



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Walton  
Ford, 2022 July 21 and July 26

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions](http://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions)  
[www.aaa.si.edu/](http://www.aaa.si.edu/)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Walton Ford on July 21 and 26, 2022. The interview took place at Ford's studio in New York, NY, and was conducted by Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Walton Ford and Ben Gillespie have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

BEN GILLESPIE: And, okay. This is Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. It is July 21, 2022. I'm conducting the oral history of Walton Ford.

So Walton, I would just like to start by asking you to tell me about where you were born, and what your family was like.

WALTON FORD: Yeah. Okay. Thanks for asking me all this stuff. It's an honor. I'll just preface that on the record, to know that it's an honor to be in the Smithsonian. Can you hear me? Is this good? Did we do it? We did a test, okay.

My parents—I should start with my parents a bit, because I grew up in Westchester County—which is an affluent suburb of New York City—starting out in Larchmont, and then later, after my parents divorced when I was 11, we moved to—well, I was a bit older when we moved, but after my parents divorced, we moved to Croton-on-Hudson, which actually suited me better, and I identified with more because there was some woods there. It's quite bucolic. There's, like, swimming hole and all this kind of stuff, and deer in the woods, and I liked that. But anyhow, let's back up.

My parents were both from the South, and they met in Atlanta, Georgia. My dad's family was one of the founders, in the 18th century, of Nashville, Tennessee. His family went down the Cumberland River and basically found a spot to build a plantation house, which started out very primitive log structure, in the 18th century, and then grew into a big *Gone With the Wind*-style plantation setup. My mom's family, in a similar fashion, was in northern Georgia, starting out in a place called Traveler's Rest, I think, and—yeah, Traveler's Rest, in northern Georgia in the hills, and then, again, had a sort of empire-like expansion of—so they came from a sort of Blanche DuBois kind of, like, lost fortune. It's unique to the South, this feeling of aristocratic privilege without any money at all, and this concept that, like, the only difference between them and, say, the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts was just the fact that they were, you know, on the losing side. But the real—the fact of the matter is they were—you know, her—my mom's dad sold insurance, and my father's father was in banking, and they had—you know, they were just kind of educated, middle-class people with real upper-class feelings about the family, you know? This sort of, you know, knowing that both sides of the family had come over, you know, pre-Revolutionary War and all that. And that was in the background always.

And when I was a little kid, it was kind of—I mean, there was strange stuff in the house; for example, like scrapbooks that were put together by relatives—older relatives, you know? Like, older scrapbooks, and they would have, like, Confederate money in them that would have pictures of, like, people picking—you know, African American people picking cotton and stuff on the back of the Confederate bill, you know? And Jefferson Davis on the front. Really weird reminders of this history. And furniture that was from plantation houses that were lost to the family, you know? But, like, "Oh, this came from blah, blah, blah, Jarrett Manor," or whatever. You know, these names would come up—Glen Echo and Jarrett Manor and all these places that I never saw. And we would go down South to visit relatives, and I would feel acutely uncomfortable when I was down there, because there was a machismo about the male culture down there that had to do with just being tough, hunting, military school, that I couldn't relate to at all.

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And luckily, my dad and mom were already liberal in their outlook, so they pretty much felt out of place—I mean, they felt truly Southern, but they were—the minute they got married, they moved to New York. My dad's childhood was such that he had nothing but brothers in his—so I'm going to do a little of this back history, because I think it had a big impact on me and my identity—who I thought I was, the story that my family told itself about itself. So, my parents were artistic. My dad drew. My mom drew and painted. They had both been to New York and loved it. They both were not—they weren't people that were listening to country music. They were listening to jazz, you know? It was—you know, they read books. My mom said there was a standing offer in our house, five dollars to the first kid in the house that would read *War and Peace*, you know? That kind of thing. Those were the rewards. Like, "Let's see you do something productive." To this day, I think I'm the only member of the family that's read that book. [Laughs.] Maybe my younger sister. She reads. But—by now, she might've read it. But anyhow, I was keen to do that kind of thing. Yeah."

I used to call my mom a culture vulture. Like, she'd go to the ballet. Like, she'd bring me to see Nureyev dance, you know? Or go to the Met, and I'd look at a Gauguin painting of topless women and be like, "Oh, my God, that's so incredible." So she was introducing me to these things, and he was too, because he had a drawing board at home and he was a cartoonist and he let me use his paints and things. So, I know my dad was born in 1927 down South, and by the end of his life, he had worked at *Time Life* magazine, and one of his best friends was Gordon Parks, who did *Shaft*, you know? And I was like—his journey, from being among bigots and Civil War apologists all the way to New York, where he was able to be tight with people like Gordon Parks, a major figure in the civil rights movement? You know, there you go. Like, that's—I was proud of my parents for that.

But there was still, like, language and attitudes in the house that I was, like—when I was in my—by the time I was in my twenties, I was kind of horrified, you know? They just had a DNA, you know? There's a fine line—I have Russian friends who now have to deal with the fact that they've got Russian soul in their heart and bones, and you've got Putin there, you know? And then you're sort of like, "What am I supposed to do about that kind of background," you know? Like, "Because I can't make it go away, and some of what people like about Putin is in me," you know? That kind of feeling. I never grew up in the South and felt completely alienated from that, but my parents didn't because they had happy memories down there, and childhood. And strangely, some of my dad's apparent colorblindness in his friendships—and my mom's, too—came out of being deeply in love when they were children with, like, a nanny. You know? So there's a kind of confusion.

Like, maybe one of the—like, because they were sort of formal homes that they grew up in where your, you know, children are, you know—yeah, like, it's not—maybe not that—formal homes, that's all. And so Mom and Dad are not a hundred percent available, affectionate-wise. The person who sits you on your lap when you're crying and gives you little kisses and patches up your scuffed knee is an African American woman who works for the family. And that love isn't fake. I've been down there and seen it. I saw—when I went to my grandmother's funeral, I saw my uncle, who was, you know, a man in his sixties at that point, and his beautiful nanny—[laughs]—who came to the funeral who was in her nineties, and he fell into her arms crying, and she was petting his head and saying, "Baby brother, baby brother."

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That's what she—her nickname for him when he was a little—and that was moving and very complicated American history stuff. So I grew up around that atmosphere, and I understood almost immediately, and deep in my bones, the ambivalence and the complexity of history in this way that I think was super helpful to my later practice, honestly, because all of my work is engaged in reading, and a lot of times reading history and parsing it in a way that pulls nuance out, that isn't the received knowledge from either side, you know? So that I can—and you have to do that if you're—all of your, like, your—my grandmother—okay, most of my grandparents were dead when I was born, but I had one living grandparent, who was my grandmother, and I loved her deeply, and she was a horrific bigot in her language, at least.

Like, how can I say? I have observed this bullshit as well down South, where there's people who have attitudes towards whole groups of people, and then they always have these exceptions, and then those exceptions become, like—like, my dad had an attitude about certain types, because he was from the South and educated at Vanderbilt and had a thick Southern accent, and then came to Time Inc., where there was a hell of a lot of guys that

were very Northeast educated; Harvard and Yale guys, you know? That kind of schooling, and that kind of background. And he would say things like, "Well, you know, your mother, she lost—" No, he would say, "I had to lose my Southern accent for business." He would say it like that. He would say, "Your mother, she still has hers, but I had to—" You know? And I'm like—[laughs]—Dad, if you could hear yourself.

He's like, "I didn't want them thinking I was some kind of freckle belly," and, you know, "You just said freckle belly for lazy person. You're not getting away with anything here." He was amazing that way, and he had worked on his accent. It was even thicker when he arrived, so there you go. But his self-consciousness would sometimes rise up in a resentment, and it could feel like antisemitism or bigotry towards Blacks, or something, that was just coming out when he felt like maybe his position—like he was being mocked because he came here—and I can see his point of view. Like, I've criticized him for those attitudes when I was in my twenties and super critical and kind of estranged, when I was in my teens, from him completely, because he wanted me to play football. He was a little bit of—you know, he was a Boy Scout. You know, he did have these sort of roles that—and I had nothing to do with it. And I'm a little boy with plastic animals in his pocket, and, like, sneaking off into the corner to draw, and he's thinking, "This is effeminate," you know?

He loves that I'm an artist. He was backing that up one hundred percent. But he wanted me to get out there and play football as well, you know? And instead, I really am that little pale kid that doesn't want to go outside and do that with him. And I'm avoiding him, and then he's getting pissed off. So—but later, I look back and I said just what I was saying before—I haven't gone on a spiritual journey as vast as his. I haven't been born to complete bigots in the South in 1927 and ended up in New York with—

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WALTON FORD: —like some of the most amaz—and who—where my dad literally would say, like, when he saw my artistic talent, put Gordon Parks in my way, because he's like, "You're the two most talented people I know and I want you to meet each other," you know? That kind of thing. And Gordon was graceful enough to meet a little kid and be, like, encouraging. And my dad knew a lot of those kind of people. He knew this guy, Jack Davis, who was one of the cartoonists at *MAD* magazine and I knew him growing up. Like, when I broke my arm, he signed my cast. Like, all of those kind of people were around, so I saw—my dad introduced me to this idea that you can make a living as a creative person and that you can even rise above incredible challenges, like my dad's Southern accent or the color of Gordon Parks's skin, or that—you know, in a world where these things are not celebrated, you can still—if you have talent, you can get over that. You don't have to worry about that. So there was a very positive message in his life, but I also, of course, rebelled against it.

My mom, on the other hand, felt like a hundred percent unconditional love and support. She just was, like—she kind of, without saying a word to puff me up, had me feel like I was a genius, had me feel like there was nothing I couldn't do, and had me feel that there was nothing she wouldn't do to help me do that. So, like, anything I needed for my artwork or, you know—and even things that she couldn't stand, like snakes; paranoid of birds flying in the air—I would bring wild animals into the house and, unlike a lot of kids, they find a bird and think it fell out of the nest or something. I wouldn't engage in really bullshit versions of that, because there is a sort of nonsense version of that, but every once and a while, say, an English sparrow, which I knew already as a little kid was an invasive species so therefore, I'm not taking anything out of nature that needs to be there, so I was like, "Okay." I took one home and the—[laughs]—the difference between me and most of those other kids is that mine lived. It didn't die in a week, like every other kid's. It not only lived, it grew to be a pet, and it sat in my toy Jeep. That was where it roosted every night, so the poop was all—everyone was like, "Doesn't it shit all over the room?" And I was like, "No, if they find a roosting spot, they go to their roosting spot, and that's where they sleep and poop most of the time. So yeah, there's some shitting around the room, but generally the big shit is happening in the Jeep, which is awesome." And then I just cleaned the Jeep out once and a while.

And he had full run of the house, landing on my shoulder, the whole fucking nine—she, rather—and that was—and I would do the same with snakes, turtles. Mom never knew what the hell was going to be living in my closet. I did a thing that was so—I didn't realize how upsetting it would be to her. I caught a huge pilot black snake, which is a constricting snake that eats rats and stuff—it was a proper commitment, but it's our own native kind of

constrictor—one of the constrictors we have here—and people don't realize that, that we have constricting snakes in North America. But I caught one, brought it home in a fucking pillowcase, you know, because—and I took a saw and sawed a window in my closet, and then nailed—or screw gunned a screen to that. I got a screen from the basement that I knew wasn't being used for a window, and I made a screen window in my closet, and I emptied all my stuff out of the closet and then put, you know, newspaper on the bottom of it, and a dish of water, and a branch that went up to where the clothing rack, you know, bar was, and the snake would climb up that and hang out, sleeping, on the bar. And it lived in my closet for the whole summer.

And my mom was like, "You just sawed a hole in the door. Like, what—don't you think?" And like, "That's valuable. How're you going to fix that?" And it didn't even occur to me that I'd done something wrong. I thought it was an improvement, you know? I was like, "I made a perfect environment for all these things I catch now in my closet."

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I thought that was perfect. I was like, "This solves all my problems. I could keep anything in there. I could get a baby raccoon. Doesn't matter what it is. I could put it in this closet. It's going to be fine." It looked like an exhibit in the zoo. So she just had to deal with this shit, and she would really not make me feel like—I mean, that was the only time I ever saw her upset, because I damaged her house, which makes—[laughs]—some sense, and now that I'm a homeowner, if my kid damaged my house, I would be ballistic. So the way she—the graceful way she handled that was remarkable, in my opinion, because I think—I have two daughters now. I would've completely lost my shit on them if they did this to my house.

I don't get it. She was some kind of angel, and definitely the mom for me—the one I needed. My dad, much more conflict, because he was a bit of a bully and he was a tough guy, but he also was super supportive of my talent, and like I said, introduced me to all his celebrity art friends. And I would get summer jobs at the [Albert and David] Maysles brothers, like, who did *Grey Gardens*, because my dad knew them. He knew—and then, I don't know, I could—and in graphic design studios, doing paste up and mechanical when I'm, like, 15, and then—and so I had these—I needed jobs because we had no fucking money—but I would get cool jobs, because my dad would hook me up, and my mom too.

Anyway, so I had parents that—when I got to RISD [Rhode Island School of Design], I didn't fully understand how lucky I was, except I did hear other people's stories, and some of those kids had to fight to go to art school, and my parents understood that there was no other place for me. So—

BEN GILLESPIE: Tell me more about your involvement and engagement with art as a child.

WALTON FORD: Okay, yeah. So, as I said, my parents divorced when I was 11, and my dad was a character that inspired a certain amount of fear, so—but he did have a drawing board in the house, which is like that thing—one of those—and he had watercolors and pen and ink and all of these tools of the trade for doing—not oil painting or anything, but for doing, like, you know, maybe, like, caricatures and book illustration type of work, which is what he was interested in. My older brother also had—was born with some kind of gift, and I was as well, and it's an impossible thing to quantify, but—and many, many, you know—there was a funny web—or not website. Yeah, I think it was a website years ago, called *Things White People Like* or something like that, and one of the things they liked was calling their children gifted, you know? And so, it's true, white people always call their kids gifted, so it's become an—and it doesn't matter how completely untalented your kid is, they're still going to be gifted. And, you know, white people like being creative, and they like to say they're going to learn a foreign language, all those things. It was hilarious, actually.

But I know what I got when I was young, and I did come to understand that it wasn't standard equipment with everybody that I knew, and I could—I've been able to—computers, weirdly, helped me understand what the gift was, and what the gift was, is basically you can more or less rotate things in space in your brain—objects, three-dimensional objects. That's one of the things. So I could even look at a two-dimensional drawing of an animal, for example, like, when I was a kid, a tyrannosaurus, and then I would draw it from a different perspective even though I was, like, nine. Like, "Oh, I'm looking up at the underside of his jaw and he's towering over me," and I was able to do that, and it wasn't taught to me. It was just sort of downloaded into my brain.

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Also, it was never a challenge for me to look at the world that we're in right now and see how you could flatten out that, and put it in two dimensions. How I could make this—this is just a series of shapes, colors, light, line. It doesn't matter. I can translate—okay, so, can I translate this into a series of—an arrangement of tones on a page? Yes, I can. Can I look at Ben Gillespie and then make him into a line around Ben Gillespie's features, which is not actually something in nature? You know, a line drawing of a human being, which we just accept as, like, "It looks just like him," is a completely abstract concept. There's no such thing as a line drawing walking around in space. And yet that just came easily. It didn't—it was happening long before anyone showed me how.

So that—and then my brother was six years older than me, so he would give me pointers. So he had a—he was—he had just the same gifts, and I don't know why the two boys got this, and it's not—a lot of the romanticizing of the artistic gifts have to do with things that we're seeing that no one else sees, and all this sort of glorifying the artist as being somehow a middleman between God and the rest of us, you know? Bullshit, in my opinion. A lot of it is really technical, like what I just talked about, and it's—that's enough to make you feel, A, different. It also takes up a certain amount of gray matter that then there's usually deficits, like, I was really confused in math class, and then really insecure about my confusion and then trying to cover it up, and then going—and then hating school, and then you're halfway to being the alienated artist who thinks—who feels like a martyr, even though he's been given these tremendous gifts.

So it feels very contradictory and kind of stupid, but it makes sense. You're uncomfortable because you really don't understand what's going on in this one department and you're expected to understand and even care about, and then all I want to do is go home and draw. I don't want to be in gym class. I don't want to be in any of these classes. The only class I want to be in is an art class, and everything else feels like bullshit. So I was super uncomfortable as a little kid, so the—but I would go home and draw, and then show my parents and get praise. Not only that, go home and draw, and there's tension in the house—a divorce is coming—and my dad's an active alcoholic, and it breaks the tension to show them something beautiful that I did.

Also, my storytelling, and my kind of verbal, like, kind of outflow that is remarked upon, it was rewarded when I was funny, if I told a funny anecdote. So if I combine the two—if I drew a cartoon and it made them laugh? I mean, I had a lot of options for getting—for not getting my dad angry, because he wasn't—he didn't have organized violence like some kids would have to, like, get a beating, you know, that was formally arranged in the—you know, I grew up—I was born in 1960, so corporal punishment in the home wasn't something that people thought was terrifying. It was sort of expected.

My dad's temper was mercurial and fleeting, and he never saw himself as a person that punished his kids with violence, but the fact of the matter is he fucking hit me a couple of times, and I'll never forget it. And it didn't take much, because he was a big guy and he was a strong guy, and he would hit you on the head with his knuckles. And then he would—I could tell he would be sorry. It wasn't something that he planned, but he was an alcoholic. I know he spent a lot of his time hung over. I know he had a lot of mistresses, girlfriends. He had a lot of financial pressure based on the fact that he would party his money away and then take advances on a salary, and my mom was always under financial duress.

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WALTON FORD: All of this crazy chaos was there. So for me to draw, retreat into my room with all my animals and my pets, and all this weird shit, and the stuff I caught in the woods, and my field guides, and my brother was the same kind of animal nerd that I was, and we would go trout fishing when we got a chance, and we would go in the woods whenever we had a chance. And my brother and I, you know, weren't the same, but we had a lot in common.

Yeah, man, it was, like, safe ground in a house that didn't necessarily always feel like it was safe, and in a world that didn't feel safe—definitely school felt like a nightmare—and the only place I really got praise was in this—you know, if I did a—God forbid like I actually did my homework, which was rare—it would have maps and charts and pie diagrams and fucking lettering on the cover that I'd make, and an illustration, and oh, my God, and then

there'd be some—lots of writing, because I'm a talented writer. But anything that had to do with math or, I don't know, just—there were things that escaped me completely. If they put me on a football team, I couldn't remember the plays. I couldn't remember the sequence. I couldn't remember where I was supposed to be. I was terrified of getting hurt, and I just hated that shit.

Because my dad was such a jock, I did get to be a tough kid. It wasn't like—I hated organized sports, but I used to get in fistfights and stuff. So I wasn't, like—there would be a part of me that was—that bought into that, at least at first, that I had to be tough in some vague combat-ready way. I thought men got drafted, because it was during the Vietnam War. My dad's brothers were wounded. One of them was wounded in action in the South Pacific in the Second World War. My dad was drafted into the Korean conflict but ended up in the occupation of Japan and never had to see combat, luckily. My brother's friends were getting drafted into the Vietnam War, so I thought this was just what happened. "Someday I'm going to be in the Army." And I was like, "I don't know how the fuck I'm going to manage this." I was like, "I can't. I mean, I'll have to try to do what my dad did," which, he became a cartoonist on the division newspaper and art director there, and he was able to—but he didn't get any deferments and he was—luckily, he didn't end up in combat, but that was just the luck of the draw. And I just thought, "Maybe I'll luck out like my dad."

But I kind of knew I was going to end up in the Vietnam War. Like, it just seemed like it was going on forever. My whole life. You know, I'm born in 1960. My whole memory was that kids are getting killed over there and so will I, you know? And I can't manage it. It's definitely not something I'm cut out to do. So I guess I'm—I guess it's going to be a really short ride. There was that feeling kind of hanging over you, like, "Wow, by the time I'm 20, I'm probably going to be dead." Weird. Like, now that I look back, because I don't think—once that passed, it was a pretty remarkable feeling, like maybe that's not going to happen. Like, maybe I don't have to go to basic training, you know, and get shipped somewhere. Because my dad's bio was, his parents died, he was in a horrific car accident—went through a windshield—when he was 18, had to have his whole face reconstructed, and then he got drafted. And then when he gets back, he gets married, and the next thing he knows, he has four kids. So his life was, like, a series of just earth-shaking events that, when I looked at it, I thought, "Is that what it means to be a grown-up? I don't know if I can manage this. Like, nothing in this childhood is going to prepare me for this."

So there was a lot of anxiety in me as a child, and even in me now, just an anxious person and a very anxious little kid. So, like a lot of anxious little kids, you go right towards your fears. You get the horror comic book, you know? You get obsessed with the movie *King Kong*, you know?

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I was a little kid who liked—the gorier the comic, the better, you know? The more monsters that I thought about and drew, you know, and I think that's always about overcoming your fears—making them manageable, you know? If I could draw the monster, then it's not going to come and get me. So yeah, I drew a lot of violent things when I was a little kid, you know, dinosaurs fighting, you know, cowboys and Indians fighting, guys, like, wrestling undersea against an octopus, you know. The imagery you grow up with, pulp—[laughs]—magazines and stuff. John Mulaney has a hilarious thing, where he's like, "The things you think are threats when you're a kid, like quicksand," you know? It's like, quicksand is not a thing, but when you're seven, you think you have to be prepared. Like, so I had a bunch of those in my head and I drew them, you know? And when the grizzly bear comes out and, you know, you've got only a little knife in your hand, like, what are you going to do? You know this—and I would draw it, you know? That moment—pulp stuff, obsessed with that stuff.

So looking back, if you're an anxious little kid with a big, scary dad, yeah, of course, you're going to draw monsters, you know? Which only then further alienates your dad, who was like, "Why are you in the room drawing these little—" You know? It's a weird little kid, kind of, you know. I felt like that weird kid, and that's—I mean, maybe a lot of people feel that way, but they cover it up. But it looked to me like kids in Westchester that had—that could afford to be—go to the country club, you know, and have a boat and all these things that these kids had, ten-speed bikes and skiing in Aspen, and all—I mean, you know, these kids were around. And I thought they looked—I never flew on an airplane. I didn't see a palm tree. I never went skiing when I was a kid. It was, like, once my dad left when we were 11, we were like—my mom had to go to the butcher shop and buy a bunch of chicken wings and

cook them up, because that was the cheapest meat for four kids, and she did great because I never felt hungry.

But I also knew that we were right on the edge, you know? That she was doing everything she could, and that Dad wasn't sending the check or whatever the fuck it was that we needed for support, and she was—had a high school education, so the jobs she could get weren't paying tons. So my brother and I started dealing weed out of the house and, again, drawing was this refuge from all of this stress—a kind of way out. I always knew it was—my friend Joe Andoe's from Oklahoma, and he's the same way. We could draw when we were little. He said, "We put all our chips on one square from the get-go." There really wasn't a plan B.

I even remember thinking, once I started helping my brother sell weed out of the house—he was buying kilos in New York City from these bad kids, mostly Italian American kids that he would make friends with that knew how to get this stuff in bulk, and then we'd cut it up into dime bags and sell it to high school students—and I remember thinking, "Well, I guess—" Again, the Vietnam War had left as a possibility pretty much by that time. We're talking, like, 1971, starting to sort of not feel like it's urgent—that I'm going to get—I thought, "Well, when I go to jail—[laughs]—I'll do tattoos for guys and things like that, and draw pornography and stuff. I'll be the guy that draws and that way, they won't, you know, victimize me. I won't be, like, beat up and raped and stuff because I'm the guy that did the tattoo for you," or something. I thought I had a strategy, because it had worked a few times in high school. I could defuse some tension with kids that wanted to beat the crap out of me or something, by like, you know, drawing something cool for them, you know? Even, like, a girl in the school naked, I could do that for somebody if they wanted to.

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Like, "You want to see what she looks like without her clothes on? Because I pretty much have a pretty good idea right now." So I could do stuff like that when I was little and get away with it, and I thought I was going to be able to survive these things that I thought—these horrible things that I thought were inevitable, like being drafted—[laughs]—or—which I didn't think I would survive. But I was strategizing after that, how I was going to get through my prison stint, which seemed inevitable. [Laughs.] Which is so weird. I thought, "How many 12-year-old kids thought they were definitely going to end up in a penitentiary or something?" There's quite a few, you know, but not in Larchmont or Croton, and somehow, I found myself in that situation.

So it's an affluent, sort of white-collar community, and I had these sort of concerns that later, when I made friends with, say—like, I'm friends with this guy, Raphael Xavier. He's an artist in Philly and he grew up in the streets. He's a Black guy who grew up in the streets in Philly as one of the pioneers in breakdancing and stuff, and now he teaches at Princeton and stuff, but he's—Raphael and I have a lot in common. [Laughs.] And I'm like, "But I was, like, this kid who was, you know, got into RISD and everything, and whose dad went to Vanderbilt and stuff. I'm privileged." Like, white privilege. And yet somehow, that background definitely shook me up in a way that was similar to whatever his experiences were, you know, more like with kids in the projects and stuff like that.

