just for the record.

JB: I'm a little tired of the dryness, I think. And I'm a little hungry for more of the rich paint quality or more of the softness of edges, perhaps, that occur from flow. The oil paint stays wet a little longer and so you can't help working back into it once in a while. I liked the acrylic originally, too, because I got very clear edges with it, because it was generally dry before you put another color on.

DS: Does that tend to affect your style?

JB: Yes, I think a good deal, yes. And I was interested in that, too, because the tendency for a person first working with acrylic is to try to do oil paintings with it, which never works. I wanted to stay with it long enough to see if I could not do oil paintings in acrylic, and I've done some that look definitely in that medium, you know.

DS: They do. There's another element, of course, in your very recent work, in the last two shows, I recall, and that is the introduction of a linear element that I suppose has been facilitated by the acrylic?

JB: I think it was facilitated in that the surface is sometimes very dry and rough and it encouraged the use of line, which I was already interested in but couldn't successfully use with oil because it became a kind of a sliding line instead of a more trenchant or drawn or pressed line, which I could do with crayon or charcoal against a hard surface. So that is one of the main reasons that I did use it, too. I'd forgotten it but that's one thing I'm very interested in now -- a sparse use of a line and to have with it a kind of double function: one is to contain and at the same time disperse the form. Break it, and also contain it, which seems to me anyhow to be the primary problem in painting -- to have a form in equilibrium between dispersement and containment. And I like a line

used very sparsely. I used to fill a thing with lines when I was doing the earlier work, but now I'd like to use it just very simply and where it means a great deal in a dual way.

DS: Would the line in most of the recent paintings be an element that emerges in the final stages, or is it thought of at all stages of the composition and employed with that in mind from the beginning?

JB: Well, I like to use it from the first with a combination of masses of color some line put in to start the painting. Then the form changes, some of the masses go, some of the lines go, some of them remain then as lines that had a more irrational feel. I haven't been able to do that so well. Most of the line comes in now toward the middle, or toward the last; but the difficulty of that is that it sometimes is too planned, whereas if it existed before and the painting went around it, it might work a little better. At any rate, it is a big problem to merely make it integrate. To make it very sparse, and have it also work, means a great deal.

DS: I often feel there is a very deliberate element in some of the paintings, which I haven't minded.

JB: Yes. I've tried some very deliberate line. There was a theme I picked up from a rug in the Metropolitan Museum, which I was very fond of, a kind of an arabesqueing, a very simple repeat running around the border of a rug. used that theme in a number of drawings and in a number of paintings. It was a rather rigid line and I wanted to try this very rigid, contained line working against freer elements. Then at times I like to use a very loose, wandering line. When I've worked with a rigid line it sometimes filled the rest of my form in a little too closely and was hard to break, and I think the meandering line is probably the thing that -- that painting back there started with a good deal of rather rigid line, a kind of an arabesqueing. Most of it has come out by now. But it did continue over to the left. There were two kind of spiral lines.

DS: The way it weaves in and out of space seems to encompass several planes.

JB: Yes. The line was drawn first and then the thing started working around it. The line had to be described again. I would like, ideally, to have the line put in and left without working around it.

DS: You don't like the oil or the back - the shapes chew into it at all.

JB: I'd rather not. I would rather see it just done. You see the wash on the wall to the right there with the Indian red top to it?

DS: Yes.

JB: That is the theme I was working with. It is a repeat of that; that black part would repeat again in the opposite way, then it would repeat again. use that theme continually in various ways, in a number of paintings. But at any rate, what you said is true: that I am very interested in using a rather trenchant line against softer elements of the painting and the masses.

DS: That interested me a great deal. And do you work at times in line alone? I mean do you ever sit down and make a drawing just with a running line?

JB: I never do that, no. No.

DS: Do you do any drawings at all? I think you said that you didn't very much, but I'm a little confused.

JB: I do a good many drawings but they're the kind you see on the wall there; they're not drawings for paintings. They might be just hanging around the wall for an unconscious reference, but I never work from them directly.

DS: You don't draw from the model?

JB: No, I haven't drawn from the model in quite a while.

DS: Well, I think that interests me a very great deal and in the remaining several minutes we have on this reel if there's anything else you'd like to develop along that line -- are you working more with brushes now, or other means of applying?

JB: I work with brushes most of the time now.

DS: And on the floor, do you still begin on the floor?

JB: I still begin on the floor and work both with brushes and with some paint poured on, and squeegeed on with a cardboard perhaps. That produces very flat tones but mainly a very, very crisp edge to the form. And I like to work with brushes and with washes to have other areas have different kinds of penetration or softness to them, you know. And then the line coming in. And I'd like to use the line not as a flowing line now but a line applied

with some pressure that makes it hard or more tense. That's probably a reaction against the painting I did for so long where the line flowed and was thrown on or dripped on or swung on, you know. But I think my whole tendency has been away from a fast-moving line either violent or lyrical into something that is slower and denser or more wandering and unknowing, you know.

DS: That's very beautifully expressed. I suppose there's been a kind of reaction against the energetic -- well, was it ever terribly important -- I suppose it must have been? The throwing on obviously implies an energy in your early work and certainly in the period when it was massive there was a great rush to the paint.

JB: Yes.

DS: So in that sense you were an action painter.

JB: That's right, yes.

DS: Did you think of yourself in those terms?

JB: No, not at all. Action painting may have many good points but it doesn't seem to...

END OF TAPE 3 and END OF INTERVIEW