It felt—it wasn't nearly as terrifying, obviously, because there wasn't gang violence in my life and stuff, but there was definitely a fear of police and a fear of the man, kind of this general feeling of being an outlaw and an outcast, and that the powers that be were not on my side, that if I was to play by the rules, I wouldn't be able to have a nice bicycle, that I wouldn't be able to have a down jacket for the winter. A pair of hiking boots I thought would be nice, so I didn't wear Converse high tops all winter in the snow with a fucking bread bag there to keep the water off my sock. We would do that. I would take—so I was like, "I don't want to do this anymore." If kids see this, they make fun of you. I put—you know, I have a cotton—or, no, I have one of those fucking white socks that you get from Kmart or whatever and then a bread bag over that and then a Converse high top sneaker, and that's snow wear. Like, "I'm not going to do this. My brother and I can get me some nice fucking boots and then I have hiking boots, like all the other kids." They all had those big, clunky hiking boots in the '70s.

Jesus. And my mom would get me that for Christmas, like, you got one big present a year at Christmas, where she had to peel—like, where she really had to go, "Oh, my God, this is \$80. Like, you get this at Christmas." But we got a—you've got to save up, you know? This is something that everybody has to save up for, because she had four kids and she couldn't do



—sometimes the big present would only come to one kid a year. Like, so there's just shit we had to think about. When I would get home later, Mom had it set up so that each of us would cook. She would get the groceries, and then you would have to get dinner on the table before she got home, because there were so many kids and she couldn't get home from work and then cook for all four kids, so we learned how to cook. And so, looking back, I thought, this great art life, right? She got me ready to live a bohemian life.

By the time I got to RISD, you know, my girlfriends at RISD would open the fridge and see a roasted chicken in there, and they'd be like, "How the—who roasted this chicken for you?" And I'm like, "I roasted that chicken for me." And they didn't even know how to cook. So I knew how to do my own laundry, and I knew—you know, it was, like, "Oh, God," you know? We ran the house. We had to. So it's all good. It wasn't exactly hard shit, but I was an anxious kid, and partly the affluence of Westchester could make you feel out of sync with everybody else, if you were living like this. But my first girlfriend's dad was a TV repairman, so that was—

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WALTON FORD: —fine. It was like I found a group of people who—where it wasn't—sometimes I would—you know, whatever. You'd call them kids from the other side of the tracks or whatever. It was fine. It was—I wasn't—but I didn't feel at home until I got to RISD, and my mom made sure I got into RISD because she signed me up for the summer session program, so I went to RISD when I was 16 during the summer. She got the money together. It was, like, 15 hundred dollars in tuition, and we sent me there, and I had all my meals paid for, and I lived in the dorms, and I think I got some scholarship money for it or something. I don't know how we managed it. I was too young to care about that stuff. I just was there, and I was the star. I couldn't believe it. I was, like, big man on campus, and my teachers said, "If you apply, you'll get in, but you have to graduate from high school," and I was like, "Oh, shit, I definitely haven't been working on that."

So I was, like, at least a year behind in my classes, because I just didn't show up. I was truant all the time. So, I hated school so much that I pretty much dropped out by the time I was 16, but I would show up enough to just get enough credits to be, like—towards the end of the year, I would realize, "I do want to advance in the grades, actually. I don't want to just get stuck in tenth grade for the rest of my life." So, you know, I would show up a bit and squeak by with, like, 65s, get into eleventh grade. Oh, my God, what a fucking relief. But really on my way out the door, and all the teachers were talking to me about it, and I was like, "You know, I'm just going to get a fucking job. I mean, this is—I hate this so much." And pretty much it was—the only reason I went to high school was for the girls, just to keep in touch with the fact that, even though most of the guys wouldn't want to hang out with me and I didn't have many friends, a lot of the girls would have crushes on me because I was that person that you could romanticize in that way—somehow the artist.

There was always some girl that was susceptible to that, the fact that I read books and I listened to music and I drew, and they could sense it when they went in my room or something that I wasn't like all the other boys. And so that was a very powerful aphrodisiac for certain girls, so that kept me in school at least a little bit. So yes, basically sex kept me in school. And then RISD saying, like, "Get—you can come here, but you can't come here without a high school degree." And that warning really shook me up, and my mom, again, came to my rescue and got me tutors, and I squeaked by. And they even felt so proud of me at the little high school I went to that they got—they put together a little scholarship fund for me, because I got into RISD and they had never gotten anyone into RISD. It was Croton-Harmon High School, 600 kids in the school, so I'm a class of 200 kids, not even, and they'd never gotten anyone into RISD before. It never even—nobody had ever applied to RISD, and so it was, like, a moment of pride for the whole school, which was a real shock to me, and they did a—literally passed the hat among the student body, and I got \$800 scholarship money from the school itself, and my mom was really moved, and everyone was delighted. So I was off and running. I could see there was a path to success for me after all.

BEN GILLESPIE: A high school severance package.

WALTON FORD: Unbelievable. And literally, I had the principal arguing in third person in front of me with my arts teacher. So, like, I'm in the art room when I'm supposed to be in social studies and I'm sculpting, like, these, you know, really advanced projects of, you know, whatever. We're probably casting things in metal or something, you know. I'm doing,

like, lost-wax things. I'm doing shit that, you know, Renaissance technique in the goofy-ass high school. Anyway, going—you know, it was ridiculous. Oil painting in there and stuff. Nobody was doing these things in there, and the art teacher was super sweet and, like, he was arguing on my behalf in front of me with the principal. The principal's saying, "He's just a lazy shit. Everybody has interests, but they do them on their own time and they get the grades, and they sign up for sports. Where's his school spirit? We can see he's a good athlete," which was another fucking big bummer.

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Somebody's—my dad made sure I could do these things. It wasn't optional. So I could throw a football and catch it and run, and they saw me doing it in the yard, and then the coach of the football team would never speak to me again because he was like, "Where's your school spirit? You should be on the team." And I'm like, "What the fuck is that?" It didn't even occur to me that I had school spirit. I didn't have school spirit. It was, like, survival.

And they were arguing about this over my head as if I'm not there, and I'm just sculpting away. He's like, "He should be in social—" He came to find me and he had this big fight. It was like, "He's marching to a different drummer," says the art school teacher. "You'll be surprised, the path—I think he's going to be a big success. I think he's going to make us proud." And the principal's, like, "Seems pretty fucking doubtful. I've seen guys like this before and they're only interested in their own stuff, and they're selfish and self-absorbed and lazy." And he's, "What's he going to do? Work in the local tattoo parlor or something? He's not that cool." And that whole thing, and that unfolded as an argument in front of me.

So I could see that. I was, like, eh, I don't know. That doesn't feel great when you're, like, 16. I guess I'm bitching and moaning, but what's interesting is now, I've emerged from all of this with nothing but gratitude. Like, honestly can be truthful about this. If you're given a gift, the polite thing to do is say, "Thank you." My early childhood, because of the discomfort of it, I didn't know that I should say, "Thank you for this gift." I just took it for granted, that it was there, and I could see all of these hardships. That's all. And things to be anxious about. So I didn't see it as, like, a tremendous advantage and gift and something to be grateful for. It just seemed like, "This is what I want to do and nobody's letting me do it," is all it felt like, or, "They're trying to tell me it's not worthy, and at least my parents are on my side with it, but I don't know how this is going to end."

It felt like I was programmed wrong for the world. That's how the beginning felt. And then later, you get to New York, or you go to Rhode Island School of Design. You realize, "We've been looking for you." Like—and I had no idea, really. I mean, I had a little idea from my dad. He tried to instill this in me, but I kept seeing him as this corporate guy and I didn't want to do that either. He was sweet. He would invite me—the idea of, like, inviting your kids to work. I definitely got to go visit my dad at Rockefeller Center or nearby, rather, on Sixth Avenue near Rockefeller Center where Time Inc. was, and I got to see the whole inside of that thing. I was in the art department. I saw them laying the magazine out. I met all the creatives in the thing. I was wandering around. My dad was a complete bon vivant and everyone loved him, and so I saw that there was this corporate way I could make a living, but I hated the look of it. He gets up really early and he gets home really late, and he's grumpy all the time and beleaguered, and all he really wants to do is go fishing, and kind of hated his job on one level.

It was just too much confusion when I was a kid. I didn't know the life that I lived was even remotely possible, and I don't think even when I went to art school I did. I mean, the idea of becoming a blue-chip famous artist is not something that somebody says, you know, "This is what you're going to do," you know? That's ridiculous. It's like, "I want to grow up and be a rock star," you know? *The Onion* had a hilarious headline where it was, like, "Six-year-old girl announces plans to become princess bride astronaut fashion model," you know? [Laughs.] Like, that's kind of—like, it didn't occur to me that I could shoot for that kind of thing. "I want to be a famous artist someday."

But later, when I got to RISD, a lot of this anxiety fell away because I was celebrated, and then when I came to New York, the anxiety—[laughs]—kind of kicked in again because you had to get a job. I worked with RISD students and stuff. I don't know if we want to keep on the childhood stuff, if you had more questions about that.

BEN GILLESPIE: I just wanted to hear a little bit more about your time at museums and zoos.

WALTON FORD: Oh, cool. Yeah. So this definitely is where my mom came in. My mom loved New York City. That's why we were raised in Westchester.

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It had nothing to do with thinking that the suburbs were some wonderful place, which she was really—she more than my dad, I'm sure, picked this environment of saying, "Where can we go where there's some trees?" The house was not a big house, you know. When my mom got a divorce, we moved into a big house, but I'm just saying New York City was the reason why we were where we were, and my mom never forgot that. So, that tickets window in Time Square—I don't know if they still have it—but in the old days, you could go and any cancellations or empty seats, in any Broadway show, would be for sale at the last possible minute, and you could go and sort of sign up, and for a fraction of the price of the ticket, definitely if you didn't care what you saw—they'd give you a list of possibilities sometimes. I forget exactly how it worked, but do you know what I'm talking about?

BEN GILLESPIE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

WALTON FORD: I don't know if they still have something like this. They might.

BEN GILLESPIE: It's probably an app.

WALTON FORD: Yeah, right? But in the old days, it was an actual physical space right in the middle of Times Square, which was another eye opener that I had a lot of experiences with when I was a teenager. Like a lot of juvenile-delinquent-type teenagers, I ended up in Times Square quite a bit, but we can get to that later.

My mom would—so we would do things like that, and she would get discount family tickets and things, but she also worked at museums. She worked at what they call Sleepy Hollow Restorations, which now is known as Historic Hudson Valley, but it's those historic properties like Sunnyside, which was Washington Irving's home, and Philipsburg Manor, which was a Dutch settlement from the 17th century—really early European settlement. You know, those restored village type—you know what I'm talking about. My mom was—ended up throwing these gala parties there, because even though she didn't have an education, she had class and she knew how to throw a good party, so they had her organize one of those fundraisers and she made more money than anybody had, because she knew how to make these rich people comfortable.

And so she ended up being the top fundraiser for—she was head of fundraising. She climbed to the top of the whole fundraising thing all by herself, and she went to Hunter [College] and got her degree and all this. I mean, she's my fucking hero. I mean, my mom is unbelievable, what she was able to do. So, to be a little tiny five-two Southern-accent woman no one took seriously, to being, like, top fundraiser at this nonprofit. So the idea of—so we—museums were paying our bills. Like, I knew that the museum thing was a positive thing from a very early age, and my mom would take us to the Met, and my mom would take us to see special exhibits, when certain things were up, all the way until in this hugely memorable—even as late as '82, I realized, because I looked at the timing and it was different than I thought.

Nureyev put the whole Ballets Russes together and did *Afternoon of a Faun* and *Specter of the Rose* and reconstructed all those ballets that Nijinsky had danced. My mom got all the tickets to that and brought me to those. So I saw—you know, you're seeing, like, *Parade* is the kind of thing. Like, I'm not—I don't remember if it was Stravinsky, but, you know, it was the kind of thing where Stravinsky did the music, Picasso did the sets, Nijinsky danced the fucking thing. I mean, this is like—

BEN GILLESPIE: [Erik] Satie.

WALTON FORD: Satie did *Parade*. Yeah, exactly. Like, Satie, Picasso, and Nijinsky—it's not going to suck. And then Nureyev reconstructing it, and I saw that stuff, and I was like, "This is going—this is unbelievable." So—and then I saw Judith Jamison dance. I saw—you know, so dance was a big part of it, which is so against what my dad would have done. And my dad would question me. He was worried about my sexuality at that point, you know, because I'm talking about Nureyev, and he's like, "Isn't he a fag?" And I'm like, "Dad, he could kick your ass, for one thing." [Laughs.] Like, which my dad knew something about, like, you know?

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BEN GILLESPIE: Okay. So back to—

WALTON FORD: So, museums. I remember being six and we went to the top of the Guggenheim to take the whole spiral down, and I remember getting off the elevator, walking over to the edge and looking down, and hitting the dirt. I was so terrified. Like, the vertigo—and I was paralyzed with fear with that view, and it took a while for that to—but that kind of vertigo, I don't know, I've never experienced it since or before, but it scared the living hell out of me, and I think little things like that were good for me, to know the power of architecture, for example. That effect has a lot more to do with the way that building is put together than the actual height. It's not really that high but it's completely terrifying in that way because you're being flushed down the toilet, almost, and I felt tremendous pull and then I got really scared.

So I don't remember anything else about the Guggenheim from that day, but I was a tiny kid, but—never forget going to the Guggenheim for the first time. Completely overcame my fear of heights—not completely. I can do it now. It still bothers me, but I made myself dive off of cliffs and quarries and all that kind of stuff as a crazy kid growing up, and I still do that stuff. I find it exhilarating to overcome my fear of heights now, but I didn't as a little kid.

So I have early memories of museums and trips to the museum, mostly to do with my mom. Loved going to the Central Park Zoo as a kid growing up and seeing that clock. [Sighs.] Heaven. And the sculptures? The bronzes there, which are these incredible animal bronzes, and then the animals. In those days, they had what later became incredibly sickening to me, but they had big animals in Central Park in the old days, which they had no business having. They've redesigned the zoo since I was a kid to really make it more humane, because the kind of animals they have there now don't need a lot of room. The only ones that are a little on the edge there are the polar bears, where it's like, "That's not exactly an appropriate setup for a polar bear." But most of the smaller animals seem like they have a pretty good deal compared to like what it used to be like. When I was a kid, they had, like, a gorilla in a cage that was, like, the size of a minivan. It was very depressing.

But when I was little, it wasn't depressing. I got to look at a gorilla. So I didn't get—you know, none of us in the '60s really understood any of these more contemporary concepts about zoos and things, so I loved it. My mom made sure we went there. And the Museum of Natural History was nirvana, like, times 20. If we—if my mom was going to tell us that we were going to make a stop there, I was in—you get so excited when you're little that even that creates anxiety, you know? You're like, you know how kids can get. They get a little bit nutty. Like, kids real—like, maybe it's going to not happen or something won't—oh, my God.

But I was so excited if I knew I was going to go to the Museum of Natural History, and I drew from the exhibits when I was a bit older and I would be allowed more time, like, maybe even if we get to the African hall, if I stop in front of the gorilla exhibit and want to draw the gorillas, then everyone else can go take the whole lap around and see all the rest. And by the time they get back to me, maybe I'll be done with my drawing, and then I'm happy to leave. Like, I don't have to see everything else because I got a drawing done. It's sort of a compromise because Walton's going to take longer. Always trying to accommodate my gifts, which is super fucking sweet.

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I always felt celebrated when I was at the museum, especially drawing in front of a diorama, even to this day, because people stop—the tourists—and they look over my shoulder and they're like, "Oh, my God, that's really good," you know? Like, as if I just taught myself that minute. Now I'm like, "I am a professional." Like, it's not like I'm a student who's trying to figure this shit out. But even as a little kid, they had that look, you know? It was, like, definitely you don't expect a nine-year-old to be drawing that in that way. It's like, "Whoa, what the hell?" It's that thing, that little child prodigy with a piano or something, you know? It's that startling disconnect where you're like, "That doesn't make a lot of sense."

And a lot of kids who start really young, you know—because my former girlfriend, for example, used to enter the dance competitions when she was little, like six or seven years old, and she'd do, like, a Bob Fosse routine, like Liza Minelli, and that's disturbing on some level, to see a little kid doing *Cabaret* with the hat tip and the little black stockings on and

stuff. You're, like, creeped out a little, but this is how we get so good at these things. We can—we start when we're so young, and we start operating at a really high level at a really early age, and it doesn't look normal but it's definitely—well, I guess it isn't. It's like, you don't have a plan B. You don't have a choice.

BEN GILLESPIE: Do you remember any dioramas or exhibitions in particular from the Museum of Natural History?

WALTON FORD: Well, yeah. I had the—I remember things like before they put the blue whale in. I remember when you used to go to the museum and they had a contribution box that literally had, like, a slot, like, for money to go in for the new whale. Like, contribute to—"We're going to have a life size blue whale. We're going to redo this hall. Contribute, you know, your pocket change towards that," because they had a sort of dead looking sperm whale, as I remember, or something. As a kid, I remember the premodern—I don't know when—I swear to God, I remember this stuff, and I've got to go to the dates, actually, and figure out exactly when did they put the blue whale in, because I know it was after my first visits to the museum.

But the gorilla exhibit. The whole hall of African mammals, obviously, was put together by Carl Akeley way back in the day—way before my time—and, you know, all that Teddy Roosevelt stuff has been there since Teddy Roosevelt was still alive. So those—ever since I was a kid, the wolf diorama, its fucking perfect creation of night, nocturne, unbelievable thing in the snow with the shadows, and, oh—and the gorilla diorama, obviously, and the coyotes in Yosemite are, like—it's one of the most convincing illusions in the whole museum. It's just—you're there. It's very strange. And the African wild dogs, which is just a haunting one. They were all, in different ways, important to me.

Two of the ones that most people don't think of, that I lost my shit over, was in the very first experiments with the contemporary diorama format that Akeley pioneered, who was the guy who really invented it—the ones where—it really is this world. They were experimenting with that form in the North American birds, which is a very small room in the museum, generally. It's not vast. But there's one of peregrine falcons in the Palisades, and you're looking out over early 20th century Hudson River and there's, like, an oyster boat under sail, that kind of thing. Like, it's just a different world, right? But it's very subtle how it's like, "Oh, my God, those are the Palisades. That's, like, Yonkers across the way, and it's completely rural."

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And then the same very creepy, beautiful marshland scene, which is the Meadowlands. It's, like, the Hackensack River in, like, 1910, and again, there's, like, a fishing boat in the background and it's gorgeous, and there's no, like, pollution and there's no horrific—you know, there's no—it's right where the Pulaski Skyway is, and where all this—you know, where they dump bodies and stuff—[laughs]—in the mafia. It's a hellish landscape now, and it's absolutely gorgeous in this. So it's a time capsule—a remarkable time capsule—where they're just saying, "Oh, here's the local birdlife in 1910." Yeah. But now? It's like, that, weirdly, some of those same birds would be there, but you would have to render oil on the water and a tire—[laughs]—and a fucking shopping cart, you know. I don't know what, graffiti and all this construction and warehouses and, oh, my God.

So it's a profound place. Many of the exhibits are of places that have been transformed. There's some, even in Africa, where apparently, you know, Nairobi has overtaken the spot that was rendered, because it's very specific. All of the Museum of Natural History dioramas, damn near, are specific to exact geographical location at a particular season and a particular time of day. So it's like, "This is the blah, blah, blah plateau in late October at, like, six-thirty in the evening." I mean, honest to God, and all the shadows and all the plant life and all—everything is going to correspond to that, and that blew me away when I knew that that was the case, as a kid. That was just, like, ah, the accuracy of it, the fastidiousness of it, the research that went into it, the amount of effort it took to not have any of that stuff go astray. There's not a single plant that doesn't belong there. There's not a color of the soil that isn't right. They're not fudging it at all, and I was like, "Goddamn."

And the landscape backgrounds are some of the best landscape paintings in America, by anybody. Like, anywhere you want to go, you're going to see—so there's a guy called [James Perry] Wilson that did the background paintings. You know, it goes on like this, and as a kid and a little nerdy kind of, off to the side—and, again, this goes back to my—how they

misunderstood me at school, or how it went wrong for me, at least when it comes to anxiety and stuff—is that the teachers didn't understand that I would know all of this stuff like that, and somehow still be failing, in a class that they didn't realize I had tried, at least at first, and then gotten so freaked out by my inability to understand the things the other kids could understand.

Like, I couldn't figure out even the watch face for a while, and I kept faking it like I knew how to tell time. There was no digital watch when I was a kid, and this idea that they would say, "It's 20 after," and I'd be like, "20? But it's pointing to four. How is that 20?" Right? And they'd say, "It's one-twenty." "Okay, I understand it's on the one, but also it's not exactly on the one, so I'm not one hundred percent. But then it's on the four, so why isn't it one-four? Why did you call it one-twenty?" I just—these things were escaping me, and nobody was sitting down with me and helping me out with this, and even if they did, it was going to take a while. I didn't understand the units of—I didn't understand the times tables at first, you know?

Later, I wish somebody had just said, "If you were to take five three times in a row, that means 15 because it's three times in—how many times do you want to—" You know, there was, like, a linguistic way in—like, if I was going to teach a kid the times—

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WALTON FORD: —table, what we're talking about is, like, "What if you, you know, if you took seven five times in a row, what would that add up to?" I didn't know that that was what they were telling me, so even then, I would be like, "Time with the watch with the—what are you—" I just was confused, and I know I had a learning disability—it's never been fully diagnosed, but I go to a shrink now, and he's like, "It's quite obvious to me that there are undiagnosed things that would be called learning disabilities now that would've gotten extra attention." But in the 1960s, they just thought, "This is a kid who's, like, spouting all these facts about the Museum of Natural History dioramas and who made them and what year and how they were made and, you know, they hammered metal and then they painted it and that's a leaf. Like, they made them—and that plant, they made out of wax." It was, like, fucking ridiculous, and digging into this stuff and then going home and making my own versions of these things. Like, I would do makeup jobs on myself after I'd seen a horror movie and recreate the special effect myself, and I found a place that would sell me latex rubber, and I would dip cotton in it and then sculpt the latex rubber and cotton on my face and make myself into an ape. Like, crazy! And it would dry on my face and give me a rash, and then I would paint it, and then I would go out and scare the shit out of other kids, and I was having—

I just had these things I was working on at home, and I always had a project, an art project going. I always had a metal armature that I was putting clay on to make a sculpture or, you know, teaching myself how to paint in oils or—you know, it just went on and on and on. You know, "Oh, wow, you can carve Styrofoam." You know, "Oh, shit, I'm going to carve something out of Styrofoam that looks like rock and I'm going to make it look like a rock, and then I'll paint it to look like granite and then everyone will think it's granite, and then I'll pick it up and throw it at them, and—" You know, it's like I had this idea of cool things to do, and always, always, "I'm going to do a comic strip now," you know? "I'll give it a name and draw the cover and—" *Whew*. "I'm going to get a Super 8 camera. Let's make a film." It never quit. It never fucking quit.

And so they thought I was lazy. My homework? I already had my homework. I knew what my homework was. It was the stuff I wanted to do. Because I saw *Planet of the Apes* or something, and then I made prosthetics for my face so that I could talk, so I made a lower jaw and an upper jaw and I figured out the elastics to attach them and, you know, I did a primitive version. I was like, "God, if I carve this out of foam—" So I took an old pillow that was a foam pillow, and I cut it into a lower mandible and an upper mandible with scissors and carefully trimmed it out and then painted it, and then painted my face, and then mounted the mandibles on, and then I was an ape that could talk and use his mouth and still eat, and I looked—for my money, I thought I looked just like the people in *Planet of the Apes*. You know, this was the kind of stuff I was working on.

What a weird kid. When I think—but weirdly, if I had that kid now, because I had kids that had their own obsessions. I'd be so proud. I'd be so happy. And my parents were, but they were worried more, because it's just a different era and it was a different environment—

much more—you know, *The Onion*, again, makes hilarious headlines. In the *Our Dumb Century*, in the 1950s and '60s, it says, "Ant-like conformity now more affordable than ever." And, you know, and it showed Levittown, you know? And it was a little bit like that in the suburbs, like, you were expected to fit in, and definitely the kid who's trying to do *Planet of the Apes* makeup in his own room is not—he's not fitting in, exactly.

BEN GILLESPIE: Also thinking about *Planet of the Apes*, I would love to hear about other formative media that you were consuming or exposed to.

WALTON FORD: Okay, so this is super fortunate. I'm going to sound—I don't even tell many people this because it just—sometimes I sound like I'm full of shit, but this is not full of shit. My dad, because he was at Time Inc., they got all of these advance notices, but also advance tickets and cultural event things.

[00:05:12]

So my dad would know about stuff ahead of time. One of the things he knew about ahead of time was when the Beatles came to Shea Stadium for the first time, and my brother was obsessed. He's 12 at the time, and I was probably, like, five, and we went as a family to see the Beatles at Shea Stadium for real. And I sat on my dad's shoulders and I saw a helicopter come down and I heard screaming girls wetting their pants, throwing up everywhere around us—fucking mayhem—and if you want to give a little kid who's artistic and creative the idea of the power of what art can do? That was power. You know, 150,000 people flipping out.

And I loved the music, but you couldn't hear the music to save your fucking life, and my dad actually figured out if we went to the very back of the—towards the wall, that some of the sound would bounce off the wall of the singing, because we couldn't hear anything, and it actually did. The acoustics—my dad's a smart guy. So the acoustics were such that he did find more of a sweet spot where you could hear. But he—knew that from being a football player, that if you're calling plays, that sometimes you could hear them—hear better. He understood the acoustics of a football stadium, so he brought us to a place where we could hear a tiny bit.

So that was a powerful moment that I never forgot, and the other thing is, okay, Jack Davis—who did that drawing of my dad—who was one of the pioneers of underground comics, in a sense, because he was at EC Comics, which started *MAD* magazine and also had all these violent war comics and horror comics that were formative for people like R. Crumb, and people like that. So Jack was one of my dad's best friends. That's an image of my dad. He and Jack used to go fishing together in the White Mountains in New Hampshire. He gave us all of his boxes of EC Comics that he got. They were just—he didn't care. They were in his attic. His kids didn't give a shit about comics, so he didn't give them to his children because they weren't artists. He saw that my brother and I are sitting there drawing and buying these comics. He's like, "Oh, you don't have to buy these comics. I have boxes and boxes." Gave us what it turns out was a priceless collection of comics, but we destroyed them because we looked at them, and we used them as source material. We didn't know. We probably cut them up and put them on—you know, we didn't know what the fuck we were doing.

But we had these priceless comics directly from Jack Davis, EC Comics, first editions, and just destroyed them reading them, looking at them. And, good for us, in a way. I would've been able to go through RISD on those, when I look back. We were horrified later when we realized what they were worth. But that was hugely impactful, because they literally would take, like, a Ray Bradbury story, and then they'd have these artists—I don't know if you know about this, but this guy—like, Wally Wood was a really famous artist in that stable and he would draw, like, the Ray Bradbury story up, and it would be—they wouldn't pull the punches. It wouldn't be, like, juvenilia, because Ray Bradbury was writing for adults, and these comics were horrifically violent. They would show people's flesh being melted off and half-skeletal people still talking and stuff. It was really powerful. The artists were highly skilled. The writing was on a pretty high level for a comic book, so—and it was very violent. It made them put a code on comics, but we had all those Pre-Code comics. So that was enormous.

And then, as soon as my brother—so by 1970, I'm 10 years old, so now the hippie thing has come. Now my brother's bringing home *Zap Comix* with R. Crumb, and so now it's, like, big sex scenes, big penises being rendered, big, you know, vaginas and tits and everything and people doing drugs, and I'm looking at comics that are depicting this and I'm freaking out.

Like, this is the best. I'm 10 years old.

[00:10:00]

I'm a pre-sexual person. So I don't really know what I'm looking at, but I definitely know what I'm looking at, and I want to be a part of this world. I'm like, "I know that this is fantastic," you know? So, precociously introduced to underground culture, which kids now today on the internet, obviously, is very common. But in my day, I was lucky. I knew other kids who had older brothers who knew about this stuff. But I—that was a little clique as well, and they tended to be not the best kids, you know? They're definitely, like, the dad being out of the house or, you know, latchkey kids, or kids from the other side of the tracks, more access to pornography and stuff like that. So I would—there was a group of kids who knew about this stuff, you know? Like, I've already seen all of this stuff—really raunchy stuff to see when you're, like, 10 years old, 12 years old.

Loved it. Fucking loved it. Loved *King Kong*, the original *King Kong*, it didn't matter. I would search the newspapers for certain things appearing on TV that I might sneak downstairs and watch late at night, if—and so these are the—this is the list. So, if it's *Island of Lost Souls*, which was an incredible horror film from the '30s—Pre-Code horror film with Charles Laughton—*King Kong*, any of the animated Ray Harryhausen things that would come up, so that would be, like, *Beast From a Thousand, Two Thousand Fathoms [20,000 Fathoms]*, or whatever the hell it is—or any of those—*Gorgo*. My God. *Godzilla*, obviously. *Godzilla* and *Gorgo*, few of the Japanese costume ones. Preferred animation to someone in a costume, but definitely those early *Godzilla* and *Gorgo* films were awesome. Anything that had a gorilla suit. So there was, like, certain—ugh, what's the name? I'll get it in a minute—certain horror films that had really awesome gorilla suits. Anything from the Marx Brothers. Anything from W.C. Fields. Anything from Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin.

These things only came on television once in a while, you know? But you could—there was rerun stuff, you know? There was space fillers. A lot of these films were only shown late at night because there really wasn't a big audience for this kind of stuff. And then later, like, I ended up—we started with the Beatles that way, but I ended up being a Rolling Stones kid, and so later, when—it would be a big event, I remember, when they showed *Gimme Shelter* for the first time on television, and all of my brother's friends came and we all sat on the floor and watched that together. So I was, like, a little hippie at that point.

Later, weirdly, I became friends with Mick—I made—I did artwork for the Rolling Stones' 50th anniversary, and got to hang out with the band. I couldn't fucking believe my journey in this way. But didn't even care that I didn't meet Paul McCartney yet or something because I met all of the Stones and hung out with them, actually—actually spent time, idle time, sitting around with those guys—backstage time, time at Mick's birthday party—70th birthday—and just getting invited to things. "Oh, we're going to do—you know, L'Wren Scott's launching a perfume," and then I show up at that, you know? That was Mick's old girlfriend who's died.

But anyway, I've been super blessed to meet all my heroes, kind of. Another cultural impact that I forgot to mention: in Larchmont when I was young, before we moved to Croton, on the same avenue I lived on—Murray Avenue, which was across the street from the Murray Avenue School that I went to—just down the block was the makeup—a very famous makeup artist named Dick Smith.

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WALTON FORD: He did *The Exorcist*. [Laughs.] He did the old-age—these are things he won Academy Awards for—he did the old-age makeup for Dustin Hoffman in *Little Big Man*, where he made him look a hundred-and-ten years old. He did all of the gore that you see in *Taxi Driver*. He did, like, people getting their hands blown off in real time where he would literally—so I'm a little kid—no, at that point I'm a teenager—but you hear, like, I knew that Dick Smith made a wax hand and then he had a fishing line that you couldn't see, and all he did is have the guy hide the wax hand in his sleeve, hold his hand up, and then the fishing line went across and sliced all the fingers off. Very easy to do, but when you add the sound of a gun and you shoot it in this fucking horrific lighting, like, if you're Scorsese and you have that as your special effect, unbelievable. Like, beats digital stuff every time, because it's real. His—oh, whoa! And you feel nauseous because you just saw it with your own eyes. It's not—there is a difference. [Laughs.]



And goddamn, that wizard was just down the street, coming up with the simplest solutions to really hideous problems, and going to his house for Halloween to trick or treat was one of the most horrific things you could possibly do, because he'd use—his workshop was in his garage, basement. He had a studio in the house right there in Larchmont, New York, making these things. So my mom hated when I went over there, because I would be handling basically a severed head or something that was absolutely convincing, you know? And—or, like, kind of dark—like, Linda Blair's whole body cast in plaster, because he had to create fake Linda Blairs whose head spun around. So it's weird. You're looking at a sort of plaster cast of a pre-pubescent girl's naked body, you know? I mean, there's some weird shit over there that my mom was like, "I don't like it when you come back from there because you tell me what you saw, and it's really disturbing." Like, "Oh, yeah, he has this whole bucket of intestines that he made, and the way he made the bucket of convincing intestines is like this." And it's, like, not exactly the way you want your little, you know, 10-year-old boy talking in 1970 or something.

So a lot of cultural influences coming in from different directions, and he would—Dick Smith would goof around sometimes, making us up as well. Like, he would do—show us little makeup techniques and things. He was a very sweet guy, actually. It wasn't creepy to be there. He just happened to have a job that—you know, it's the Golden Age in Hollywood and definitely a big deal in horror movies, and he was instrumental in figuring these techniques out. So he won many Academy Awards.

So there were these people in my life that were, like, creating art and making a living, and I think that, again, had a huge impact. A lot of the edge in my work—violence and sex that come into the work—you know, come in honestly through these channels. That makes sense, you know? That—and you mix that with the fact that there was a sort of criminal element in my childhood with my brother and I, and the kind of kids I hung out with, whether it was, like, the expectation that I would—that there'd be a few fistfights a year, like, that just were unavoidable kind of thing, and this menace of the police hovering over the whole scene. You know, it gave an edge to the whole suburban experience that was a little unusual, I think.

BEN GILLESPIE: What I wanted to ask—so, when you were in high school, you had a trip to Colorado, right? Was there, like—

WALTON FORD: Oh, my God, yeah, in junior high school. Yeah, there were a couple of episodes like this. So I had a best—I have, to this day, a best friend I met the first day of kindergarten, Walter McTeigue, and his family—there was real reasons why we would end up together, I realized, as, like, he's—I probably love him as much as anybody I'll ever love, you know?

[00:05:16]

Like—and so we meet when we're in kindergarten. His parents—his father was a jeweler—a fifth-generation jeweler, and they had, like, an atelier on 47th Street, so they were the only non-Jewish family that went back many generations on 47th Street, because they were Irish. And—but the—I think the aesthetics, growing up with a dad who might draw something and then have it made, you know? Like, the craft, this idea of making something incredibly beautiful in-house, kind of? So he grew up with that as well. I think that might've had something to do with the connection right away. It wasn't like a—honestly, you think of a place like Westchester, most of the dads are—their jobs are pretty fucking boring, let's just be honest, and we didn't really have boring dads, you know? Like, in that way. His dad was also kind of a bully and a tough person to have as a dad, with high expectations and a certain amount of violence in the house, so there was that, too. We had that in common.

So we wanted to run away, let's just be frank, you know? Walter and I planned our escape from a very early age. Like, "We've got to get out of here." Once my dad left when I was 11 I was given a reprieve, because I wasn't going to get knocked to the ground in an arbitrary moment, you know, just for saying the wrong thing or something. You know, like—and Walter's dad unfortunately didn't leave, so he was more keen on the escape after I realized it wasn't necessary. But I suspect if my dad had stayed, I would've done something more like him. He really did drop out of high school and just hit the road as soon as he could and got a job, like, stringing cable television and stuff. I mean, he was like—he became a real blue collar worker, even though his family had tons of fucking money from the jewelry business. It was very weird. I've seen this before: rich kids who end up riding the rails, run away from

home and end up homeless or something. He wasn't quite as bad as that, but he had money at home, but he had an abusive situation at home, so he wanted to leave. He left his house earlier, and then came back and worked in the family business and made peace with his family and it all worked fine. It all came out okay in the end.

But we wanted to run away, and he came up with a plan first. He called a whole bunch of guys and outfitters in and around Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and he got a job on a ranch in Colorado, and he went. He was maybe 13, I think, when he went, and when he came back, he was strong and he had—and tan, and he had done all this stuff on this ranch, and I thought, "Shit," and he said, "I'm going to do it again next year." And I said, "I'm going to do it too." So I did. He showed me the way, and I got the job and we just—we presented these things to our parents. We were like, "I got a job in Colorado as a hired hand," and my parents were so impressed with Walter and I for figuring this shit out. And I made all the phone calls myself, but fucking Walter told me how to do it.

And I got a job from a guy called Perley Green, Hay, Grain, and Livestock, Oak Creek, Colorado. It was about 18 miles from Steamboat. And they said, "Just show up on a certain date at the Steamboat Springs airport," you know? And my parents were so impressed. They scrounged together the money to get me an airplane ticket, and it was the first time I'd ever flown in an airplane. I was 14. I looked out the window, couldn't believe it. Land in this, I mean, connecting flight in Denver, almost missed. I didn't know anything about this. I didn't know how to do this, and took that tiny little airplane into Steamboat airport. Oh, fuck, like, the kind of—in those days, we're talking 1974, I think, there was, like, a dog running across the runway when I landed. Unbelievable. Unbelievable. And he has a pickup truck. He has fingers missing, Perley. He's got a notch out of his ear. He's chewing tobacco. Fucking amazing. And I worked on this ranch with these cowboys that called me—they started out calling me the New York Prick as a joke, and by the end, it was Ol' Walt.

[00:10:08]

And Ol' Walt was invited back, you know? He was like, "We'll put you on the payroll, you know, next year. You proved yourself." But they'd, like, rope me when I was walking with buckets of slop for the pigs. They'd throw a rope around my foot and then trip me. They were—you know, you were hazed. And I chewed tobacco. I drove a tractor. I had my own horse, mostly fixing fence, which I loved, because if you have a massive ranch in Colorado, you've got to patrol the fence line to make sure that elk and things aren't coming in to eat all the oats, or whatever you're growing in the fields, and that you're also—if your horse is wild—they had a lot of semi-wild horses that were breeding stock for their—you know, so they could see when the foals came whether this was going to be a good horse or not for a work horse or something, or they'd keep other people's horses on their land and those people would pay them, so they had horses on the place. But you needed to keep the fence fixed, and I would patrol—you're riding along, you had these jacks. Anyway, you'd find a break in the fence. You have to mend the fence. You have gloves and you have wire and these jacks that pull the two broken strands together, *chk-kuh-chk-kuh-chk*, and then you make a loop, you know, and tighten it up, and then you go onto the next break.

Oh, man, and you're out in the middle of fucking nowhere, and you've got a horse, and that's the only way to do it because the fence—you can't drive along that. Now, they do fucking ATVs. They don't even use horses like that anymore on the ranch that I worked on. It's now long gone. But even later, I heard they had ATVs, and that made me very sad. I mean, they use helicopters. They use all this crap now. But in those days, it was all horses. There was no television service and they had a landline there, but they had one station that would come in from Craig, Colorado. [Whistles.] Like, fucking unbelievably remote.

And I got tough as nails out there, and I got strong, and I came back like a man, you know? And I'm 14, and there were rattlesnakes, and I skinned a rattlesnake once. We ran one over and they threw it in the back of the pickup because it was so huge, and I thought I would try to skin it and make a hat band for my cowboy hat or something, and I just made a mess. It smelled like dead fish, and we had to throw it away. I didn't know how to tan it. I thought you'd just leave it in the sun or something, and eventually the pigs ate the whole project. You just throw it to the pigs and they eat it.

But, like, something I saw was when you skin—when you kill a snake, if it's in the warm sun for a long time, it can still have nervous reaction, and after I skinned it, this pink, like, lozenge of meat—super phallic—throw it in the dust, and it's still moving around. And then

the pig picked it up and started eating it, and it's—this pink, you know, four-foot tongue, like, hanging out of the pig's throat as he's swallowing it down. These images were in my head as—I'm 14. I was like, "Whoa." Then we castrated pigs. I had to help hold them down. That was nightmarish. The scream that—a pig knows. It definitely knows. Sounded like a man's scream. It sounded like I'd scream, if you were cutting my balls out.

I got to see all of this stuff. It was—they had guns. They shot varmints. I saw them do it. It was heavy. Their dogs on the ranch were for keeping predators away. They were not pets. If you wanted to play with them, you'd put big, heavy leather gloves on and you would sort of roughhouse with them, and they would fucking grab. It was like dealing with a wild animal. I loved this world. I was, like, so intoxicated, and my dad had raised me right, because I brought my fly rod, and they were, like—eh, I don't know. These guys, they didn't even—the little creek that ran through the place, they didn't even know there were—

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WALTON FORD: —trout in there. They didn't care. For them, they'd go to the lake and throw worms in and catch fish that way, and they didn't care. So I went down there with this high-class, like, Abercrombie & Fitch rod that my dad had bought and let me bring with. My dad spent money on fishing equipment, I'll tell you that. And I caught—I was—I'm a skilled fly fisherman. I can fish. I grew up doing it, so I come back with my dinner and a bunch—and then some trout for them as well, and they were like, "Whoa! Ol' Walt!" The next day, everybody wanted to go with me, and, "Can you teach me how?" Because there were young—oh, to say there was a daughter who was about my age on the ranch, who actually was, like, romantically interested in me, which I wasn't so interested in her.

And then there was a kid who was about 14, and some of the kids out there are so skilled at riding and horses. This kid was a horse whisperer kind of person. He had done racing with—he had raced Quarter Horses, quarter-mile races. When you're little—before he became a big, huge cowboy, when you're 14, it's good to enter the races because you're so light, and those kids are already such great riders that he was winning races. So he was hired by my ranch to train a foal, and I watched this. This is impactful for the later projects. I watched him do it, and he was my age, but he was, like, a hero. He seemed older because he would, like, just lay across the back of the little foal, and get it used to his weight and be petting it and talking and giving it little pieces of sugar, and it was getting used to this idea that, "It's a nice thing to have a person's weight on my back." Slowly getting him used to that. So beautiful to watch him do this. And, you know, cowboys that now would be, like, Trump supporters or something, but to see these guys interacting with an animal this way—in the sweetest way—and then he would—

By the end of the summer, he was putting little string in its mouth, like a little—and just, like, getting them used to having something in his mouth, putting them—then put the whole bridle on, putting the—then putting the bit in his mouth, getting him used to it, and he's chewing the bit in the same way, and putting the saddle on there, just letting him walk around with the saddle. Everything slowly, slowly, with all this praise and all these pets and all this affection, until this animal just loved—this was the high point in the day. He's going to get oats. He's going to get pet. He's going to get told what a good boy he is. Everything's as sweet as can be. And I watched this. It's, like, all of this positive reinforcement.

And by the end, this was going to be an incredible horse. Like, he'd come out of a very famous stud and their best mare, and I watched them breed that summer for a different—you know, for next year. I saw them breeding their horses as well, so I saw that process, which was intense. Talk about a little, like, sex moment. If you've ever seen horses have sex, it's pretty awe-inspiring, like, you know, the penis on the horse is, like, that, and the mare is in heat, and the whole thing is outrageous.

And so, I don't know. I came back. I'd seen a lot. I'd seen—I'd been—I'd seen them killing rattlesnakes. I'd seen them, you know—oops. I had seen a real working ranch with real cowboys on it, and I knew they didn't believe in evolution, and all of these weird things about them. I knew their politics were super right wing in a way that mine weren't. They would grill me about it sometimes, give me a hard time. "Walt probably likes those hippie girls." I said, "I actually do like those hippie girls. You're right." [Laughs.] "And he probably likes that hippie music too." And I said, "I do, you're right," you know?

But I got my hair cut when I was out there. I had long hair, but before I went there I got it cut

off, just so it wouldn't cause too much trouble. But—I loved *Blazing Saddles*, the movie, and they fucking hated it.

[00:05:01]

So there was that little conflict right there, you know? It was making fun of everything that they believed in, you know?

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WALTON FORD: —strap [ph] because they figured going right in the water. [Laughs.] And I don't like a silicone strap.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah. Well, that's good. Well, did—so is that the only color option that it came—is that the most authentic?

WALTON FORD: I think so, yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: Okay.

WALTON FORD: Yeah. Yeah. And they said guys used to customize the straps. They would get issued these cloth straps and then they would just doodle on them or color them or write something on them, you know? It makes sense.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah. So you could always personalize it. That's—

WALTON FORD: Yeah, it wouldn't be period inauthentic for me to write something on it.

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WALTON FORD: —up.

BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Walton Ford. This is still session one, but we are on SD card two. And I just wanted to ask about your time at RISD, and—

WALTON FORD: Okay, yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: —how it set you up.

WALTON FORD: Terrific. Thank you. So I went to the summer session program, as I mentioned, when I was 16, and I took painting, just right away, and I was painting in oils, and I'd already painted in oils before I showed up so I was comfortable with it, and I knew how to set my palette up a little bit. But they really taught you better habits, you know? They taught you a really good structure at RISD, about how to approach—RISD was fantastic at, you know, technically setting you up in those days, like, you know, "This is what you're going to do. These are the paints you'll buy, and these are the materials, and here's how you put your palette together, and here's some basic assignments to get you started." And I showed up precocious as hell and I didn't know, and immediately felt super comfortable with my professors and with the workload, and I just—it was everything I wanted to do, and I got to do, all day long.

And I was the big man on campus. I felt huge. I felt like—it was intoxicating to be from a sort of—this mutt that I described in high school and elementary school, and this troubled youth, to being, like, celebrated in what is—amounts to be an Ivy League place, and had all the professors think I was the bomb, and all the students be in love with me. And I felt like I had the whole thing in the palm of my hand. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. It was like, you know, *The Wizard of Oz* or something, when it goes to color, or something. I couldn't believe my life had gone around. Nobody had prepared me for the infrastructure that the school had and, you know, what it meant to be at the best arts school in the world, basically.

You know, I know musicians go through something like this at Julliard, or dancers as well, or—you know. Anyway, I had it. That summer, right away, 16 years old. So I got prepared, and I applied to very few schools. I applied to RISD, Cooper Union, and maybe the one in Philly. Philadelphia School of—you know. But I didn't really want to go to any of them. I just thought, "You'd better have insurance," but I—they already let me know at the RISD summer session program that more than 90 percent certain I'd get in with a portfolio like that. By the end of

the summer, I already had a portfolio that would've gotten me into any art school, practically. So I knew it, and I just wanted to go to RISD. I wanted to go back, and I, sure enough, got in.

Foundation year at Rhode Island School of Design in 1978 was complete heaven, for a curriculum. I wouldn't have—it was everything I had wished I'd gotten earlier in my life. The first recognition was, you know, once I started understanding a little bit of art history, I realized, in the Renaissance, they had systems set up to identify talent early on and then get those kids into the workshops of the masters, and I also knew how unfair our society had set it up, because they did do that still with athletics—that if you were an Olympic kid, like, destined for the Olympics, you got scouted up and coached and sponsored to do that from a very early age, and that they identified dance talent that way, even, and sent them to conservancy. I found that out later when I dated people who were dancers. You know, that—it's not unheard of to find out, "Oh, my God, you have an exceptional five-year-old here. Let's get them started with a coach. Let them know what the path to success means." And tennis players, and—you know, and I'm, like, kind of pissed off, even to this day, that they don't do that with art because it would've saved me a hell of a lot of aggravation.

But so, my freshman year—so, okay, better late than never. I'm 18 and I'm finally getting the diet that I was starving for all that time. Drawing class, mostly.

[00:05:00]

Drawing from the nude model? Yes, please. Jesus Christ, what a simple fucking thing. Studying the human skeleton, studying human anatomy, getting a basic three-dimensional design class where you have assignments, like, they give you—amazing. They give you a box of toothpicks, a tube of glue, and an egg, and you have to build a structure out of toothpicks around the egg that then you're going to drop off the top of a building, and it has to protect the egg. So then you learn very quickly how to make little triangular structures, and how those are stronger than anything else, you know? Like, these little pyramids out of toothpicks, and then build those all the way around. You know what I mean? It's just like, "Yes, please. Like, fucking give me stuff to do that I know how to do that I'm good at. And then challenge me," because I don't know if my egg survived. I don't even remember whether my egg survived, but it didn't matter. The design principles were implied.

And you're at a place where, "Hey, do you want to learn how to design a car? Do you want to build your own boat? You know, what the hell do you want to do? Because we have all the facilities that you could possibly want. You want to make a film? You want to learn animation? You want to go in the dark room and make a print? You want to sculpt in bronze? You want to sculpt—or you want to take a chisel and carve something out of wood?" All of it's there. Any—you stumble into a room at RISD in those days and there's a bunch of people with big logs of wood and chisels and they're carving wood into a human form, like—I'm like, "Whoa, yes, please." With a mallet and a chisel and an instructor that can show you how to do it.

I couldn't believe it. Not to mention, I was suddenly in Rhode—I'd not only gotten into RISD. I'd gotten into Brown. You could take any class at Brown University if you get into RISD, any class at all, and so I'm like—so I go up the hill, and I'm like, "I've always liked performing." So I went into theater up at Brown, and right away, I met Jeff Eugenides, who also was interested in theater, and he was like a little mini-James Joyce. He was walking around in, like, his long coat and his scarf, and he was very much like me at RISD. He was identified as, like, the artist, because even at Rhode Island School of Design, there were people there that were, like, "I'm going to go into graphic design. I'm a photographer and I want to learn how to print in the darkroom." I showed up and I'm like, "I'm a fucking artist—A, B, C, and D. I'm like—I draw. I paint. I sculpt. I'm going to act. I'm going to design sets up at Brown for the play. I'm going to then act in the play. I'm going to sing in a band. I'm an artist. I'm not—you don't—" Every kid at this school is not like this.

And I knew it. I was in the fucking thick of it. I felt so powerful. And he did, too. Jeff knew. He was like, "I'm a writer. I'm a novelist. What do you want?" You know? Arrogance. Unbelievable, people like he and I, you know? Cocky, arrogant, little know-it-alls. But he's giving me the reading list. I'm like, "What are you reading?" He's like, "This guy, Günter Grass. It's *The Tin Drum*." I was like, "I've never heard of it," you know? Or the next one, you know? Whatever it is, he's telling me, "How about these Sam Shepard plays? You want—I think they'd suit you." So I did Sam Shepard plays, you know? Like, that was my thing. I was

perfect for that, my dad being Southern, working on a ranch in Colorado. I stepped right into a Sam Shepard play.

That was all new, then, you know? So I was in—and there was a lot of glamour because John Young—John Kennedy was up at Brown at that time, and then the Talking Heads had just left RISD, like, a few years before and came around and played in small venues, even when I was—my freshman year, we went and saw them at the Brown Student Union for five bucks. They were still young, you know? So the—there was this feeling of being close to the—you know, and Dale Chihuly, the glass blower, was there, and, you know, I think [John] Hawkes—what's his name, who wrote *The Blood Oranges*—was Jeff's professor.

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You know, we were, like—we were one step away from—and then the visiting artists from New York would come, so there's like, "Oh, here's William Wegman and here's, you know, fucking Stan Brakhage or—for film, or—" You know, it didn't—you didn't have to worry, and the next one coming—you know, "Here's Eric Fischl," you know. Nobody was—we weren't intimidated by these people. I felt like I was better than them. But also, really, like, wanted it to rub off, like, "Oh, how did they make it? You know, that's cool." It was opening everything up, making you feel like you were going to be a big star.

I met my first wife, freshman year. She was a brilliantly talented artist, an incredibly beautiful looking woman, and I fell in love with her immediately and ended up marrying her when I was 25, but we stayed—we were, like, the couple, you know? You know, I jumped around and dated a lot of other people and cheated on her, and she had other boyfriends and stuff, because we met when we were 18. It didn't make any sense to not experiment a little and stray a bit. But by the end of it, we were still together, you know?

RISD was very promiscuous, and the professors still slept with the students, and they just did, and we didn't care. Like, I talked to—I mean, women had it harder than men—young women there—because there was that ambiguousness of, you know, "Does he really like what I'm doing?" The professor—it was harder for the women, and Julie [Jones], my ex, was fending them off all the time—fending off professors who wanted to sleep with her. But the fact is, she really was talented—incredibly talented—and making beautiful drawings and paintings, so that was—it was a little different for her. I think she knew her worth in that department, and she was able to say no to them and still get—pick their brains. I don't really—it was an odd time for that. The whole protocols that we have now were not worked out.

Also, a brand new time for people, with David Bowie and Iggy Pop and that kind of music, and Patti Smith, and then later the Talking Heads, and all the punk music—the Sex Pistols and the Buzzcocks and all that, and the Ramones. It became—the music was—it felt amazing. It felt very powerful. It felt very applicable. I felt—one of the very lucky moments in music history for me was that, later, I felt sorry for kids who grew up in my, like—I don't feel sorry for them, but if you were a product of the suburbs and you were a white bohemian artist and you loved hip hop from Compton, you know, they're not speaking your language. You're just saying, "I love this," and now the absurdity of him—of the kid driving around, even if he was poor like me, and maybe from the other side of the tracks, in a sense, or grew up on the streets a little more like I did, even if you were that kid, these are not your words. This is not your world.

But if you're me, from the whole stretch of music that I was allowed to listen to, the punks were talking my language. The Ramones were—they could've been my brother. You know, the whole thing was—the Talking Heads were talking about making paintings. They had gone to my school. And being—and playing in CBGBs, you still hit the street and it's a perfect place to get your head kicked in. I mean, it wasn't exactly like it was a gentrified New York, like it is today.

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WALTON FORD: These kids were not living in the lap of luxury. You were living in some loft that—you hit the street, and you could easily get jumped. I mean, in those days. So, New York was a really—and Providence was incredibly rough. People were getting—I had friends that were shot. I had a friend that was shot to death in the street in Providence. He was—Summers, his name was. He was a painting major at Brown, and he was killed on College Hill by some drive-by shooting—random shooting they think was—there was a lot of harassment

of—knowing that there was a lot of gay kids at RISD. There was a lot of gay harassment, I remember, people shouting that I was a faggot, and that they were going to kick my ass, out of a car window, throwing a bottle at me or something when I was on my bicycle, because this idea—you know, there was a lot of gender fluidity at RISD in those days, based on this loving David Bowie and all this, and everybody who was going to come out came out right away, you know? They had been—and my friends would come to me and be like, "Oh, I've got something to tell you." And I was like, "What?" It's like, "I'm actually gay." And I'm like, "I knew that." Like—[laughs]—it was like, "Are you the last to know that we all knew that?" So that was fun, just to see that everybody was going to be okay.

But then there was an element of crime in Providence, and definitely a tremendous amount of harassment that you would experience when you left College Hill if you were a RISD student because you were identifiable. You had your hair cut a certain way. You were wearing clothes that were odd. You know, you looked like an '80s bohemian, and the general kid in 1978 or '79 still had long hair, looked like a heavy metal kid, or something. The kids from RISD looked like, you know, David Bowie, or looked like Egon Schiele, or looked like somebody from—I looked like New Order. I looked like—this is a picture. You know, that was me in RISD, you know, and that was my buddy. This was at—we were, like, bandmates. Those are—that's what we looked like.

That was very conspicuous, actually. Doesn't look like much now. It just looks like any kid in art school now, but in 1978, it would've been, like—I would hitchhike a lot because I didn't have a car. I didn't have a license until I was about 24. I used to ride my bicycle everywhere. But when I hitchhiked, I'd get picked up sometimes with that haircut and they'd—and some guy would literally say, "Where're you stationed?" And I'd say, "I'm not in the military," because I had my head shaved—a buzzcut—and they'd say, "Well, where are you?" And I'd say, "At RISD," you know, and they'd be like—you'd get a different reaction. One time a guy was like, "Oh, I had a fucking good time with a kid from RISD recently." And I'm like, "I'll get off at the next corner. I understand what you're talking about right now." But started out with military, and ended up with that. It was very strange.

And I was—all of this, I was in my element with. Like, it was like I wanted all of this. I wanted all of this crazy landlords, and cockroach-filled apartments, and I was my own boss. I was in this world that I—you could be in a band and then you could quit, and then you could be a sculptor or something. I mean, I was just—oh, my God, it was heaven. And the women were gorgeous, just because art girls always are, and have the cool makeup and like the cool music and are people you can respect. They got to art school. That wasn't easy.

The only problem I had a couple of times was falling in love with a girl—[laughs]—who was a lesbian, you know, and it's like, well, that's not good for your self-esteem, but, you know, sometimes they'd be like, "I want to try it out. I'm going to try out a boy," and I might be the one. I had so much fun but I was also miserable, like, because just, that was the pose. I don't know. It was—it came along with the music. It came along with the poverty that I experienced. I was, again, back in a place like Westchester where, a lot of the kids, you scratched the surface and found out they were really rich, and I didn't have that. I was definitely one of the poorer kids at this school. But there was a source of pride in that. I would stay in Providence and paint houses during the summer or, you know, just get some kind of working class job that paid decent that was—other RISD kids were doing—that didn't have money were setting up, so we would do—you know, like, paint houses.

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That made sense for me. But then one summer, I went back home and I got a job in New York City, you know, doing, like, graphic design or something—not really design. Like, paste-up mechanical, they used to call it. It's, like, you're—so, yeah, if I went home, I could get a job that my dad would help me get. If I stayed in Providence, I could probably make more money, weirdly, just doing some kind of grunt work, like painting houses. So I did all—everything.

BEN GILLESPIE: And didn't you get the chance to study abroad at some point?

WALTON FORD: I did. So, I wasn't an honors student technically because I jumped around from major to major. That thing I'm describing, where I said you could wake up one day and do this and wake up the next day and do that, actually, the school didn't approve of that. They wanted you to choose a major and they wanted you to stick to it. But my plan was that,

"Oh, I'm in a play right now, and now I'm going to make a short animated film, and after that, I'm going to go make a bronze sculpture because I always wanted to try that out but I never really finished it." You know, and then I'm like, "I'm—" Next thing you know, like I said, carving with a chisel and a mallet, and now I'm—you know what I mean. So I was like—and then, every day, I was painting in my studio. I was painting—I'll show you a self-portrait that I did when I was—yeah, might as well grab it. Oh, but I can't do that yet. We'll do that afterwards. And—but, like, there is one I—right here, that I did when I was 19 in my apartment late at night after school.

So, you know, I refused to be pinned down. I was really—got really developed my chops in the dark room so I could make a most beautiful print in the dark room, black-and-white. I developed the film myself and print the film myself. They taught you to do that at RISD, and I—you understood the chemistry and mixed the chemicals. You really were fucking—so I did dodging and this and that, and then pretty soon got very good at just even producing a perfect negative, getting the exposures right. So I taught myself photog—well, not taught myself. I took photography classes and excelled in that department, so that the professors asked me if I would join the photography department. And I said, "Absolutely not." And at Brown, they were like, "You should be a drama major." And I said, "Fuck that." And then I got into the sculpture department and then quit the sculpture department, ended up in film animation and then disappointed the film department because I was painting all the time. You know, I just—that was what I was doing.

I wouldn't change a thing, because who gives a shit whether the administration was happy with me or not? And the only downside was that when I—senior year, I did—I said, "I want to study abroad. I want to go on that Rome program. I want to go to Italy." And I had to convince them, because my grade point average was not honors, and literally the other students started writing me recommendation letters. I had teachers from freshman year that wrote recommendation letters to say—I had department heads that had tried to recruit me into their departments, you know. I had the drama teacher up at Brown write it. You know, they were like, "This guy is the real deal. He's an artist, so you should send him over there. I know his grades aren't cutting it, but you can't believe how determined he is to see these things and how much he would benefit. Like, you don't—this is—if this is more than just a pre-professional school—" There was people that made this case. "If it really is a place that produces artists, you've got one on your hands." And that was a very sweet student body support for me. The class president wrote me a recommendation, saying, "He truly is an artist, and I've known—" And he was my roommate when I was in the summer session program. He became the class president. His name is Steve Earle, not the rock and roller, but actually Martha Stewart's design director.

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Also, a major player with Ralph Lauren. He was a guy who helped create those two people's public image, because he left school and would—he was, like—he was—when he was with Ralph Lauren, he would actually arrange whole rooms, like, "This is the piano and these are the pictures on the piano and this is the way that you throw the rug on the couch." You know. Steve knew. Ralph Lauren actually didn't really know. And so he would come in a room that, say, Steve had created in his store, you know, like, arrange the room, and would even ask Steve, like, "Oh, there's a picture on the piano. Who's that?" He goes, "Well, that's Stravinsky. He's the great composer." And Ralph Lauren wouldn't have known that, and would—it's a photograph of Stravinsky on the piano. He'd say, "Who's that?" He goes, "That's Stravinsky, the great composer. He did *Rites of Spring*, this and that," give him a little bit of information about Stravinsky. "Nice suit." That's what Ralph would say. "Nice suit," and then move on.

Like, literally, like, Steve is teaching people like Martha Stewart how to be Martha Stewart, because, let's be honest, she started out as a caterer, and Steve created a—helped. These people are smart. There's nothing wrong with Martha Stewart or Ralph Lauren for recognizing someone like Steve Earle is a genius, and he can help me. The only thing smarter than being somebody like Steve Earle is knowing that you need to delegate certain things to people like this that know more about it. If Ralph Lauren came from the Bronx and is trying to look like he came from money, and came from old money instead of, like, you know, a kid from the Bronx—the same with Martha Stewart. If she's like, "I want to look like old money—" I mean, they'd get these places in Bedford Hills, [NY] and they'd fill them full of antiques and they try to act like they've been around for 300 years in these environments, and it's fine, but definitely hire a guy like Steve Earle to tell you how to do it—or just show



you that, "No, this, I'm afraid, is impeccable taste and that other thing that you almost did is not impeccable taste. But this is impeccable, you know? So buy this. Don't buy that and decorate with this in this color, not that color." He was that guy.

So I don't know what—I just—knowing that I was rubbing elbows with people who had this kind of discernment already? They were, like, freshmen. They already knew some of this shit. I was a little—I did feel—even though I was so talented and so confident with my hand, with what I could see and do, like, just the fact that I showed up and I could draw like that gave me a tremendous boost, but I also could see somebody like Steve Earle or other friends of mine saying, "Do you know what a Leica M6 is?" You know, kind of thing, like, "This camera is this—all that because of these reasons." Or, "This is a Rolleiflex," or, "This is a Hasselblad," or, "This is a Bolex." Like, "These are the cameras." Like, "This is the stereo equipment." Like, you know, who's the—you know, Dieter [Rams]. Oh, God, I'm trying to remember the designer. But, you know, you'd hear about architect designers, you know.

These young—some of these young people who had maybe a little more money than I did growing up, or more exposure—maybe their parents weren't from Georgia, you know? Didn't have to figure it all out on their own. Yeah, sometimes I felt like a hick a tiny bit around some of these kids who had been all over Europe, and honestly, until I was about—oh, my God, I must've been—[laughs]—shit, probably in my twenties before I saw a palm tree, you know, growing out of the ground, you know? And a lot of these kids had been, like, "Oh, I got back from the Bahamas and I went to LA and I was in blah, blah, blah, Sicily, and—" You know, I was like, "Holy shit." And I kind of bluff a little. I was a little—even at RISD a tiny bit, but I felt confident because I had the goods. And then when I got to the—you know, I got to go to Europe. I mean, many of these kids were already European and—or—

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WALTON FORD: —or they had been to Europe many times, and I'd never been to Europe until I went with my school. I mean, there was no way I could go to Europe with—[laughs]—my mom, you know, a single mom with four kids trying to make it in Westchester. No way. I wasn't going to Europe. My brother sold a shit ton of drugs and went to Europe, and then sold a bunch of drugs when he was there, and I remember thinking it was such a cool thing that he'd done that, you know? But I got there on my talent, thank goodness, and then I went—the moment—the real moment, transformation, in my whole artistic life was going to Assisi and seeing Giotto's paintings of St. Francis, and even, to some degree more powerfully, Simone Martini's cycle of paintings in the Lower Church of Assisi about St. Martin.

And then in the same basilica cathedral thing, Duomo, a Lorenzetti crucifixion scene with all the horses and all the Roman soldiers and all this stuff, and it had gone—but this—the clarity there is, you know, this is a woodcut on my wall here of a Giotto painting in Padua. But that was prepared by Ruskin [Spear] to teach English painters about early, quote, unquote, primitive, they used to call them, Italian painters. They had a huge impact on the pre-Raphaelites—these woodcuts, actually, these very ones, so, of course, I needed to buy them. And they're not expensive, because nobody really wants them, but I'm in love with them, and I have the whole cycle of the Padua.

Anyhow, Giotto's clarity of narrative, painting the story of St. Francis for people without literacy, so they can fully understand his message? What a difficult assignment, to create—to make visible the invisible, to coin a cliché. That is a great one for people like Giotto, because he is trying to tell a spiritual story with pictures, a story about a development of the spirit that has absolutely nothing to do with something you could see or even give shape to, even give a name to.

And St. Francis's spirituality is still—I didn't know it then, but I know it now, that his version of spiritual growth is what even now keeps me sober. Like, the St. Francis's Prayer is the most perfect prayer. I don't care if you're a Buddhist. You don't have to have anything to do with Christ or anything like that to say, you know, "Grant that I may seek more to console than to be consoled." Like, if you say that to yourself every day, it's impossible that you won't become a better person, because you're not even asking to—you're not saying it's better to console than to be consoled, which people can misinterpret. The words are very specifically translated from the Italian to say, "I would seek to—" You know, it's like you want the willingness to be the consoler rather than the consoled, and in that way, you will find consolation.

So, I didn't know, but when I went into that church and I started looking, I didn't understand many of the paintings because they're coded Catholic teachings but, you know, like, the stigmata image of this Christ in this weird lozenge-y shape, and he's shooting arrows through the hands? I mean, you don't know what the hell is going on, and so I wanted to know. It looked very science fiction. The thing unfolds exactly like a comic book. I was already immersed in comic books, so here's a sequential series of narrative panels, but they're life-sized and full color in this gorgeous, crazy stylized palette. I never wanted to know anything more than I wanted to understand these paintings. I sat and drew them even before I knew what the stories were.

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I was drawing the compositions. I spent hours in that cathedral drawing and trying to figure out how those figures—why they were so beautiful, why the emotion was so restrained but it was very powerful. The color—how they used the color to tell the story, how your eye went exactly to where it was supposed to go. Moved to tears for real, like, moved to tears, and Italy in 1982 has—was—had—financially, it was in the toilet. There was a tremendous amount of violence in the streets. There was a lot of demonstrations, and there were still terrorist groups planting bombs in cars, and so you could go to a—you could see a scorched part of a plaza that you had gone the day before with the pebbles of bottle glass spread around the sidewalk, like, where a bomb had gone off in a car, like, the day before, and their Carabinieri are everywhere with the machine guns, like, patrolling the—"Oh, and it's the Campo de' Fiori here, and I'm going to buy my pizza here and I'm going to eat—" You know, amazing shit.

I was blown away by Italy. There was a lot of heroin use in the streets, so I saw people shooting up, and prostitutes turning tricks underneath the window of my room over there. I could hear things, like, happening that I had never heard before. I heard someone scream "*Aiuto!*" and get—you could hear a car door slamming, and—*aiuto* means "help me," and so I was in a world that I didn't—you know, because we couldn't—Palazzo Cenci, in those days, it was in what they called the Jewish ghetto, which then was a really rough neighborhood of Rome, and so it was my first time I lived in a big city in a rough neighborhood, which later, I was used to in New York City, but it was my first experience with that, you know, being around a lot of junkies, being around gypsies trying to get money out of you. I loved it. Food, unbelievable, of course. Ate the best food of my life.

And my transformation as an artist, I realized, up until then, became obsessed with nature. The narrative in that—dioramas I was telling you about, like, with the Meadowlands, where you can see that basically men—my narrative was, "Human beings destroy the planet, and that's it," right? That's just—end of story. Everything we build is—probably was nicer before we built it up, you know, like, with the exception of Rockefeller Center in New York, maybe, or something. But most of everything I saw, I thought, "Oh, I like nature, and culture is just a sort of—we're just a sort of bacteria on the planet." Then I went to the Tuscan hill towns, or Venice, or Siena, and I was like, "Whatever was here before, who cares? This—people have transformed this into some form of heaven for me. It's architecture and painting and food and beautiful people in the streets, wearing cool clothes, and, you know, beautifully designed Vespa thing to ride around on." Everything was, like, holy shit, you know?

This is human culture adding, because the thing was, I didn't realize—I'd never experienced before. It was like, I'm in Siena, and then I walk a little ways, and then I'm in an olive grove and there's mountains around. And in Tuscany, they still have wolves in the mountains. Like, I'm like, "They've coexisted with the nature here in a way." I just was like, "This is the best. I didn't know such a thing was possible."

American kids? [Sound of thunder.] I used to make a joke when I came back. I was like—I know, this is amazing, right? I like a summer storm. Yeah, big thunder bumper outside Smithsonian.

I didn't know. I didn't know. I knew I liked New England towns, but still, they seemed like—it seemed like everything I really liked was threatened in America, in a weird way. Like, you used to be able to catch trout in the stream, and then they built a whole bunch of housing projects and the stream got silted in, and now there's no trout in it. That was, like, a normal story for me in Westchester, like, watching things evaporate within my own little teenaged life.

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Like, "Oh, that's too bad," you know? When they built that housing development, they planted grass, and then they used fucking pesticides all over the place, and now the stream is too polluted to fish. That was a normal narrative. And we used to make jokes. We'd be like, "Oh, you know, hey, remember the hill where we picked blueberries? That's Blueberry Hill Condominiums now, you know? And there's no blueberries." You know, it's exactly—that was normal. Then I went to Italy and it's like, "No, for 2,000 years, this town has been here, and look. [Laughs.] Nature looks beautiful here, and so does culture." Oh, I didn't know. I didn't know. Why didn't you tell me, you know? I didn't know.

And I had studied art history enough to know the paintings existed. I didn't know you could step out of the cathedral where the painting was and see olive groves stretching off into the horizon, and, I don't know, the whole thing was insane. And literally in Spoleto—I think it was in Spoleto, where I was living—I get a little bit of Italian to speak because you live with a family. I lived with these two old ladies that I loved, and they were good cooks, and they loved me, and they loved my girlfriend at the time who became my wife, Julie, and—but anyway, in Spoleto, I remember an old man, and he had a pet wolf. I'm pretty sure it was in Spoleto. And he was old and the wolf was old. The wolf was like an old German Shepherd or something. He was all drooly and old. And I was like, "What is this?" And he goes, "You know, *lupe*." He said it was a wolf. I said, "Where did you get it?" He goes, "Up in the hills." He got it when it was a puppy. I was like—I only—in Alaska? Nobody fucking has a wolf for a pet that he just got in America, in a town.

I don't know, the whole thing blew me away. Everything I loved about nature, everything I loved about art, everything I loved about food, everything I loved about—oh, I just was in, again, like transformed. And then winter break came, and you had a whole month or something to travel, and my future wife, Julie, and I, we wanted to see the Middle East. We had, like, loved, like, watching *Lawrence of Arabia* or something, you know? We were like, "Let's see some of—" She had, like, textiles that she used to wear from places like that, you know? It was—loved the way Muslim women looked with their eye makeup and all. "Let's go."

So we went to Tunisia. We took a—we went down to Naples and we caught a ferry across the Mediterranean. 24 hours on a boat. A guy died on the boat—had a heart attack—and they dropped him off in Sicily because he was Sicilian, and his wife was screaming and crying, and all the Arabs are laughing while he's having this heart attack. Unbelievable journeys. And then into the desert, incredibly dangerous travel for us as white kids without any idea what we were getting into, with a little backpack, finding our way into the desert.

I think Tunisia's all kind of used to tourists at this point, but the kind of thing we were doing was quite—it was fantastic and very transforming. Saw a huge car crash where there was dead people laying by the side of the road. I hadn't seen dead people, and by the time the guy died on the boat and by the time we saw the car crash, I went back home, I was like, "I've seen, like, half a dozen dead people already just in a short trip." Astounding. Roman ruins, fucking oases in the middle of the pink sand deserts, totally sexually harassed the entire time we were there. I don't know. One of the great experiences of my life, and so, yeah, the whole thing was—I made paintings about that trip in Tunisia. I made—I adopted a sort of Sienese technique to paint my childhood memories for a while. Like, so I painted, say, violent scenes from my childhood in the style of, like, the saints being martyred and stuff. It was a really fun project for me to learn it deeply. I learned all the techniques of tempera and gold gilding and—

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WALTON FORD: —making my own gesso and— [Sighs.]

BEN GILLESPIE: It sounds amazing. I think that's maybe a good stopping point for today.

WALTON FORD: Perfect.

BEN GILLESPIE: Okay.

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WALTON FORD: —or if I decide to, it's a separate issue.

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, tell me how you like your coffee.

WALTON FORD: [Laughs.]

BEN GILLESPIE: So I can do my test. [Laughs.]

WALTON FORD: Okay. I like—I really do just do milk and sugar, milk and simple syrup if it's a nice one. When I worked on a ranch in Colorado as a little kid, they—when I put milk in my coffee, they said, "You ain't been weaned yet?"

[They laugh.]

BEN GILLESPIE: That is the most Rocky Mountain thing I've ever heard. They probably—if you tried to, you know, strain the grounds—

WALTON FORD: —grounds, yeah, same thing.

BEN GILLESPIE: "Why are you doing that?"

WALTON FORD: They'd drop eggshells in there. I remember when Bonnie, who was cooking the breakfast for all the hired hands, she would just throw all the eggshells in the coffee, and —

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BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie, conducting the oral history of Walton Ford. This is our second session. It is July 26, 2022, and Walton, first I'm going to ask you—so last session, we ended—you've had a transformative study abroad experience in Italy. You're wrapping up at RISD. What is next after that?

WALTON FORD: Okay. So what's next after that is I—you know, since my dad left when I was 11 and my mom had to go to work and all, we didn't really have money in the family to—for me to—so I left RISD with quite a bit of student debt, even though I had work study and a certain amount of money that was granted to me for not having money. I didn't maintain grades that would've allowed me to get a scholarship because I was just too crazy in those days, so I wasn't—I didn't get a free ride, and I had a lot of student loans to pay off. And so the point was, like, "Okay, where am I going to live and how am I going to do this?" And I had friends that lived in New York that were upperclassmen that I had met at RISD, and they had—many of them had sort of started their own companies, and one of those companies—or a couple of them—were restoration companies, that would—we would—so anyway, I got a job that way.

I got a job working at a restoration where we did—say, they would take an apartment in the Dakota, which are vast. The apartments inside the Dakota—the individual apartments are basically like giant Victorian mini-mansions, with many rooms and hallways and huge doors, like, 13-foot ceilings, you know. You can't tell from the street how magnificent it is inside, but the building takes up most of a city block, as you know when you go there. You can see how it faces the park, the full length of the block, and the apartment—I mean, many of the apartments take up a half or a quarter of a floor of that, so you do have what would amount to a large Victorian house in the suburbs or something. They're spectacular and beautiful, and there's woodwork that's beyond belief in there, and much of it was very abused in the '80s.

The Dakota had some out of a shabby era, where it, like, you know, when it's associated with, like, *Rosemary's Baby* or something, as a big, sort of, full-of-whack-jobs and kind of a bohemian building to, you know, a luxury place, where—you know, where John Lennon had recently been shot, where Yoko still lived, where, at that time, Leonard Bernstein lived in there. Lauren Bacall lived in there. You used to hear their voices when you rode the freight elevator up, because I'd ride up in the morning with the mail, and the garbage being picked up, to be delivered. It was a hydraulic freight elevator—if you want to really get historic here—which had a metal rope, you know? Like, a cable, rather, a metal cable that ran down the side of it, and when—and the guy wore heavy leather gloves, because this was a sharp kind of thing to do—the metal cable could hurt your hands—and he would pull on the metal cable, which would set a counterweight in motion in a liquid pipe that ran down the side, and you

could hear the gurgling—*blblblbluh*—and this fucking thing would take off. It would—the counterweight would counterweight us, and lift us up.

So there was no electricity involved in the running of this elevator, which, again, with global warming and stuff, the 19th century answers to these things were there, and I'm like, "Fuck you for tearing this stuff out," which is exactly what happened. There were many elevators like this in New York in the old days, but this was one of the last survivors that I saw, and it was a novelty in the '80s when I was in it. But New York had a texture like that, that you just took this stuff for granted. Like, I would describe the elevator to people, because it was so fucking cool. The other thing is the men that operated it were cranky, and if you missed your slot—like, if I was late to work, they weren't going to just fire up that elevator any old time, because a human being had to actually use his body and muscle and effort to get the elevator going.

[00:05:12]

So I wasn't allowed to really be late. If I missed that morning drop-off, then I was in trouble.

So anyway, this is the first job I got in New York. So I—the woman that was to become my wife, who I was in love with at RISD, who I think I described in the last session, we moved together to New York, and we—my brother already lived here—my older brother—and his partner had an apartment he sublet to us for a brief time up on—Uptown, near the—weirdly, on—more or less, on a block away from Riverside Drive, near the—like, 112th Street, way up by the—you know, you could see the—St. John the Divine and all of that, and Columbia University close by.

But in those days, there was a transient—a pay-by-the-night hotel right next to it, that was full of people who had panhandled enough money to get a room, or recent immigrants, or—you know, it was a flophouse. People used to throw unbelievable amounts of garbage out the window. They just airmailed everything that they didn't need anymore—banana peels. We saw old high heels going out the window in the middle of a fight. We could hear them screaming and the person was throwing the woman's clothes out the window. Crazy shit going on. And literally, if I left the window open to the airshaft to get a little cross-ventilation, some of the garbage would bounce on the windowsill and into the house, so that was always interesting.

And then it was a tiny window in the bathroom that was probably—you know, that to all appearances, too narrow for a human being to get in, so I just left it open for air, and one time, we came home and the apartment had been robbed of the few possessions that we had. Maybe a—what they used to call a beatbox, or even a ghetto blaster—the names for those radios of those days—they took those. They must've been frustrated because we didn't have anything. And the way they got into the apartment—the cops came and looked it over, because we just called the police, because that's what you did, but there was nothing they could do about it, they said they had little kids—maybe, like, a five-year-old or a six-year-old—that would climb in that window and then let the thieves in. They would've taught the kid how to do that, so they were using toddlers to open the door, like, climb in, open the door, and then just leave, you know? "It's fine. Wait for us outside on the street until we come out with some new stuff."

And I couldn't believe it. Like, welcome to New York. We had been there, like, a week, but they saw these kids—these sort of fresh-faced kids moving in, I guess, or people used to keep an eye open for what was going on, on your—on the block—certain people whose job it was to rob other people—and we were obviously sort of noticed, coming and going, and so they thought maybe there's some good stuff in there. "Maybe they're rich college kids." They were—[laughs]—in for a surprise, because we really didn't have anything.

And I felt blessed, because we had paintings up on the easels that I was doing on my days off and they weren't slashed, destroyed, or clobbered, or even touched. That funny equation of having a certain amount of respect for talent, no matter who you are, is—I think it really held. I felt blessed. I was like, "Oh, my God, they could've resented and trashed our art studio," and instead, you could sense the feeling of, like, "We're not going to touch this stuff." But they had taken the drawers out and dumped them out really quickly, and we had a little bit of cash. I think my future wife had a piece of jewelry that her grandmother gave her, and the radios.

So anyhow, that was New York. I remember one—there was a little tree that had been recently planted right outside the building and that was nice, because you could look out and see a little bit of green, and then one day—one night, rather—I heard a sound out there of, like, *chop chop chop*, like this. And I looked out and there was a guy.

[00:10:00]

He seemed to be very drunk. Big guy with a machete, chopping the tree down, just chopping it down. And when it fell over, he walked away, and I was like, "You just chopped my tree down, like, for no reason." And what you can't do when you're on the first floor like I was, within, like, speaking distance from this guy, with the window open because it was hot—there were bars in the window there, so I thought at least maybe—I don't know what they could send in. A ferret? Anyway, I had—I felt safe-ish. But I was like, "You can't argue with a man with a machete—a giant guy with a machete. Like, what the fuck are you doing, cutting my tree down?" And then the tree laid on the sidewalk, because it was New York in the '80s, forever, it seemed like, because garbage used to pile up.

People used to steal cars. I had the kind of street where if you stole a car, it was so quiet, dead-end street on Riverside Drive—I know I'm just going into crime, but this was the atmosphere I was working in, so I think it's important. An artist with no trust fund in New York in 1982. It's interesting where you might end up, in neighborhoods now that multi-millionaires are in.

But that street was a good—many of the streets I lived on were good streets, where you could—if you stole a car, you would take it on a joyride—not you or me, but a person who likes stealing cars—and if they didn't have a very, designated chop shop that they actually had—like, there were people that were in the business of that. In other words, they steal a car. They drive it right to this garage, and then they strip it, and they just—they make the most of it. But there were many people who stole cars who didn't have that kind of setup. They might have a pickup truck as part of their business. All of this was unfolding, it's not like I knew it all when I arrived in New York, but I saw it all with my own eyes, and then I got filled in when I didn't understand what I was looking at by people who had lived here longer than me.

But yeah, they would steal a car, take it on a joyride, take all the tires out, take the radio out, take everything out of the engine that seemed worth selling, the carburetor—whatever the fuck. I don't know, because I don't know cars—strip it down to its essentials, and then set it on fire, and then just leave it there. And the city wouldn't do anything. I mean, you could—there wasn't really a hotline or anything. There was no—you could go to the local cop who's parked on the sidewalk with the cup of coffee who had seen everything and didn't give a shit, and you could say, you know, "This burned-out—there's so many burned-out cars on our street. When are they going to come and get them?" You know, and you wouldn't get any kind of straight answer out of that guy, who's like, "I'm going to get called up for a murder in a few minutes. Like, I'm not interested in your wimpy complaint. Like, just go away. Step away from the car," like, with this fucking baton, like, "Keep your distance. Like, I'm not a public servant," which I'm like, "Actually, no, yes, that's exactly what you are, but you act like you're doing me a favor to not shoot me," you know?"

So there was a lot of attitude in the city in those days, and it was decidedly not a safe place to live. I mean, I would argue—I would wonder, if you live in Ukraine right now, if you live in Kiev, right? If you're in a major city in Ukraine, are there 2,000 people dying in your city every year? Even with this invasion? Like, I know that it's possible that it doesn't even average out like that during the whole conflict that was—I mean, New York City was a war zone, I guess is what I'm trying to say. I would—it would have qualified as a war zone. I think if you just did the numbers, like, how many people have to get killed in a year before it's declared a war zone? And before the population is traumatized by that? Like, how much of that does it take to be traumatized—laughs]—by just what unfolds on the streets?

Because, to hell with just the murder rate. The murder rate's a fraction of the violence, and then the violence is a fraction of just the suffering. Like, okay, this is just the most messed-up, squeegee-man, homeless person I've ever seen. Like, that's enough—

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WALTON FORD: —for today, you know? Or that particular transvestite prostitute working

that particular street, where a van—a huge van—a van that appeared to have, like, maybe 15 Hasidim guys in it, right? And they call one tranny whore over, and she gets in the van and you just think, "What does that mean? I've never seen anything like that." And how are people living like this? And, I mean, I'm even using the language of the street from the '80s because it's recalling it. And there's—I'm not saying anything racist or anti-Semitic at all about this. This was just the facts on the street. There was stuff that I saw. I'm not trying to call out a particular group, because it was lawless, and so what you saw affected everyone.

So it was just stuff I didn't think I would ever see, and I saw it with my own eyes, and then it would just be stories you couldn't quite comprehend that you were catching the tail end of, like I—or that were clear, for example. Like, one time I come out of the subway and there was pebble glass from a car everywhere, and they didn't clean up like they used to, and there was a lot of blood on the sidewalk, and there was a bloody sneaker just full of blood, like you'd poured a glass of blood into it, and I just looked at that and went home. And I was —[laughs]—like, "What the fuck?"

Or I'd come out of the subway on my way to work in Bushwick. I worked in a—so many different jobs that were interesting that I really want to get to, because they're not even my oral history. They're an oral history of New York City in the '80s that I got a glimpse of, some stuff that I think, if you were someone who also—there's an interesting coalescence that happened at that moment, where someone like Luc Sante, who's now Lucy, but Luc in those days was, like, a historian of the underbelly in New York City, you know? He wrote *Low Life* and all of this stuff. He still—she still writes these kinds of things.

The interesting thing is when this sort of bohemian culture comes in contact with this sort of street culture that—like, I'm reading Henry James, but I have access to, like—but I'm working in a metal shop in Bushwick, and I'm grinding wells that the wells were made up by bikers who had been in and out of Rikers Island and biker gangs, and one of them was a guy called Larry DeSmedt, who later became known as Indian Larry, who was a very famous motorcycle customizer when he died in the 2000s. He died in a motorcycle accident. He was standing on his seat doing a stunt in front of a lot of people and he fell off, and his brain was shattered on the sidewalk. But Larry and I worked in the same metal shop, so the fact that we would've crossed paths, and that he—not only had Larry, who—you know, who had robbed banks with guns, who had four fingers on one hand because a pipe bomb went off, who spent many years in prison.

Larry was also my friend, but he became friends with Patti Smith. He was photographed by [Robert] Mapplethorpe many times. Some famous pictures that Mapplethorpe took have Larry in them, one of a sort of ecstatic man with his head back, where Larry said he was asked by Mapplethorpe to just masturbate to orgasm, and right when he got an orgasm, Mapplethorpe just took a picture of his face. You know, he was part of this art process now. The chances of that—those worlds coming together in that way, where I'm working in a metal shop in Bushwick and riding the subway, luckily, with Larry, because I felt safe when I was with him—that he could handle these situations that arose, and I could observe how he handled these situations, and sometimes it was beyond me to handle those situations the way he did, because I'm not—one of these guys.

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But it was—it felt comforting to be with somebody who had seen many things that I couldn't understand, like what it's like to survive in prison. One of the ways he survived, too, was by having a completely fluid sexuality, so he was a very charismatic person, and it was also my first experience with someone who, you know, who I'm—I was a heterosexual innocent kind of—like, I had two girlfriends in my whole life kind of thing, and I arrive in New York, and Larry's insinuating that I should get with him, like, just for fun, like, why wouldn't I? Like, "Come hang out with us at night," you know? He would have a little smeared eye makeup on sometimes. He'd be sort of hungover, and I wasn't understanding what I was seeing, but I was learning fast. And then he said, "Yeah, I was in a lot of pictures with Mapplethorpe," and I remember being at a bookstore and flipping through, and there was a picture of him making out with a guy—this guy that could kill you in an instant, very macho biker. Larry—it's, I think, called "Larry—" What was his boyfriend's name? Well, anyway, he described—you know, one of—he was with a woman named Bunny, I think, when I met him, but he was with this man.

It was new to me. All of this was new to me. It was really fascinating. They had all these

tattoos and they had all these muscles, and they could kill you if they wanted to, and then they would be sort of tender and flirtatious and seductive, which was so interesting. But he was still using heroin in those days. He later became a very big icon of sobriety, but he—so, when tools went missing in the shop, he was blamed and then fired, you know? This was just Larry. Larry taught me a lot. I mean, the phone would ring, and it would—they would be for him, and you would hear him say, "Oh, no, he doesn't work here anymore. Larry doesn't work here." It would've been for him. "Larry doesn't work here and the last time I saw him, he was at the Bowery Mission, actually. I think he was trying to get a meal or something, and he'd been on the street. He looked like shit. He looked like he was about to die. Good luck finding him," and he would hang up the phone and get somebody, whoever was after him, off his tail.

I just saw this stuff over and over again. The stuff—one time, Larry and I were walking to the lunch place that we went to out in Bushwick, which just served, like, greasy burgers, you know? Either that, or it was one of these metal-quilted trucks that came around and open up, and they have, like, coffee and donuts in there, and it's disgusting. I would eat there. I made a joke, "We eat pucks all day long. It's a different type of puck. It's a sweet puck in the morning, which is like puck-shaped, and then we get a burger—" Because we were working long hours in this metal shop. "—a burger at lunch, which is another puck—a meat puck. So first a dough puck, then a meat puck, then another bigger dough puck," because we'd get a pizza at the end of the day. And I'm like, "We just eat pucks." He thought that was hilarious.

But we walked by the Boar's Head plant—meat-packing plant in Bushwick—to get this lunch. I'm not sure if it's still there. But in those days, the tallow trucks would come, and the carcasses would get dumped out of the—they'd come down a chute. There was a big screw in there, that you'd be dropping these carcasses into this hopper, and they'd be slowly grinding out into this tallow truck and down the chute into this truck. *Boom!* Big noise of the rendered skeleton of this thing coming out, and—because they would get just dead meat and transform it into Boar's Head products, and then dump all the stuff they didn't need into a tallow truck that would take away all the bones and tissues and render it into, like, you know, this tallow, which is like a waxy substance that you use for candles and grease. The smell, unbelievable.

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But one time, the truck wasn't there, but the guy thought the truck was there inside the plant, so the carcasses were coming out two stories up, falling through the space, and landing on the sidewalk. *Blam!* Because there's no truck there to receive them. One after another, smashing into the sidewalk as I'm going to get my hamburger, and Larry and I are just cracking up, like, "Wow, that's just New York." There's a difference now. There isn't—you don't see that so much.

So that was me as a—working in a metal shop to make clothing racks for a luxury clothing store called Charivari at that time, which is not—no longer there, but—and the way I got that job was that the metal shop owner had gone to the sculpture department at RISD, so he—and he was hiring these—he figured out pretty quickly the best welders in the world are motorcycle customizers, but then you're definitely herding cats, because you're dealing with outlaws and guys that you have to have a certain tone of voice, or they're going to maybe pistol whip you as their way of quitting.

So—unbelievable. I mean, when I think of it, I'm like, "How did I—what the fuck?" My memories, I almost have to fact-check them in my head, and when I talk to someone from that time, one of the reasons I have these photographs up right there—those are James Nares's photographs that were taken of New York City at this same time, and they prove that I'm not tripping. I mean, the one to the left is of an abandoned car, it looks to me like it's on the West Side Highway, and it looks to me like it's been there a long time, and it looks to me like the city's just, like, "Well, drive around it. We're not going to get it—we're not getting around to it." And the West Side was completely fucking empty, so I'm like, "What exactly—what kind of New York City is that? That—" I remember that one, but I think sometimes that I must've been imagining it, because it seems so insane.

But, *Escape from New York* was a fantasy film made at that time that had a tremendous core of reality to it, that the city viewed New York—I mean, the country viewed New York as a sort of ship that was anchored off the coast, that was like a ghost ship that was anchored off the coast that we don't really have to take responsibility for any more. Like, we don't know what



the hell they did over there. We don't understand it. And we on New York—on Manhattan Island, felt the same way about the rest of the country. Like, "Reagan? Who the fuck is that? Like, it has nothing to do with my world. The patriotic talk that you are manufacturing about this country is not—doesn't relate to my daily experience at all."

So I didn't—everyone else seemed like they were tripping. I didn't believe a word I heard and I lived in what I thought was reality. And then, weirdly, I would leave New York City to go visit my mom, who lived in the Hudson Valley in a little apartment. Once she sold the suburban house, she moved into a small apartment in Ardsley that overlooked the Hudson. Very beautiful, and it was called Hudson House, which was really funny, because I remember putting it down as—when we were moving from place to place, I didn't know what to put down as an address, so I put my mom's address down, and it said Hudson House, and somebody thought that it meant I was in a rehab facility, because it—they were like, "Well, what kind of program is that—do they run there?" And I was like, "No, it's my mother's, like, really nice apartment building she sold a big suburban house to get." So it was kind of luxurious. They had—anyway. [Laughs.] Hudson House. Just the assumption right away that I was in rehab. It's so funny. It was a different town.

So—I was living in this city that—you can hear from the tone of my voice and the stories that I'm telling, which are even not the worst ones—that there was a lot of—that everyone who lived through that period of time in New York City—

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WALTON FORD: —if they weren't super cloistered in the Upper East Side or something, and even those people saw some stuff, that you kind of couldn't live there for the decades that I lived there without some sort of trauma and horror outside the street, and true fear for your life sometimes. I remember being followed by groups of teenagers, crossing the street and them crossing the street, and then me crossing the street again and them crossing the street again. And then I'm like, "Okay, this is real," and going into a bodega and, luckily, them deciding it's not worth it at this point. That kind of stuff. Very matter-of-fact.

Riding my bicycle through—to get from my house in Williamsburg—my apartment in Williamsburg to my job, which was in what they call Dumbo now, which at that point was just a place under the bridge that was so fucking loud and horrible and where you really did dump bodies and trashed cars, and there was not even enough streetlights to have a prostitution thing going on down there. There was nothing going on down there. It was like razor wire, war zone bullshit, and we—you could afford to have a big wood shop there.

So, here's a daily routine for me. I get up. I have to get to work pretty early. Now, this is—there's two different versions of my working class life in those days. One would've involved going to somebody's apartment when we were actually installing and refinishing and matching the wood to the new wood, all this, because we might put in bookshelves in the Dakota that had to match the old bookshelves. We might be stripping paint off of beautiful mahogany, or cherry or ash woodwork that need—that had been painted stupidly in the '60s, so we would've been restoring the apartment to its previous glory, installing maybe new doors where there were—people were stupid enough to take the doors out. We could build a door that looked just like it had been built in 1880. That was the kind of skill level that we were at.

So we were making some really beautiful stuff. My portfolio from those days of that kind of restoration work is top notch. Some of the clients—I mean, some of the designers that would hire us, like Jed Johnson and Alan Wanzenberg, later bought my paintings, which are hilarious. Like, the very guys that had hired me to do—my company, rather, the company I worked for, rather—they wouldn't have known me then, because I was just a worker—a particularly smelly, grumpy, little worker—but I would've had kneepads on, and a respirator hanging around my neck, and I put on these same work clothes every day, so they stunk like a homeless person, because I was like, "I don't have two sets of work clothes, so if you ask me to wash them, I have to take them home, go to the laundromat before tomorrow's job." You know, so it'd have to be on the weekends. So a whole week of—in the hot summer, and sometimes three weeks before I got around to washing my outfit that I worked at—in.

Anyhow, that's another story, because I was dirt fucking poor, and my apartment cost \$350 a month, and I painted in it, and so did my wife, so we had a studio in the—what people would call a living room, and then we'd have a kitchen that we would eat in, and then we

would have a bedroom that we could sleep in. Because it was Brooklyn, we had a backyard, so we could grow tomatoes and sit in the sun, so there was something nice about the Williamsburg life, yes.

Anyhow, I would ride from—okay, so a typical day. There's—like I said, there's two typical days, one in which the van comes around and brings me to New York, but they're going to be honking at, like, eight in the morning, so I've got to get my fucking hungover ass out of bed. I'm also an alcoholic, and that's just whatever. I'm in the Upper West Side, Upper East Side. I'm in Park Slope. You know, wherever the rich people live. I'm in fucking—not Park Slope, Brooklyn Heights, with those beautiful buildings there. Wherever, installing, going in a rich person's home. More than likely, 90 percent of the time, I'm getting on my bicycle and I'm riding from Williamsburg to Dumbo, which means past the Domino Sugar Plant, past the big used clothing warehouses that people still remember, through the projects, where there were guys there that would sometimes set their dogs on me.

[00:05:15]

They would have pit bulls, and German Shepherds, and they would laugh when the dogs would chase me, so I would maybe sometimes reroute myself to avoid those guys. That was more likely at the end of the day than this early in the morning, so the mornings, I didn't get chased by dogs as much. And luckily, I'm riding downhill through the projects usually when the dogs are—in the afternoon, when they're all sitting around drinking beer and they're setting the dogs on me for fun, and saying, "Go back to SoHo," which was a hilarious thing to say, because if I could've afforded to live in SoHo, I wouldn't have lived in Williamsburg, which was pretty crappy in those days—not all gentrified, not full of coffee shops and kids with interesting facial hair.

It was either Italians who were sort of just regular blue collar people, or even like low-level mob guys, or, when I lived in Greenpoint, it was a complete Polish bastion with very little English spoken on the streets, or in the signage. There's still little pockets in Greenpoint of pure Polish grocery, like I remember. But that was all there was then. There wasn't any sort of artistic community out there like there is now. Nobody like me, say, leaving art school and moving to Brooklyn now, would experience exactly the same thing that I experienced then, because the sort of bohemian neighborhood idea was pretty concentrated in the East Village at that time, and had not really migrated to the boroughs yet, if that makes any sense.

You didn't have a community of artists or artsy professionals, or trust fund kids, or any of that kind of stuff—college graduates—living in Brooklyn, particularly. That wasn't really a thing. There might've been isolated characters in different communities, but the idea of a neighborhood devoted to that, like you have in Williamsburg now, which is all gentrified, none of that had happened in Brooklyn at all yet. So it had definitely—was taking over the East Village and the Lower East Side as I—when I arrived in New York, but I was getting priced out of that. To me, that was like, "Oh, that's where fucking Jim Jarmusch lives, or something. I don't—I'm not like John Lurie. I don't have any fucking money. I'm not famous," you know? I was like, "Those guys have driven the rents up," you know? Iggy Pop lived overlooking Thompson Square Park. It's like, "I'm screwed. Rock stars live here."

It was still really sketchy as hell down there—really, really, seriously sketchy, and ABC—you know, fucking where you score heroin. Like, where do you want to score heroin? All the Alphabet City was where you scored heroin. I never did heroin, but I had plenty of friends that did. This world of squatters in the—you know, cinderblock windows all over the city, whole blocks of buildings that had been abandoned by the people that owned them, because it cost too much even to pay the taxes on them, and you couldn't charge rent because nobody wanted to live there.

So this was the city I moved into. People were fleeing the city. They weren't, like, battling each other to get the—to pay the high rent. There was nothing like that. So the point was you're trying to figure out—and it sounds like I'm making a contradiction here, because I was saying I got priced out of the Lower East Side. Not entirely true. Okay. So this is—this was the balance. I went to Williamsburg because it felt relatively safe, comparatively. In other words, if I had gone to Alphabet City, which some of my friends did, you really do hit the street and it's batshit terrifying, because there's, like, abandoned building where they knocked out all the staircases across the street, and the guys on the top floor are lowering the buckets down, and you put your money in the bucket, and then he brings it up, takes the money, puts the heroin and the works—the needle, everything you need, just a little kit for

shooting up—and lowers it down to the person on the street, and then that person takes it and leaves, and there's a line—a queue of people doing this.

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And not only that. If the police come, because there's no staircases, they just had ladders getting to the floors above. When they're up on the roof, they pull the ladders up, so unless you're Spiderman, you can't get to these guys. So when the cops do show up, those guys just run from rooftop to rooftop and go down one—they know the maze. We don't. And they emerge in the street, like, a block away, if they want to emerge from the street at all.

So nobody was doing anything about this because it was just too much work. I mean, what are the cops—the cops are like, "I'm not getting paid for that. I'm not going to climb—what am I supposed to do? Have a fucking Batman thing that helps me climb up the side of the building?" They're like—these guys had it all figured out. So that's Alphabet City for blocks. I don't want to go there. So yeah, I could've afforded New York City, quote, unquote, if I was willing to live in a neighborhood where I—where my beautiful, you know, future wife would have hit the streets in that environment, and I wasn't willing—I wanted—so I said, "Okay, I'll—either I pay a huge amount of rent to live somewhere safe in Manhattan, or I pay a fraction of that to live in a safe ethnic enclave, like this little Polish pocket in Greenpoint, where the crime rate was pretty low, or this little pocket in Williamsburg around Frost Street that was, you know, jealously guarded by Italian American families who kept pretty little houses—pretty little gardens, like, were very, very tidy and picky about who walked through their neighborhood and all that." So that felt okay to me. I was like, "Okay, I can get away with this."

But I was making calculations like that because I was like, "Wow, I could have this huge loft space, but it's south of—you know, it's South Williamsburg, which is really scary, where there's, like, a shooting every few days." There was some documentary on Criterion about that—what was going on in South Williamsburg in that—in those days. It was enough for me to ride my bicycle through those neighborhoods. I knew what the hell was going on there, and I didn't want to live there. I tried to ride fast. [Laughs.]

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, what kind of work are you creating when you're—so, you're not on the job—

WALTON FORD: Fucking hell.

BEN GILLESPIE: —you have your studio in your living room.

WALTON FORD: So strangely, because of—I have it over there, violent little paintings I did in the '80s. I was highly influenced when I went to Italy by Giotto, and Simone Martini, and Lorenzetti, and early, what they used to call primitive Italian painting, of the pre-Renaissance era. Trecento is how they refer to it in Italy. Seemed like the cleanest narrative painting I'd ever seen, the most perfect comic strips about the saints' lives, where you didn't even need word bubbles and explanatory panels, and I thought, "I want to paint like this. I just want to paint like this." So I painted a bunch of paintings about some of my childhood trauma, actually—what it was like to grow up in the suburbs with a certain amount of violence around, just because of the way my brother and I conducted ourselves, and also having my dad be a sort of scary dude. I was exploring quite a bit, about my Southern roots, about plantations, stuff I'd read, revisionist history—

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WALTON FORD: —was a new thing in the '90s and I was really interested in reading about the stories I had been—the received wisdom I had about the South from my family, and sort of overturning those narratives in my paintings. They were intense, pretty frightening little paintings about—oil paintings on wooden panels, or on canvas that were very kind of explicitly violent and had a sort of—in the way that this Trecento would—didn't shy away from, say, saints being beheaded, or martyrdoms, where they're cutting the breasts off of a female saint and she's holding the breast on a platter with blood dripping down. I was blown away by that stuff. I was like, "These guys didn't have a filter. This is, like, Tourette's syndrome, man. They're just saying whatever the hell—are you really showing me the eyes that were pulled out of your head, sitting on a platter, and yet your eyes are there?" It's, like, this meta thing. I love it. I was so into it.

And I thought, "This language can be trans—this language, this insanity, this sort of filter-less horror can be translated into—can be used—this language could be used to tell stories besides the lives of the saints. You didn't have to—this doesn't have to just be biblical. This could be the stuff I'm experiencing in New York City, and the stuff I experienced when I was young." The stuff in the streets of New York was informing the work, because I really saw some blastingly violent things, and—but I wasn't painting them, because it was all too fresh, I think. I was painting the stuff that happened to me when I was a kid.

The contrast between those really manicured suburban landscapes I was used to and the—and violence insanity unfolding within that seemed more powerful than just, say, you know, the streets of New York looked like this kind of thing was going to happen in them. There was no contrast there. If you have a bombed-out, rat-infested street that has violence unfolding in it, you're like, "Well, yeah. I mean, what do you expect? This looks like a shitty neighborhood because it is a shitty neighborhood."

I mean, I'm leaving out all the soulful interactions I had with people—all of the moments that didn't have to do with fear—but I think I was touching on that a little with the welding. I was thrown in with—I mean, when—the wood shop's also—you know, we'd hire people from this—from the projects or the streets, too, you know? I mean, it wasn't like I—it wasn't always conflict. There was a lot of—New York is amazing because people don't kill each other every day, you know? That we can come from such radically different backgrounds, and if we're in the hot, sweaty subway together that has no AC in those days, and all the windows are graffitied shut, we're in it together, and we give each other a graveyard chuckle.

Moments of misunderstanding that then were resolved with conversation, really sweet New York moments as well. I loved New York. That was the weird part. But when I left for even a moment to go visit my mom in the suburbs, the tension that would be released, the feeling of, like, "I'm not just defending my turf now. I'm not just trying to keep you from jumping me. I'm not on constant vigilance of, you know, where's my wallet? How much money's in there?"

I had a protocol. If someone mugs you, you take your wallet out and show it to them. Then you throw it and run the other way, screaming, "Fire." And the idea's that—and a cop even told me this, a retired cop. And he said, "The logic of that is perfect. The guy wants to go after—he doesn't want to chase the screaming man. He wants to get the money. You just want to live, because he might want to cut your throat for fun." That only worked if it worked. One of my friends was mugged by someone coming up to him and saying, "Hey, where's the \$50 you owe me?"

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Right away, he was in this subway with a lot of other people around. Right away, everybody's going to tune it right out. "This is between those guys. I'm not involved." Even a cop at that time wouldn't have gotten involved in that. "Where's the fucking \$50 you owe me?" Guy's like, "I never saw you before." "Don't give me that shit," and punch him in the stomach. That was how that went. "I want my \$50 and you give it to me right now, or this is just a taste." And he gave him the \$50. Never saw the guy before, never saw him again. That was a way to mug somebody that seemed—that insulated you from having any consequences, because no one is going to get involved in that.

So I knew this. This is all around me every minute of the day, so when I left the city, I fucking, *phew*, whoa, wow. That was amazing. Go swimming in the lake in the suburbs, you know? Go sit in the fucking—by the sort of—by the Silver Lake, which was not even a lake. It's—in Croton, there was some swimming holes. I grew up in Croton so I knew where they were. Go to the rural area where there's deer in the woods. "Holy shit. No one is going to jump me today." And I wouldn't even realize until I left the city how much of this was in me all the time—how much this stress just lived in me every day—but it was there, and it was in everyone. There was no exception.

Honestly? Many of the people who now say, "Oh, I miss it in the old days," many of my friends who really talk that way did way more fucking drugs than I did; way, way more drugs than I did. Like, cough syrup. Like, "Well, yeah, you didn't think it was so bad because you were on heroin. Heroin makes it so that you see that trauma unfolding and you just say, hah!" I was not on heroin. I wasn't on any anti-anxiety things. I was only on alcohol, and I really think that's the big difference. Most of the people who talk a big game about how

great it was in the '80s were on such serious drugs that it just didn't—and they were on those drugs so that they could tune this bullshit out, and they say they miss it, and I'm like, "You don't really miss it, because if your sober self today was in that, right now, you'd fucking freak out and probably go back on heroin." So anyway—

BEN GILLESPIE: Well, I think that's a—maybe this is a good break moment.

WALTON FORD: Yeah, I need to take a pee.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah, I can reflect back.

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BEN GILLESPIE: Okay. One second.

WALTON FORD: Yep.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah. This is Ben Gillespie, conducting the oral history of Walton Ford. This is still our second session. It's July 26, and Walton, I just want to—so, we're in New York. It is a war zone, as you've described it. There's a lot of trauma. You're turning to your art, finding refuge in it again, and so I wanted to know, when do you return to natural history paintings? To the natural world?

WALTON FORD: Yeah, that's a good one. So yeah, when I get out of art school, the first thing I was doing were these Trecento painting knockoffs about sort of hippie craziness in the suburbs. Then it shifted to sort of family history and a series I did in the '90s, which would have had to do with slaveowners on horseback, losing control of their horses, often with flies all around their head, which I got this idea from a [Pieter] Bruegel painting that had this sort of demon that had a lot of flies around it, and also when I've gone down South, and you get besieged with, like, horseflies and things. So the horseflies are all around the horse and around the head of the slaveowner, and he's about to tumble off his horse, and the slaves that are around him are going about their chores but they have farm implements, like pitchforks and things in their hands, and they're looking, and there's this moment where you feel like the power could shift, or a rebellion could happen. It's an explosive moment I was trying to paint. The master is losing control, is about to tumble, and the slave has a sharp instrument—[laughs]—in his hand and her hand. Many times, it was women.

And I did a bunch of those paintings. I did probably a dozen of them. Sometimes the horse would have an erection and is going to lose control, because the horse was sexualized. Anyway, a lot of different things.

BEN GILLESPIE: Really interesting with that sporting painting genre there.

WALTON FORD: That's exactly what they were. They were meant to look from a distance like a sporting painting. And when you got up close to them—I'm pretty sure Jimmie Durham, he was the first person to write about my work in *Artforum*. He wrote an article about me called, "To Be A Pilgrim." And he was writing about this body of work and he said, "It's as if the sort of traditional paintings that would be in the sort of oppressor's household had some kind of computer virus and started to, like, spew out this information that they weren't supposed to spew out, almost communicating directly with the people that worked in the household, even," you know? Like, "Who's serving the drinks underneath this painting that's saying this alternative message that—"

I thought that was such flattery, coming especially from his—Jimmie's strategy being not completely dissimilar from mine, to take a form and use humor and kind of perverse alterations, you know? Like, he did *Pocahontas' Panties* [*Pocahontas' Underwear*], and they're all sexed up, because that's how she's been made into a figure of—a sexualized figure of white fantasy, and put that in a museum case so that it looks like it's an artifact that belongs in the Natural History Museum, or somewhere like that.

So anyway, this sort of gets me started with the animals—the animal becoming a sort of important element in these horse paintings, and the sporting art, and then hunting narratives that were like this. They would show a pile of game that was excessive. I did some paintings in this series where it was just like, you know, this sort of impulse they had in the 19th century, to just go out and shoot things.

BEN GILLESPIE: Is this the early '90s?

WALTON FORD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

BEN GILLESPIE: And I just want to—before we moved on, where did you show where Jimmie Durham came and saw your work?

WALTON FORD: Yeah. He would've seen me probably at—oh, God, there was, like, a horrible gallery called Bess Cutler Gallery. It was a nightmare. People like Bill Arning of White Columns—he was the curator at White Columns.

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Then he went to MIT and was a curator there later, and then he moved to Texas and was director of some big-shot museum out there, and now he's back. I think he's up in Hudson with his own gallery. But Bill Arning was a seminal figure in the '80s and '90s in the New York art world; bon vivant, kind of a bit larger than life. Really charismatic, chatty, amazing character, and very big promoter of my early career. He gave John Currin his start. He gave me a start. He gave a lot of people—now he has a sort of macho biker kind of gay look, but then he was like, in a—he was like this disheveled kind of—he looked like an old salesman, or something like that. He had, like, suits and ties on, and he was kind of sweaty and the suits were rumpled, and he was—because he was, like, in between being dapper and disheveled and kind of, you know—now he's a big strong guy, but he was kind of paunchy in those days. Really interesting character, you know. Love me some Bill Arning. He was a hero of mine in the old days, because he'd sort of take you out of obscurity, and puts you on the wall somewhere that people take you seriously.

And Marcia Tucker of the New Museum put me in a group show early on called—with these paintings, called *The Other Man: Alternative Representations of Masculinity*. Took kind of the horror of someone like my dad, and I would be in a show like this because of these androgynous hippie figures that I was painting that looked like they came out of a Bosch painting. And even—well, there's a perfect example. There's two little girls choking out their baby brother who wants to be around them, because they're the cool older girls. I didn't—

And interestingly, the show was panned in the *New York Times*. Marcia, in particular, as a curator, was panned in this show, because that idea of talking about a sort of fluid gender representation was not—it wasn't a thing yet. It was just like—they were like, "What the fuck is she talking about?" You know, there's—*Three's Company's* on TV, and stuff like this. Like, they thought it was already solved. Like, "Oh, we don't have these—there's nothing to discuss." They really fucking missed the point in a huge way, and then at the very end, they said—and there was some—that said, "There was an extraordinarily intense number of paintings by a young painter called Walton Ford." It was a very good review for me personally, and very bad for the show.

So that was funny, because the next time I saw Marcia, she was like, "Oh, fuck them at the *New York Times*," and I was like, "Kind of." [Laughs.] I had to keep my mouth shut, because they completely missed the point of the show but they didn't miss the point of my pictures, because there was—I'm not blowing my horn, but there isn't—there wasn't anything like that. Nobody was making anything vaguely like that. So I was easily dismissed as a sort of illustrator or a cartoonist, or someone that was somewhat related to Edward Gorey in some way that was uninteresting, you know?

Mostly wasn't getting anywhere with most of this early work, so then, as an offshoot of this hunting narrative idea, in 1992, we had the celebration, quote, unquote, of Columbus's first voyage to America.

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And I did a series of extinct parrots of the Caribbean—of which there are many—and many of them were driven extinct during the colonial period—Spanish colonial period—because their habitats were cut down, and we have a few little funny specimens and descriptions from way back. And in that series, I did them as dead specimens sitting on a page with a drop shadow, so that they looked like they were sitting right there, and then because I had read that when Columbus took over as governor of many of the islands in the Caribbean, he took—he demanded gold in tribute from Indians, and if they didn't fill the quota of gold that was expected, they would lose a finger. The particular *cacique*, their chief, would—they would

chop his finger off.

And so I had the dead bird and I had different paraphernalia of, say, artifacts from the Taino Indians, and then a severed finger, all those things laid out on a page, like certain types of Renaissance manuscripts that would show, like—I could show you what I was looking at. [Joris] Hoefnagel used to do these beautiful designs around these manuscripts that showed, like, an object that appeared to be sitting on the page of the manuscript with a shadow, as an illusion.

So I did a series like this of dead parrots, with severed Indian limbs, and fingers and hands and things like this, and feet, as if they were just specimens as well. So what we're doing is collecting specimens to bring back to Spain, so we have, "Oh, look, they have this kind of parrot. Here's a dead parrot. Here's a couple of severed feet of Indians that we came along, or a skull." You know, these things. So I made these gruesome little watercolors and they got me interested in the parrots, and what happened is, when I showed—when I had some of these up, people really went right over to them. They got—they were more powerful at grabbing people's attention than these things I was painting before, which seemed to be just repellent, mostly, to people. I'd get a reaction, but it wasn't necessarily one that would—[laughs]—help me out.

Like I'm saying, people like Bill Arning or Marcia Tucker were tuned in and thought what I was doing was highly interesting, but—my fellow artists always thought I was great—I mean, at least to my face, in the bar, after six drinks. But—and I was getting the attention of people like this, so there felt like this sort of momentum was behind me, in a way. So, I still haven't quite done an Audubon knockoff, you know what I mean? I'm right on the edge of that in 1992.

BEN GILLESPIE: What drew you to watercolor?

WALTON FORD: I—here's a painting I did when I was maybe, like, eight, and it—I'll describe it since it's an oral history—but it's a little natural history watercolor of two Blackburnian warblers sitting on a pine branch, and it's just a very traditional natural history watercolor, but it's a juvenile who painted it, and there's certain things about the perspective which aren't quite perfect. But it's basically a pre-professional natural history artist at work, and—I was eight, you know? So by this time, this was 20 years later. I have access to these skills at eight years old. By the time I was 20, they were fairly solidified in me.

Watercolor, to me, was like talking or walking. It didn't feel like an effort, particularly. It was just a way to communicate. So if I wanted to figure out something visually, I could make a quick sketch and some watercolor on it, and I know what it looks like, quote, unquote, or something, within moments. Knowing that—

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WALTON FORD: —if I then, which I really pretty much discovered early on, if I was to take that thing that comes so naturally, like having a beautiful singing voice, for example, and then push it until I'm really having to work hard, then now I'm getting somewhere. Now I'm getting into territory that most people can't follow me into, you know? So that—and that results in this sort of Muhammed Ali, Mike Tyson kind of thing, where it's like, "Okay, you have these natural gifts. What if you took those natural gifts and also worked harder than anybody else? Really harder than anybody else," because that's the thing about—Ali made it look like he never worked. Bullshit. He was, like, compulsive perfectionist. That's how he got to the absolute pinnacle of that thing.

So—and then pretend it's just, like, "Oh, I'm just beautiful and effortless." Awesome. Perfect. That's really what—actually, what Black America needed desperately, what—worldwide people of color needed somebody like him at that moment, to just give it this feeling of offhand chill. But everyone who gets to that place had a gift, and then they took that gift and busted their ass to develop it, and I realized pretty early on that I could do that, and watercolor's a very easy way, because like I said, I had pretty confident facility, even when I was in single digits of my age. So by the time I was, like, 16, I felt like I was looking at Winslow Homer and trying to figure out his techniques, and I wasn't there. I wasn't doing what Winslow Homer could do at 16, but it was a goal, and I didn't think it was outside of my realm of possibility, you know? Like, I wasn't thinking, "I can't do it."

The beautiful thing about art history is that I went and saw the Winslow Homer show now, at

62, and I was still amazed, because he did what I'm talking about, and he did it in a different—slightly different skill, like, a slightly different area of skill that I haven't developed as brilliantly as he has. So I was like, "Oh, shit, humbled again." Like, unbelievable what your previous geniuses can teach you, and the humility in that. And it was very nice that I had a big show at Gagosian, that was a pretty triumphant moment in New York, and then was able to go and see the Winslow Homer show and get properly put in my place. It's awesome.

I love that about art history. Like, you're good. You've got work to do. Winslow's like, "Let's talk," you know? I mean, we have a conversation. I don't feel embarrassed in front of the guy. But I still could honestly be, like, a little like people who go to gurus and say, "Master." I'd be happy to do that if I was talking to Winslow Homer. I'd be like, "You, you know, what do you think? And what do you think I should work on, really? Like, is there something here that you want to tell me, looking at all my work? Because I'd like to hear it." And I don't think he'd be bummed out to have that conversation with me, which is a nice feeling.

I got off track. So I went back to my roots—and this is advice I sometimes give to young students, who are in a crisis, artistically, which is almost every time—[laughs]—I go to some art school, which is natural. Well, first of all, I tell them, "You're not opening a restaurant, and you're not writing a recipe book, and you're not even cooking dinner yet. You're at the farmer's market and you're just putting things in your basket. What looks good? What do you feel like eating? Just follow your gut and your instincts. Don't come here with a list of ingredients that you need to get, because this is a fucking farmer's market. They're going to say, well, we don't have any parsley now, but we have this beautiful basil, and you change and you're flexible, and you look in—so look at art history that way."

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"Draw on the things that interest you. See if maybe, by some incredible luck, you come up with a—something delicious to eat tonight, and don't go past that. You're going to poop it out tomorrow. It's not a big deal." But most art students think—if we're going to use this cooking analogy and beat it to death, most artists think that they suck if they're not opening Le Bernardin tomorrow. "Oh, my God, I'm so bad," you know? And I'm like, "It's not even your fucking job yet, dude. It's your job to even just figure out what you want to eat right now. It's not to open a four-star restaurant and shoot yourself if you don't get the Michelin stars. It's so, so cart-before-the-horse."

So that's the first piece of advice I give them, and the next one has to do with pushing—not having contempt for the gifts that you already have, and then pushing those gifts really far. So I'm like, "What did you love to draw? Obviously, you drew when you were 10 years old because you wouldn't be at Yale in the senior—in the fucking grad school if you didn't—if you weren't that kid who went home from school and drew shit. So okay, what did you draw when you were 10?" "Oh, my God, I drew these race cars with flames coming out the back, or I drew Barbies as brides," and stuff like that. And I'm like, "You don't think there's a possible adult rich vein to tap there that you could do something cool with?"

Like, because I like listening to that juvenile voice, I went home every day, opened up a natural history book, and started drawing dinosaurs attacking each other, or birds—like, a perfect bird guide-book illustration. Like, someday I might do a guide—field guide to the birds. That's what that was, an attempt to do a perfect male, female, side view, front view, like—I think we're getting somewhere. You could easily use a field guide that was full of those, and I was eight years old. I could've done a field guide. Holy shit. Would've been useful. I already understood the principles behind it.

So that's all. We're talking about—my return to natural history art, and watercolor, was the wisdom that these were things I've been obsessed with my whole life, that pretty much a hipster outside world that I went to at RISD and downtown New York made me believe probably wasn't cool subject matter. Like, there was something where it just didn't fit in with, like, my favorite record that might've come out that year, which was probably *Scary Monsters* from David Bowie or something, like, in 1982. Like, I wouldn't have wanted to show David Bowie my natural history drawings, you know? I would've thought, "I'm not cool if I do that," you know?

So I'm in the dark room printing black-and-white photographs from—you know, whatever. I'm doing things that I thought seemed much cooler. I'm in a band, you know? I'm singing in a band, you know? That's cooler. I'm making a video with my friend about my other friend,



who's making cool hats. I was doing that stuff, like, taking video editing classes, and getting very sidetracked from what—where I began, which was that the Museum of Natural History was, like, nirvana—which it still was. Crawling into the woods to catch snakes as a little kid was what I really wanted to be doing, and going home and drawing, you know, a growling wolf, or a—you know, just getting all the fur detail right, and going to the zoo, and—I just gave up on all of that. I thought, "It's hopeless. Nobody wants to see it. It's just personal. It's embarrassing, almost. It's like—" You know, you don't want to know what kind of pornography I like, you know? I didn't want to tell anybody. And it's not interesting, what flavor ice cream, I'm not going to go on about that.

But then, I realized, kind of, I'm lucky. And many people outside of me, when I started to—for my own pleasure to tap into the same narrative—in other words, I would do an oil painting about Audubon, where Audubon is in the oil painting, and then I might do the accompanying watercolor, kind of. Like, if I've made this sort of fantasy Audubon—because they—those transitional paintings between Trecento, and the—they looked more like Hudson River landscapes.

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They were, like, dark, brooding, 19th-century Romantic paintings, somewhere between [Edward] Stubbs and Hudson River School, and they had figures—human figures in them, in narrative situations that were kind of revisionist-history-narrative situations, and so when I painted Audubon, I did a few paintings about him. It just felt natural to make a fake Audubon that also had this sort of infection that Jimmie Durham pointed out, this sort of computer virus version of an Audubon.

So I painted one or two, three, or four, five, probably, in the '90s. Bill Arning came over and fucking flipped out on them, and I gave him one, just free and clear. I was like, "Well, take this one with you." He still has it as one of his treasured possessions. It's one of the very first ones I ever did, and it's basically—I revisited it recently. We can look at the print I did based on it very recently, but it was a kestrel, which is what used to be called a sparrow hawk, and he's sitting on top of a pile of probably 150 dead sparrows, and one is flying by, and he's about to jump on that one too. It's like, he doesn't know that he's had enough. Like, "You've already killed enough sparrows. Like, sure, you're a sparrow hawk, but there's a limit to, like—would you fucking please relax? Like, you don't have to kill every sparrow. You just kill a sparrow a day and eat it. Like, you don't—can you get with that?" Not this sparrow hawk. This sparrow hawk doesn't know when it's had enough.

So what I liked is this idea that the incipient greed that our young country had—that sort of bloodlust, and also the inability to just stop when you've gotten enough was—the idea that the things that people were doing could infect the nature, and the nature would act out in an anthropomorphic way, the things that were happening around it, and that there was a concept that the Latins had—or, rather, the Romans had, and maybe the Greeks as well—or, actually, throughout the ancient world, there was ornithomancy, which was that you watched bird behavior and it gives you an insight into what will happen. So, "Oh, look, the birds are flying counterclockwise. The emperor will die tonight." You know, this kind of foretelling using signs and things from nature to tell the future.

So, ornithomancy was something that I was keenly interested in the idea of—still am—and so I will do my fifty-fifty hindsight versions of that. So, I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to make a fake Audubon that predicts the sort of environmental collapse through the actions of the animals that Audubon is projecting anthropomorphic ideas on, that then go in this computer virus way, and speed ahead to show what's going to happen in 200 years." So it's all very meta and very—I am going to make a case for it. I think it's a really cool project.

I felt almost embarrassed because figurative realistic artists like me are often sort of considered knuckleheads, or something. You're sort of lumped with—especially narrative ones. You're like, "Oh, it's a fucking Norman Rockwell painting. It's telling me how to think. It's telling me what to think." And I really thought, "No, the best narrative paintings don't tell you how to think. They are bizarrely complex and layered and nuanced and, to parse it, even the most obvious Bruegel painting, or the most obvious [Francisco] Goya etching is still a job for art historians." And you can write an entire book about one [*Los Caprichos* print from Goya, if you wanted to. The mystery and profundity of those images, the gut feeling that you're looking at wisdom but you don't really know what's unfolding here, like, but it seems unbelievably right? This—

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WALTON FORD: —strange thing, and it's supposed to be a witch's sabbath, but it's really a social critique. But who's being criticized? It's so rich. It's so powerful that I thought, "These narrative languages are far from dead, and I don't give a shit what the art world says about it," except I cared deeply, because I was a young, egotistical artist. What I wanted to do was turn my back on prevalent received ideas of what is art and what is relevant and what's good and what's bad, go my own way, and then was really upset and traumatized that I wasn't being celebrated. I really thought, "I'm so good and I'm so overlooked," you know? That was my narrative. That's what I told myself. And I'm just—and it's a crime, and it's because people can't see that, just because I'm a skilled painter doesn't mean that the concepts behind this are ham-fisted.

I'm not Andrew Wyeth, who I think was kind of a simpleton, in a weird way. There's something about his tremendous skill in his hand and his eye, and I really don't think he had a fuck ton to say most of the time, you know? And it's, like, "Yeah, the curtain's in the window at a certain time of day. I guess that's enough." But—and a sort of enforced bleakness that is—has a little bit more to do with just good cinematography than it does with—you know, like Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* says—has certain moments which have almost everything you would, want in a weird way, from an Andrew Wyeth picture, with the added idea that, "Oh, my God, we're about to die," which really helps, in my opinion, you know? A profound expression of man's fear of nature in the—in a great work of art, in that way. So—and I don't—I refuse to turn my back on those achievements simply because Tippi Hedren felt victimized by this sadistic director. It's—that's a separate story, but the fact is I'm really glad that a film like that exists because that's one of those influential—what do I want to say about how animals live in the human imagination? If I'm interested in that, then I'm going to study a film like that.

So—oh, I can't even get started on something like *The Birds*, right? Because that, along with *King Kong*, the original 1933 version? *Whew*. A few other horror films from the '30s, you know, like *Dracula* and *Werewolf in London* and all of this kind of thing. Yeah, I don't know. It's so rich, the vein I am allowed to tap into, and now, in spite of the fact that I could still think of all the ways in which my artwork isn't perfectly understood by the whole world, I can see completely that I have more than compensated in this—being celebrated, being understood, being—I don't know what—I was so needy, when you're young, sometimes unable to see how things were going well for me, you know, where—it was—I could—every year, something encouraging would happen. I would get a Guggenheim fellowship, or I would get an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grant, or I would sell some pictures to some major collector or institution or—I couldn't—and I'd even get some good reviews, even—even a few good reviews. Most of the critics have still not lined up behind me in any way, but I did get Jimmie Durham to write that beautiful piece. I didn't do that.

[00:05:01]

They did that. *Artforum* did that. I've—I have—Louise Bourgeois was on the cover of that issue. It's like—it wasn't a shitty moment for me, and it was early on, so I don't know what I expected. *The New Yorker* has been kind to me in the past. Calvin Tompkins wrote a whole profile. I have nothing to worry about when it comes to an audience. But artists are weird that way. You feel—you really remember the failures. You remember the people that didn't like your work, that—the sort of backhanded compliments.

I got this very mixed review that was highly intelligent from Peter Schjeldahl—incredible review in every way, a triumph, but also a critique. I mean, he pointed out things that—the slippery slope of the narrative painter. He pointed out the ones that felt didactic, the ones that felt humorless, and he said, "The ones that work really well are the ones that are the least didactic and the funniest, usually." And they can be macabre, but there's some humor, and it's true. The ones that are in my studio now have some underlying humor in them, and that's sort of part of who I am, and when it doesn't come out—if I seem strident, self-righteous, didactic, message-driven, end-gaming—if I'm doing that, they don't work, and he pointed that out in the review. But he didn't—he had more than enough praise, saying, "When it does work—that the humor is dead on, that the graphic sense is flawless, that the execution is beautiful—" He loves a good painter, and I'm a good painter.

I can paint. Even [Julian] Schnabel said so. He said, "Everybody can't paint." That was the last— "And it's nice that you can. That's what I like about what you do." He didn't care about

the narrative. He didn't care about the stories. He just said, "I like the way these things are painted. There's magic in the way they're painted. There's a painter enjoying painting in the way these are painted." Yeah, and other painters can see that. When Ed Ruscha had his 70th birthday, Larry Gagosian bought a little painting from me to give to him, and it was—and then I got a photo of Ed Ruscha with it on the wall, with a big, big grin on his face. And so, artists who like painting and love making art can sometimes give me my best compliments.

So, this whole concern that we have early on about being recognized, it's a lot—the same—it's like me having to take the advice I give those students, where I'm like, "You just don't think about the Michelin stars. Just think about the farmer's market. Even if you're a made artist, that's a better way to go about life." Just, what feels good? What feels right? What feels delightful? What feels like play? And it might be super hard work. It might hurt. The other—I did have a conversation with one of my ballerina friends recently, and she said—I said, "What is it that kind of we—" Because she was—we were talking about weeding out early on, because I said, "You know—" Because she said, "You work really hard, blah, blah, blah." And then I was like, "And then if you have beauty and talent—" She goes, "Everyone who was at ballet school—" She was Russian. "—had beauty and talent. They didn't even—you didn't even get summoned to the school." So I said, "What is it?" She said, "One thing is, I not only didn't mind the pain—I liked it. And then the other part was the soulfulness—the acting."

So, if you can fetishize the fact that this is the most painful thing we can do—so with painting, it is mentally one of the most difficult things I think a human brain can do. You know, you're really—I have a great friend, Joe Andoe is the artist from Oklahoma, has a great turn of phrase often. He's just like, "You get in the ring with Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo and Picasso and Matisse, and every time you pick up a paintbrush and look at an empty surface that you're going to paint on, you're getting—you're in there with the big guys, and it's not—if you haven't got something to bring, it's pretty intimidating if you think of it that way." But it's best not to, in a weird way, it's best to just say, "I'm at the farmer's market." [Laughs.]

[00:10:02]

And forget those guys for now, or those women. Louise Bourgeois. I'm not ever going to be Louise Bourgeois. I don't—those people come along rarely. They're—the sort of colossal genius is a—it's, you know, every few decades, we're lucky if we have one that sort of represents our time a little bit. And—but if the rest of the artists doesn't—you don't throw them out the window. And in a weird way, for me. You can look at Turner and you can say, "Oh, my God, you know, that is as amazing as it ever has been." But I'll look at Samuel Palmer from the similar period of time, say, more than Blake, even, or—and he's a little more obscure and a little less important, and yet he's making these tremendous discoveries, and I love them, you know? And they have more to do with my project. He's—Samuel Palmer creates—if he looks at a plant or a tree, he shows you its life force, like, exploding out of it. So, like, the trees are more like elephants that he's drawn, and then the fucking flowering bush looks like a fireworks display or something. It's exploding, because that's how it grows. It's a slow-motion fireworks display, and he can see that.

And then people say it's visionary, and I love—there's a guy called Tom Lubbock, who's a great art historian who died, and he says, "The visionary artist is not visionary in some spacey way, like he's detached from reality. The visionary artist, like Samuel Palmer, is seeing the truth that you can't even see. He's a realist in the deepest sense of the word. He sees the growth and life in the plant and then paints it, and you're just missing it, and then you call him visionary, which is a reductionary thing, as if he's on acid or something." It's just so weird, and that's nonsense. This is—it's not some inner vision. It's an actual acute way to see the real world.

I like that. It's like—I hate when they say, "Oh, maybe Vincent van Gogh had this illness or that illness." It's like, "No, he was a fucking genius, dude. He was seeing better than you were seeing. The night sky is doing that. It is actually doing that. That's not because he's insane. That's because this—the planets and the—that's because he's seeing infinite eons of movement in the sky that are real, and he's plugged into the powers that are generating the whole fucking universe and then painting it, and it's not because he's nuts. It's not because he's going to cut his ear off or kill himself. It's because he's a fucking genius. And his writings and Virginia Woolf's writings reveal that as well. Like, you want to—don't you see that the mental illness was a separate issue? [Laughs.] Not the causative issue. You're

equating the two things in a way that's really fucked up." And it lets us all off the hook, because it means that, "Oh, the artist who gets to do these amazing things that everyone knows are incredible can be dismissed as a sort of whack job," and that makes us feel better about ourselves. "Well, at least I'm not a whack job who's going to cut his ear off and kill himself." You know? "At least I'm not—"

Well, it's like in old Hollywood movies. They always kill the gay character off right away, like in *Rebel Without a Cause* or something. They've got to die. I mean, they can't be happy. God forbid he gets a boyfriend at the end of the movie, the fucking character that what's-his-face plays in *Rebel Without a Cause*, you know? It's got to be sad and unrequited, and then death. Thank you. So artists, same thing. "Just the car crash at the end, please, or else. The hanging or the mean behavior." Evil fuckers. "Oh, wow, they suck as people." That's the message. Or, "They're crazy."

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WALTON FORD: Or, "They're martyrs." But they can't be anything like happy people because that's way too threatening. They get all these gifts and they get to be happy at the same time? That's way too much. "I don't buy in. I want them to suffer and be assholes." And the fact is, the artists created that image as well. We nurture it. I love puncturing it. I don't like to buy into that. Raphael was happy. He had a good time and he made good art, you know? Same with [Sir Peter Paul] Rubens. Totally well-adjusted, happy, good businessman, nothing wrong. You know, like, "Sorry, it's not all about what you think."

But, God forbid, you know? The punishment is supposed to be built in to the genius and—but—so my—I just—I guess I'm getting off the track because it's not bio now, but it's my philosophy about art, which I guess is sort of developing at this time we're talking about. All of these concepts about how you make—how people make great art, I'm very interested in that to this day. It's the only reason that, sometimes, becoming a famous artist or a celebrated artist is—it can be really rewarding, in that you get to meet other highly-accomplished artists as well, many times. Like, I can kind of meet most of the people I want to meet now in an offhand way. Like, it just sort of happens. It unfolds naturally, and there's nobody I'm too intimidated to say, "Hey," to, you know? Like, I'm like, "Oh, God, I love your movies. [Laughs.] You're a really great actor," or, slash, or "You're a really great director," or, "You're an amazing—I listened to your music growing up," you know?

And so even during this period that we're talking about, I got to meet people like Patti Smith and stuff like that, just because they would've seen my work and, "Oh, I saw your show," you know? And sometimes it would be people I wouldn't expect, like, I met David Byrne and Cindy Sherman when they were going out and they were like, "Oh, we saw your show at the Brooklyn Museum." Like, I was so amazed, you know? I forget that I've had these—[laughs]—that I, "Oh, they do know who I am." I'm, like, so shocked and surprised.

I remember pulling out—I was in Great Barrington and I had done some artist proofs with my printer, and I had them in the back of my car, and I ran into a friend who was walking down the street with someone I didn't know, and this friend of mine was like, "Oh, what you got in the back?" And I said, "Oh, I got these prints. Want to see?" And called them over, and he's looking at them, and, "Those are nice," you know? And then the person with him says, "They look exactly like Walton Ford's," and that person was Jerry Saltz—[laughs]—and I was like, "Well, I am Walton Ford." [Laughs.]

So I'm shocked when that happens, you know? I'm still amazed when that happens. And, you know, it was emerging during the early—the late '90s, early 2000s, that I was, you know, starting to get my work up on walls in places, and—so this was New York. I guess we got some of that. And then—but I still hadn't really broken through in a way. I didn't have the audience I was hoping for yet, and—but again, I was way more drunk and insecure and way more desperate in those days, in a pretty unattractive way sometimes, you know. I wasn't exactly pushy, but definitely wanted some more than what I was getting, and I was developing a certain amount of bitterness just because, you know, I was pushing my late 30s, had my—been married when I was 25 to the beautiful painter that I met at art school, and we had two—we had one baby and then there was another on the way at some point. But before the second one came, my first wife had—got a grant to study in India for about a year, and that transformed my life as well as—the way Italy did.

I saw a lot of the same kind of narrative religious art that I didn't understand all over again,

and I saw a lot of—weirdly, we put—we definitely put India and Africa in a similar place in our brains simply because of the wildlife.

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"Here's a place that has elephants. Here's a place that has big cats that can kill you—tigers in India, lions in Africa. Leopards in India, leopards in Africa. Monkeys in both places." You know, the whole *Jungle Book*, that's India. So I couldn't fucking believe it, because I'm living in Varanasi, which is a city of many millions of people, but monkeys steal your breakfast and there's hyenas across the river eating dead bodies. It's—there's leopards outside in the jungle, if you want to—there were places in India and Nepal where I had a sleeping bag, and I was with Nepalese people, and I said, "I'm going to sleep outside." And they were like, "You're not going to sleep outside. A fucking leopard will carry you off."

So, I was amazed. [Laughs.] I was like, "I'm here. I not only get countless centuries of human culture, practically. Like, as crazy a thing as—like, Buddha walked here. That kind of culture, along with the animals that I'm interested in." So I made a whole series of paintings about India when I got back, obviously, using the native fauna, acting out mostly misunderstandings between Western people and Indian culture from the get go. Like, when the first Europeans arrive and how completely confused they were by what they saw, you know, because they saw people worshipping what essentially looked like the Devil in the form of, like, say, Kali and things like that. And there's such a rich fauna and flora that I could draw upon to tell my sort of narrative stories, you know, my ornithomancy could unfold in that environment, and it was still my story because people that looked like me and had names like mine—Walton Whitner Ford—you know, would have gone there and died there and tried to subdue the population there, et cetera, et cetera, so I was very tied into my ancestral kind of rights to tell the story. So that developed the work very close to what I was doing now, once I got back from India.

BEN GILLESPIE: This is a good moment for me to change the SD card.

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BEN GILLESPIE: This is Ben Gillespie interviewing Walton Ford. We're still on our second session, but a new SD card, and we're back to the '90s. We're in New York, and I'm going to ask Walton about a pivotal figure and champion he met—

WALTON FORD: Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: —in the '90s.

WALTON FORD: So what happens is, the way we got to India, my wife and I, was that she got a fellowship—an Indo-American fellowship, which is something that Senator Moynihan made up that doesn't exist anymore, but it sent artists from America to India, and then it sent artists from India to America, so it was a cultural exchange. Really great. Was there—so there rent free for, like, a year, living in little hostels and stuff. We had a baby at that time who turned two over there. Amazing experience. Come back to New York with all these ideas for paintings, and no job and no money, and I had a friend who lived in the Berkshires, and he said, "Oh, the house I used to rent—" You know, he went and bought a house, or had built a house and moved into it.

But anyway, he said, "The house I used to rent is for rent again." I said, "And what's the rent?" He said, "\$750 a month." And nothing in New York at that point was still in the price range like that. The loft that I had been renting was going up to \$1,800 a month, and there was a rock star who lived above me. You know, it was like, "Oh, God, I'm out. This isn't going to work." This was in—we were living in a loft in Tribeca. So I said, "I'll take it." I called the landlord. I said, "I'm there," and I had just enough money for first month and last month, and we moved up to the Berkshires, and I set up a little painting studio in one of the rooms in this little house in Hillside, New York, on the edge of the Berkshires.

And a couple of weeks go by, I think—not even. Like, really a short period, and I get this phone call out of the blue. It's a little English voice. "Hello, it's Paul Kasmin. I've been hearing a bit about you. I thought I'd ring you up. Like to come and see the work." And I said, "Okay," and he came up, like, the next day. Fucking Beamer pulls into the driveway. This little guy gets out. He was dressed impeccably, like a little Beatrix Potter animal. He's like, you know, whatever he was, like, five-four or something, this plump little dude. Cute is the

word for him. He was cute.

And he comes in. He looks at everything. He's very, very quiet. I'm thinking, "Oh, man." I was so used to kind of imagining that I was going to be rejected, you know, just so—"Oh well, this is probably not going well. He isn't saying anything." He says, "I like everything I've seen." And he's like—you know, and then he gets—he picks my brain a little about how I'm making my money, which then was just still as a craftsman with blue collar jobs—high-end craftsmanship. I think I was working on a museum exhibit at that time. We were building a museum exhibit for a museum somewhere outside of New York that—anyway, creating a fake sunken ship, an underwater scene. Really cool job, but whatever.

I—he said I could quit my job. He said he would sell the paintings and keep me floating. He said that you could—he could cover these kinds of expenses that I had, which were so low. I had another baby on the way. There was a baby—my wife and I had one child who was almost four, and a baby on the way, this didn't seem like a big deal for Paul to cover that, you know? I was driving a fucking Nissan Sentra that had 300,000 miles on it, you know? Bald tires. And, you know, it was like that. It wasn't any real expenses in my life. So now, looking back, I realize, "Oh, shit, all he had to do was come up with a couple of thousand bucks a month for me, and he had an artist in his stable who he thought was really talented, and it wasn't a big gamble." And so then, within a few moments, again, he sold some—many of the things that were in my studio.

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Sometimes to really important collectors, like Jed Johnson, who, you know, Andy Warhol's former boyfriend, who had his own interior design firm, and he was showing it to his customers, who thought it looked cool in his place. So we're off to the races a little bit. I'm getting ready to do my first show with Paul. I do a show with Paul. Peter Schjeldahl writes about it. It just—this is what's happening. Holy shit. His little gallery's right across from Lucky Strike. I'm eating lunch in Lucky Strike with Paul all the time, going back and forth from the country and my beautiful family in this hip gallery, and everything is fucking rolling along, right? Shows are selling out, got a waiting list, raising the prices. Fucking hell.

A few shows into it, you know, Paul's going to move to Chelsea after a while. I might be jumping ahead a little too much, but meanwhile, my alcoholism is really getting out of control, let's just say that, and my behavior is getting out of control, and my poor wife is having to deal with that, which is rough. I mean, it's very, very hard. It's hard enough being married to an artist whose ship is coming in when he's 36 years old. It's—a lot of built-up resentment had come along with that, a lot of feeling that I was on the other side of the velvet rope and not allowed into the club, and then when I was suddenly let in, one, I didn't believe it, and two, I was just pissed off, I guess. I had an attitude. Too much was invested in what other people thought of me, in my mind. That was a sad place to be, but I think most drunks are like that.

So with all this good news was some not-so-good news, but it was all self-inflicted, and I—you know, I didn't know I needed to get sober then. I identified myself as a drinking man. I liked bars. I still like bars, you know? I just like the atmosphere. It's, like, some of the few ungentrified places left in New York are old bars, you know? Occasional old butcher shop as well, like Ottomanelli's, or something. You know, places that's creaky that have been there a hundred years. It's like, you think of bars often, and it's such a great model for not changing things because people don't want it to change, and you're selling something that you can always sell, because there's always going to be drunks like me that spend their whole paycheck in the bar. So the business model's awesome. They don't change a thing. They just have the same shitty beer on tap and they stay in business.

Anyhow, I loved that whole world, so when I would live in the Berkshires, I had a barn—a kind of beat-up studio, totally littered. The roof leaked. It was, like—but I felt right at home, and—really messed-up studio. So a bird would fly in and make a nest, and then I would leave the window open because I wanted the bird to come and go and have a nest in my place, and it would sit on my easel and watch me paint. It was, like, exactly—I was like, "Do you actually—you figured out who I am. Like, somehow, you know that this is safe," and I would think there was some psychic connection in drunk hyperbole, like, "I'm like Dr. Dolittle—a drunken Dr. Dolittle."

So, I'm creating a persona for myself in that way, creating these myths that work for me,

kind of—keep me in the studio, keep me working. Then when I go to the city, I just behave like a lunatic. Like I was a—I was—you know, the city was still really grungy in those days, still really wild, and I was, you know, getting involved in the nightlife a little—more like the bar life. More like just my friends who had remained in the city were still drinking in the same bars, and I could hang out with them, and I had more—all kinds of cheating on my wife, like, crazy behavior, because I was a famous artist now. You know, that kind of thing. It just went right to my head. I was acting like an idiot, and not sustainable. When was the—so partway in there, I decided to paint it.

[00:10:04]

Oh, Paul decided to move to Chelsea, one of the earlier gallerists to do so, moving up to 27th Street, which seemed like Midtown. It didn't—it wasn't even in the 20s, you know, like, down where Gagosian has his place. You know, that was making more sense a little. Meatpacking was still Meatpacking. Pastis hadn't even moved in there yet, so it was a little hard to tell whether that was going to be the next area, because the developers were just moving in on Meatpacking. Paul almost took a space down there, which luckily he didn't, but then he opted for this automobile—it was, like, a taxi garage. It was a garage that repaired Yellow taxis, which obviously was on its way out—and Checker Cabs and things like that—and they moved out. The garage couldn't afford it. Paul moved in.

I remember we went around with his brother-in-law who was an architect, and he had a fluorescent orange spray can, and there would be a big wall, you know, and they'd have tools all over it and stuff, and he would just spray paint over the wall a big X and write REMOVE. A really gratifying thing to do. Walking, *shhhhh* with the line, and then make the arrow sign at each end, and then write, REMOVE. And we walked around and did that for a whole afternoon, and the next time I went in there, it was a big white cube. Amazing. And they had to redo the floors because they had so much oil on them, and the smell of that—

Amazing times. The thing that became Marquee, right next door, which is now a nightclub called Marquee, was empty. It was just an empty space that the same landlords had, so Paul put a whole show of Frank Stella in there, which put Frank Stella back on the map. No one—I'm going to tell you honestly, no one gave a shit about Frank Stella in the '90s at all. We were over it, and then he was doing those wall constructions and these crazy abstractions that were more like swirly, gestural, coming-off-the-wall, all this weird color, and Paul thought they were great, but most people didn't give a shit, and actually put them up and everybody was like, "Oh, my God, I guess these are kind of great." And so, grudgingly, had to give, you know, the little bastard, Frank Stella, his due because he's a good artist, against all odds.

So that—you know, Paul was smart. He did a show of Andy Warhol drawings before people gave a shit about Andy Warhol drawings. That show, David Hockney came to, and the lightbulb went off in his head about his ideas about optics in drawing and all of that kind of stuff, and then he wrote that book about optics after seeing Paul Kasmin's show of Andy Warhol drawings, because he thought, "This is the line quality that comes from having a photograph to work with." And so anyway, he—I guess what I'm trying to say is that Paul was underestimated as a—how much influence he had, because he was so self-effacing and so kind of weird, and his program always had kind of really good artists mixed with a sort of perverse celebration of really bad artists that Paul was interested in, because he's English and perverse, and because English people do think people like Kitaj are great, who aren't, and so they get confused sometimes. They'll be—like, they'll have Turner and they'll have Francis Bacon, and then they'll have somebody else that you're like, "Really? You think that's great? That's not really that great." But that's English people.

So he would do those things. He would show—and then he would just show offensive things, like David LaChapelle, or something just because he wanted to, or even a paparazzi photographer—that guy, Galetta, or [Ron] Galella, or whatever his name is. You know, he didn't give a shit. Paul was very interested in whatever he was interested in, and he didn't have an agenda—art historical agenda, and I think—or a monetary agenda. So, you know, the sort of trophy blue-chip thing that you have with a Gagosian gallery—

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WALTON FORD: —where everybody is proven to be this certain thing, and you're all museum worthy, and there's just a certain level. He wasn't interested in that at all, Paul. He

didn't care what the hell it was. It was going to be—he really didn't—that was not an agenda of his, particularly. "This isn't for art history. This is what I'm interested in right now." It was more like the way he read. He was someone who read as well—a voracious reader, you know—and when you're reading a book, it doesn't mean, "Oh, this is my favorite book," or, "I'll get a hundred percent behind this book." You just read a book and put it down. Either you recommend it to your friends or you don't. He would have a show like that. But people are going to invest all this, like, judgment in that in New York, and, like, "Paul Kasmin? I don't understand. What's he up to? It doesn't make any sense," you know? And it's like, "That's right. It's like ordering from Seamless. It's going to be pizza tonight, and tomorrow it's going to be from a four-star restaurant, because that's what I'm in the mood to do." So I don't know. He's funny.

So, no one knew where his artists fit in because he didn't give them a context, you know? I do notice—there's a clarity, when you've shown at Gagosian, because people are like, "Oh, that means you're important. Okay. I should know you. I should know your paintings, I guess. I'd better look into this. This is my problem now." You know what I mean? It's pretty interesting. When you're at Paul Kasmin Gallery, it's definitely not their problem. They don't have to feel stupid if they missed your show because it was just another weird Paul Kasmin show, or they don't write about it. Many of the critics ignored Paul Kasmin's shows time after time. They never wrote about them. Wouldn't matter how cool it was. It wasn't news, you know? But then, you know, whatever fucking little—whatever—anytime, you know, somebody farts at Hauser & Wirth, they're going to write about it, or [David] Zwirner or something. But not Paul.

So, you know, and the last time Larry was in the news, it was because he bid up that *Marilyn Monroe*—or, he was the guy who was representing somebody, probably, who bought that record-setting *Marilyn*, and they'd report endlessly on stuff like that. They flip out when that shit happens. So Paul's little contribution was—it was really gratifying, but, of course, a bit late, when I read all the obituaries that acknowledged, "This was a guy—this was a one-off. This was a person that took risks. He didn't give a shit. He wasn't fitting into fashion or he was a complete old school art dealer that made his own way in his own way, and he was fastidiously honest."

One time he asked me if he could sell a set of my prints to fund a—to pay off some architects that had done some work on the gallery—in the new gallery when we moved to Chelsea. He owed me money at that time already. I said, "What prevented you from just not paying me and saying, oh, collectors haven't paid me yet? You know, like every other art dealer would do. They would just take their fucking time. Instead, you pay me as soon as you get paid, and then ask me for money." And he said, "I wouldn't be such a donkey as all that." Called it a donkey. And I never forgot it. I gave him—of course I gave him the set. I said, "What's good for you is obviously good for me. Let's get the fucking architects paid and open the gallery and have a show."

Because the fact is, when Paul opened new spaces, I was always his first show. Like, he wanted—he loved working with me. He actually told the fucking *Wall Street Journal* that, I'm pretty sure it was that, that he said—the most—the biggest compliment I've ever gotten from anyone, probably, on the planet, was—they said, "What artist, living or dead, would you like to work with?" He goes, "I'm already working with him. It's Walton Ford." I was like, "That's unbelievable." I said, "Paul, you're smarter than that. You know art history. Come on, man. [Laughs.] You had thousands of years to draw upon, you know? I mean, you're talking about going back to the Greeks and Romans, man." I mean, I cried when I read it, because that's how I felt about him as an art dealer. Would you want to work with Leo Castelli, or anybody? I didn't work with anyone while he was still alive. Well, I did have a show—one show with Larry in Beverly Hills, and that was simply because Paul doesn't have a gallery in Beverly Hills, and I wanted to do a show about California.

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And Paul hated it. He was angry and upset and tried to convince me not to do it, which just made me want to do it more. That's how we were. We were like—we did—I did say to him, "If this was the other way around, you would do the show in Beverly Hills. Give me a fucking break. You always make the deal." Because he was a monster for selling things. He sold out all my shows. He sold all my paintings in a way that even the great power at Gagosian can't do. Nobody has been able to sell my work like he could. They'd just arrive at the gallery and be gone, and the check would be in the mail. It was outrageous. Very rarely did something



sit around.

BEN GILLESPIE: And so that—the Beverly Hills show is interesting, because it's a body of work dedicated to California, and rethinking California scenes. I wanted to ask a little bit about your source material, if you felt an evolution since you returned to natural history painting—

WALTON FORD: Yeah.

BEN GILLESPIE: —in the '90s.

WALTON FORD: I would say that the project that I'm working on now got its start when I got back from India. So, I had done a few Audubon knockoffs before I went to India, and they were strictly staring at an Audubon painting, studying everything about it that I thought was cool and interesting, and then putting it away, putting it out of my mind, and coming up with my own, and that told a story that would've been embedded in my close reading of Audubon's journals. So I wanted to reveal aspects of Audubon's character and, like I said, the ornithomancy of our own American attitudes towards nature, and so that was already a developed idea that I had of—about how to go about these things.

And when I went to India, I realized I wanted to broaden it, you know, to a sort of global subject, in a sense, and the most striking thing about my life in India was just how little I understood of what I was seeing, and how many misunderstandings and aggravations come out of that, you know? I mean, it's not impolite in India for someone to point at my watch and ask me how much I paid for it, and that's not rude, but I thought it was rude, you know? You know, things—just little moments like that. That's a very minor one.

The other—the bigger ones being like, "Wow, I spent three months in Varanasi where they have the burning ghats—the burning dead bodies—where people come from all over India to die in Varanasi and then be burned there, because you go directly to nirvana if you follow through in this way. And so I really loved being—I mean, I saw countless dead bodies floating by in the river and being burned on the funeral pyres, and used to rent the boats and paddle out into the Ganges [River] and see the bodies floating by. So the cultural misapprehension—the distance between how I grew up and what I was seeing, sort of—I wanted to make a whole bunch of work.

So the first themed show I had that used the flora and fauna of a specific place was all about India, and I did it right away with Paul Kasmin, and that was the one that Schjeldahl wrote about, and all of that. And the elephant I painted, which kind of—so when Paul moved to Chelsea, I painted a life-size elephant with a giant hard-on, and it was an Indian elephant, and it was made up of, like, 20 or 30 separate paintings, which were to function as completely self-contained compositions with their own birds in them—like, a bird painting within this—and those fit together like a big jigsaw puzzle on the wall to create one big elephant picture. So this was a complicated project. Took a long time to do. It was about 20 feet long by about 13 feet high, and that elephant was life-size, and it was put up on the wall in Kasmin's new gallery in Chelsea.

But while it was being painted, Dodie Kazanjian of *Vogue* magazine—she's the cultural editor there. She's married to Calvin Tomkins, Tad, who came with her and saw this project.

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The word got out, let's just say, that there's a young artist in the Berkshires in Massachusetts living in this crazy, fucking kind of out-of-control barn situation with a leaky roof. I couldn't put the animal on the wall because I didn't have a wall big enough, so I painted it on the floor with a ladder and a rear view mirror to see the whole thing at once from the POV of the viewer. If you put your head where the viewer's head will be, it doesn't matter whether you're up or this way, so I had—I could figure out a way to look at it. That's all I needed. And then I would take it—and so I drew it on the floor. I put rosin paper down, and I drew it freehand on the floor, the elephant, and then I made all the panels that would fit together and cut them out, and then transferred the drawing to the panel on top. Then I would take the individual panels, put them on the wall, and paint them, then put them back down and make sure they matched—the colors and stuff—and then slowly make my way across the elephant until I finished it.

When the word got out that this is a project that was happening, it was like—people came to

see it. It was like a little pilgrimage thing started happening. Everybody in New York wanted to take a day trip to the Berkshires, and people hadn't moved to the Berkshires in mass yet, so I was, again—like, I'm always a little ahead of it. I was way early for fucking Williamsburg. No artists were out there when I moved there in '82. Then I was way early as an artist in the Berkshires. There were other art scenes that had erupted in the '60s and stuff, and weirdly, when I moved there, one of the locals was Gerard Malanga, was living up there, and we were acquaintances, and he was a pretty fucking debauched dude. He had a lot of kind of young people that liked hanging around with him—[laughs]—in a sort of debauched way up in the Berkshires. But I was like, "Whoa, this is crazy."

So there were—there's precedents of artists around, but there hadn't really been—I mean, Norman Rockwell was in Lee and Lenox and places like that—Stockbridge. He had really settled in Stockbridge. But he had painted the scenes of—Lee seems to be very common, the barber shops and diners and policemen and stuff, they were in Lee. Anyhow, his work was there. So they asked me to sit on the board of the Norman Rockwell museum, and, of course, I said, "No." But I used to make the joke, like, "Stockbridge got Norman Rockwell but Great Barrington got me." And it's like, "Fucking hide your daughters, hide everybody, run for the hills. This is the most fucking debauched version of a Norman Rockwell you'll ever have."

And that's how I defined myself in those days. I was a mess. I don't indulge in that kind of name calling of myself anymore, but I certainly did then, and I was living it up. I was a big fish in a small pond. I was like a local celebrity, and I kind of got away with murder—you know, driving drunk and having the police pull me over, and be like—kind of like, "Get home safely," type treatment, you know, like, instead of, like, handcuffed face down, like most people. So I don't know. I was getting away with murder. And what else? Yeah, and the local restauranteurs would welcome me, you know? I would, like, show up at closing hour and close the restaurant with the staff. You know what I mean. Like, I'm still at the bar when everybody's being kicked out, and they're even in the kitchen, like, making a family meal for me, too, you know, and I was just part of the deal. I was, like, so insinuating myself into everybody's stuff because people wanted to be around me, and I exploited that.

So those were the Berkshire years, and Paul was a big part of that, and I painted the elephant, and then they wrote about it in *Vogue*, and then—and it caught the attention of Calvin Tomkins as well as Dodie, and then later, he wrote about me for *The New Yorker*, and, you know, it just, whoa, you know? This is heady stuff. You get a six-page profile, artist profile in *The New Yorker*, you're like, "I don't know what to expect anymore, you know? Like, I don't—"

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WALTON FORD: "—really have anything to complain about." So then my marriage collapsed because my behavior was just too insane, and—but I was kind of fun, so my daughters wanted to live with me for a while, so they—you know, they lived with their mom for a while, and then they lived with me for a while, which was really surprising for me, because I was like, "God, this is sort of chaotic and I'm not—" And they mostly liked living in my studio. They didn't even really like—I had a little house that I rented in the countryside but it didn't have good internet, and my studio was the train station—the Great Barrington train station, with freight cars running by, and it was right in the middle of town, and it was—it had a fireplace and a big waiting room that was, like, you know, 20-foot ceilings. You know, it was beautiful, built in 1910. It was a disused railroad station that I had made into a sort of home. It had a Viking stove in it, and it had a big refrigerator, and I had a bedroom there and couches all over the place to sleep on. So my daughters are like, "Why don't we just stay here?" So often—and I had a young girlfriend.

But one time, I remember my daughters went—one of my daughters went to see her friend, who had a house with—her friend had a house with a picket fence and married parents and, you know, golden retrievers, you know, and she came back and I'm like, "Well, why don't you have her over here?" She goes, "You live in a train station with a girl half your age." I mean, this is, like, my— [Laughs.] And I was like, "Guilty as charged, yeah, I guess so." And now, my daughters in their twenties, they're like, "We lived in a train station with my dad and his, like, girlfriend, and it was awesome," you know? Like, they think it's the coolest thing, in a way. I mean, they also roll their eyes, but it has more cachet amongst their friends. They're like, "Whoa, what kind of—?" Who had boring dads that were good fathers, instead of the kind of father I was.

So eventually, even out of living with my daughters in that situation, it sort of emerged that I couldn't—that this drinking thing wasn't working for me, and I met a woman who I fell in love with who was in the program, and I won't go into her because she never wants me to talk about her, but—because we were briefly married—but basically, she helped me get sober, and then I realized, you know, just how much had to change in my life, and I eventually moved to New York City. I kind of really thought my daughters would be better off with their mom, so I kind of—they were mad at me for this, but I kind of put them back on their—with their mom, which I even—it's a little controversial because I think it hurt them, but I also was a recovering alcoholic and a mess, so I didn't really—I think it was the right decision. And she wanted them, and I was like, I'm busy painting, and I'm, like, this weird father emeritus, you know? It wasn't—I was preoccupied, probably, a bit. You know, I love my kids, but I wouldn't want me as a dad. I—they made it work for them—[laughs], but I don't really know what that would've been like. I was—I love them and I think they're brilliant, you know, but I was preoccupied.

So I moved back to New York. I get this studio, which is fantastic. You know, my head is starting to clear. Now we're talking about—I'm 51 years old when this happens. I'm sober. I realize I'm probably going to stay this way, because I really like it. This isn't arm-twisting. It really feels good. And now, 10 years later, it feels even better, so that—I really—there is language in AA that talks about being recovered, because I know AA gets a lot of shit for people announcing they're alcoholics for the rest of their lives, but it's not—there's no hopelessness in that. You can say, "I'm a recovered alcoholic." That's all. It's just, like, you know, you can be a convicted felon, and sorry, we can't take that away.

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It's not like it never happened. Sure, it happened, but you're not that person in the sense that I don't define myself as a person who drinks and mistreats people, but I do have a disease called alcoholism, which is completely in remission, and every day that it remains so, I'm grateful. But I don't feel like it's a fragile thing, and I'm not terrified to be around alcohol or any of that. Drinking is definitely not my problem now. The mental habits that—and the anxiety that made me want to be that way.

So anyway, I've gotten to that place all by—all with the help of this thing, the program and spiritual life and all of that. And then the painting has only gone better. It's—I have all these long days now with clarity. I can read. I can think. I can go into more depth than I did before. If the practice is changed, it's just that the research and the nuance has gotten richer. I think the paintings are more ambiguous than they ever were, which is very good for the—Peter Schjeldahl's early article on me was very complimentary, but it also—the critique went home. I told him that recently, especially since I think it was when I—when we all thought he was going to die. He certainly has hung on. But I'm pretty sure, when I saw him at some event—I can't remember how it went—but I said, "You know, that was a big deal for me and it really helped me. It was—" And he was like, "Whoa, artists don't usually say that when they get a mixed review from me." I was like, "I needed a mixed review. It was like a crit. I had only just left RISD where they gave you brutal crits. A brutal crit with some compliments in it is really nice, and you said I was an art star, but one of many millions. [Laughs.] You know, the way the sky looks at night when you're really in a place where there's no light pollution. That's the kind of art star we're talking about. We're not talking about Andy Warhol. We're talking about, wow, there's a constellation out there and it's hard to keep track."

But nevertheless, he joked about that. He was like, "That's the kind of art stars we have nowadays, and Walton's one of those." I was like, "Fucking take it!" I will take a backhanded art star compliment from Peter Schjeldahl any fucking day. He's a brilliant man. And so anyhow, the project, it—I leaned heavily into the areas that he pointed out that were strong, because I really felt like he was—it was a bullshit detector. I think he had—you don't necessarily think the critic's going to see your Achilles heel, and he saw my Achilles heel and pointed it out, and I was like, "I can be pretty self-fucking-righteous," especially in those days, and it was really cool that he said, "That doesn't work for this project. You're—I don't want to—I don't want your moral scrumptuousness," or something, is how he put it. And I was like, "Damn right. Neither do I."

I was in agreement with the guy, and I told him so, and it really was good [for my work]. I thought it was one of the best early crits I had, because when you have Paul Kasmin and he's fallen in love with you, and he's making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, he's not

going to tell you necessarily what he really thinks every single time. My printmaker would. Peter Pettengill was great. I started making prints because that's, like—I make large, full color etchings with, like, up to six copper plates. It's a very involved process. There's a video that Taschen released with my last book that actually Rob [Allen] made with me personally. He made it. Really good little video that sort of gives you a rundown on how I make my prints with Peter.

But the idea—actually, [David] Hockney, early on, told me that I should be making prints as part of my practice. He's like, "That's part of your job. When you can draw like this and when you have things to say, you make prints. You make other things. You don't just make luxury objects that go for millions. You make prints that go for a few thousand. You diversify what you make. You make them for people. You broaden it out." He's very—I mean, Hockney makes a fucking iPad picture and gives it to you every day. He wants that. He's generous. You know, whether you like Hockney or not, it's—I happen to like—I was—when I was at RISD, it was a guilty pleasure, because again, another frowned-upon artist. But I think partly because of gender politics now, being an early gay artist has gotten him a lot of acclaim that he wasn't getting before.

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But I just always kind of just thought he was enjoying himself—that it was that thing that Schnabel said about me. I see someone who really fucking loves making paintings, and sometimes that's really infectious. It's like someone laughing and you start laughing. It's infectious. He's—his—he is an absolutely playful artist who enjoys himself. So—

BEN GILLESPIE: I wanted to ask about something that's also evolved in more recent years, which is your own writing accompanying your paintings. So you often work with historical texts, and pulling from documents, imaginaries [ph] for animals, or stories that we have from travelers and explorers, or even fiction, for how we have this natural imaginary world and the depiction of it. But correct me if I'm wrong, but your own essays accompanying them, that's a little more recent—like, post-2005?

WALTON FORD: Yeah. I hadn't—I mean, one thing that happened to me, when I went to Rhode Island School of Design, one of the first friends I made up at Brown was Jeff Eugenides, and I think it took me a little time to get the courage to publish anything that I wrote, but I have—which is no fault of his, because I showed him early writings of mine and he laughed and gave me the greatest compliment I've ever had. He goes, "I don't—I'm not going to tell you anything to do differently to this, but I'm also going to tell you kind of, like, fuck you, because I can't paint." And I was like, "Thank you, Jeff." He's—he was supportive. He thought I could write, and I think maybe there was an essay in the *Gagosian Quarterly* that maybe you wrote—read—is that—did you read that one?

BEN GILLESPIE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

WALTON FORD: Yeah, okay. And that's pretty indicative of my style, and I do have a specific writing style and I have developed it, but I've kept it to myself. And I'm beginning to get more courage in trying to find the time, because it's super time-consuming. That's the biggest bitch about writing, as you probably know. If you're—and also if you're interested in—you have a fairly high standard for the kind of language that you want to use, and the way that you want to write. So I want to write something that I'm not ashamed to show to Jeff at all, and since I read so much, I know what really ravishing prose is like. I—yeah, so, I mean, Virginia Woolfe or Henry James.

So I—knowing that kind of slowed me down only because, you know, I might think, "Oh, I'm going to write something. I have a short story idea," and then I'll read *The Aspern Papers* from Henry James, and I'll be like, "I don't know, man. I don't know. Maybe not." I don't think it was ever that direct, but I think the amount of time it takes me to create a piece of writing that I can stand behind the way I can with my paintings is really time-consuming.

So I got a lot of pies in the sky, and certain gifts—I remember when I was at RISD and Brown, I would go to some of the professors there that sort of were pro-me, you know. Some of them were anti-me, and some were pro-me. The pro-me ones would say, you know, "The gifts are unevenly distributed. We've seen it before. Some people get a whole bunch of different gifts and they have to make a choice and they focus on certain gifts, really develop those, and then other ones fall to the wayside." And I do know, like, Akira Kurosawa, he would draw his

own storyboards, and they were beautiful. Like, he could draw—you know, he could do that, but it's not like he was able to really develop that because he put it all into his films, and some people—

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WALTON FORD: —like Chaplin, you know, get to compose the music for his films, write all the words for it, and direct the films, and, you know, they get all of these enormous gifts for athleticism with him and acting and writing and composing music. I mean, some people figure out a way to let it all out, you know? And then some—you know, sometimes there's a sort of false courage that you get from one gift that makes you think you can do other things that maybe you're not that good at, and that happens too, like artists releasing music that sucks, or really brilliant actors or musicians having a show of paintings that suck, and, you know, this whole sort of—Anthony Quinn as a painter, or James Franco as a conceptual artist or something, you know. And you're like, "No, you really haven't any idea how to develop that, if you really want to know the truth."

And so there was always a little fear of that—yeah, exactly, a lot of consonants.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah.

WALTON FORD: So yeah, I don't know where I was. Oh, yeah, so there's some hesitancy knowing that syndrome, that you can get a little—your ego can lead you into areas of discomfort, like—or you can think that you're going to release this album of music, because I have one of those right now that I'm going to release, or do this piece of writing or act in this film, or do these different—because I was in a lot of plays—and you can imagine that you're going to be great at those things. And sometimes artists are embarrassing when they do that, you know? So you have to be on guard, and maybe get a little feedback and try to get somebody who's—is there anybody out there that's actually going to tell me the truth? That would be helpful.

So with the writing, I don't know, enough people who I respect told me that it was okay—laughs—you know, that, like, I knew I was sweating it and I also knew that I had read a lot and also knew that I knew what good writing was like, and yeah, we talked about E. B. White a moment ago, or Virginia Woolfe, or James Joyce's earlier work before—like, forget trying to get involved with *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake*, but just, you know, *A Portrait of the Artist or Dubliners* as just prose. Like, how do you write English prose? You can just go—and how do you write a short story that will bring you to tears? You will actually cry real, wet, hot tears when you read this fucking thing. How does one go about doing that? And I've been very interested in that, so—from a very early age. So—because even juvenilia—when I was a kid, I recog—I don't know if you've ever read *Wind in the Willows*, but there's not a single graceless sentence in the entire book. It's one of the most beautifully written pieces of prose in the English language on the highest levels, not for a kid's book in any way, shape, or form, but just as a great colossal achievement as a work of art.

So my feeling about things like that—and to have read *The Wind in the Willows* when you're little and read those sentences, just the mole coming out of the ground and rolling in the grass, you know, on a spring day and going down to the river, and these fucking sentences where the river is throwing itself onto fresh playmates, meaning, like, a stick floating in the water. Like, what? Who the fuck writes like that? And yeah, oh, man, you know, I could go on about it. It's just—I love it as much as I love looking at a great painting. And being in such direct conversation with a genius that you'd give anything to meet, like Virginia Woolfe. So—what am I going to say?

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Yeah. I got the courage. I'm 62. I think, like I said, even Rob is a good bullshit detector with writing, for sure. He's a very good writer himself, and if it was shitty writing, he wouldn't let me publish it, because it's like—he has some pride about the Ford studio here, and that everything that leaves here has to be high quality, so we share that. Like, we don't let—nothing leaves until it's ready, and—including my writing, so I am lucky to have an in-house editor. That's helpful, and gave me courage. Like, if it gets past me, the harshest critic, and then it gets past Rob, a kind critic, then it might make its way to print without seeming too idiotic.

And then Nina Wiener was the editor at Taschen, and she's a brilliant woman—she's no

longer there—but she had pretty high standards for the writing as well, and she loved what I wrote for my Taschen books, little bits here and there that are dropped in. I want to do so much more. I have an idea about a children's book, using Walt Whitman as the main character, as a small fox being chased by foxhounds in Long Island in the 18-whatevers, you know? 1830s or—no, 1840s or '50s, like, before the Civil War, like, when he lived in Long Island and wasn't well known yet, but was writing *Leaves of Grass*. And he's speaking in this very pompous way, like, in this very *Leaves of Grass* way—in this very existential way to the hounds that are very grounded in the fact that he's just a little fox that steals chickens from the farmer, and the little fox has this more, like—you know, "The hens don't belong to anyone but the tangled nest and the whirling cosmos." You know, this kind of—[laughs]—mystical outlook, like, "How could you say that the chicken belongs to the farmer when the farmer equally belongs to the chicken?" kind of thing. You know, like, his outlook is like, "There is no—there's no division between you and me. Like, there's not—none of this." So—and the foxhounds are like, "You fucking wait until we get a hold of you. We're going to tear you to shreds, you little asshole." You know, they have that attitude towards the fox.

So I'm going to do this book, but it gives me an opportunity to write in a Whitman-esque style from the point of view of a cute little Beatrix Potter fox, and I'm in love with this project, and I'm already writing it, and it makes me laugh. Like, I—and I'm—I've read little excerpts to some of my friends and they are getting a big kick out of it.

So I am getting this confidence to tackle something as hard as that, which is not easy at all, to write good blank verse coming from a little fox's mouth that sounds like Walt Whitman could've written it. But he talks about—his—yeah, he's really—and there's something—you know, there is—you can be mis—it's easy with real spiritual development—it's easy for the person who feels like they've had an awakening, like Whitman felt that he had had very much, like, a Hindu one—it's easy to sound pompous, because you are saying that, "What people call God is in me as much as it is in anyone, and that you and I are absolutely the same, and we—and I know who you are, and you're perfect and so am I, and it's all perfection, and everything is illusion that's laid over that. The perfection is already there," and that can be misinterpreted as a sort of arrogance.

When he is saying, "I am everything, and I am this, and I am that, and I am that," he's talking about a universality, not an arrogance, but people got mad at Walt Whitman—angry at Walt Whitman because it sounds like he's bragging and he's talking down, when it's the opposite of what he's trying to do. So I wanted—so I thought a little fox being chased by foxhounds is the perfect way to have him metaphorically live. He lives in this world where he's effortlessly staying ahead of the foxhounds. He doesn't even have to try, and they're running and desperately trying to catch up with him and saying they just want to tear him to shreds, and when he finally goes to ground, he goes into a burrow and then he emerges out into the universe. He's—there's stars and planets all around this little fox floating in the universe, and he's completely escaped the bounds of the earth.

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And that's, like, the last image in the book, because he says, "You won't catch me and you never will," and it also is a metaphor for the kind of genius we're talking about. The way that Whitman wrote *Leaves of Grass* is still how people think they're coming up with something original today. If we went to some poetry slam tonight, we would hear people that wouldn't have surprised Whitman at all, and they'll be the ones that get the biggest applause, too. The more they sound like him, the more people think it sounds like it was the freshest thing they've ever heard, and that I noticed. It's just a fact. It's one of those fucked up things that happens once in a while in art, where you just can't—

I mean, again, with Virginia Woolfe, it's the same way. You can talk about, "She's a snob," or this or that. People are now trying to hashtag her or something. But just read the stuff. It's full of wisdom, compassion, and the most beautiful sentences you've ever read, and it's just—nobody—you kind of can't touch it. You put it down and you're like, "It's undeniable," and—I don't know.

I love art like that. It's not a question—it becomes a question of preference. If you don't like it, fine, but it's the best fucking thing of its kind, and if you don't know that, then I don't know, you're just missing out. Sorry, you know?

BEN GILLESPIE: What I love—Whitman is a great encapsulation of some of what you explore

in the natural paintings, where, like, that omnivorous eye—

WALTON FORD: Yes.

BEN GILLESPIE: —that can identify with everything, and—

WALTON FORD: Omnipotent, too, like, fucking hovering above the universe.

BEN GILLESPIE: It's very—like, it's a human in the world that recognizes itself as part of nature. Like, "I am nature. Nature is me."

WALTON FORD: Oh, God.

BEN GILLESPIE: "We're in this together."

WALTON FORD: I love it so much.

BEN GILLESPIE: And I guess—so the—what I'd like to hear about, thinking after that, is maybe, I guess there's so many things that continue to excite you. I don't have to ask because there's so much more—

WALTON FORD: It's so many projects. I'll never live to do them all.

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah. And I guess, maybe part of that, and maybe as a way towards wrapping up, what do you still feel, or continue to unfold, as the ethical impulse in your work? Because I think there's a really—there's an ethical foundation that seems to undergird a lot of the exploration.

WALTON FORD: That's—yeah, you're going to get me choked up asking that question. I mean, thank you for that question. [Pauses.] I don't know. I had a—I'm friends with this guy, Robert Thurman, who is—he's actually Uma Thurman's dad, but that's beside the point. He's a Buddhist scholar and he runs the Tibet House with his wife, Nena. I haven't seen them in years but I actually love them. They are in Woodstock. They don't really come down to the city as much as they used to. And he once told me that I was—[Sniffles.] Oh, fuck—that it wasn't me that was painting these pictures—that it was—the animals had to tell these stories, and that they needed to communicate them to us, and this was what I was put on the planet to do.

He said it was, like, an incarnation for me to receive these stories and then the—and pass them. They pass through me into this form, and that my—all the things that feel like personhood gifts—like, personal egoistic gifts, like, "You're Walton Ford. You're a famous painter. You have these skills. You have these stories to tell. You love to read these things." All of this is a story that lays on top of the truth.

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WALTON FORD: Which is simply that the animals, other beings—other manifestations, actually—of this same power which I'm animated by, those manifestations have an interest in sharing with this human manifestation part of the universe these stories, and it has a lot to do with the sort of suffering that we inflict on these animals, that they want to point that out. They're pointing. They're spiritual pointers, according to him, and the only real game in it is just—because it is all one creation. I mean, no, the—it is all a unified spirit of loving compassion that generates the entire journey, but that these manifestations that it takes place in—human beings, animals, plants, living creatures with conscience, presence, and awareness—conscious awareness—to observe the creation itself unfolding in this game that results in enlightenment eventually, and to just keep re-enlightening this manifestation is the game of the universe, for some reason that we don't understand.

So this is the play that happens here, and some people are very far away from enlightenment. They're fascists, for example, or something, you know? They're storming The Capitol, whatever they're doing, or they're doing a #MeToo thing to somebody who clearly is not a rapist or something. [Laughs.] You know, they're on the other side. Maybe they're doing a—you know, they're attacking whatever that comedian—I forget the comedian that—whatever, I can't remember his name. But he was a politician. He was a senator. He was the one that—I kind of don't think he probably did a hell of a lot to have his whole career destroyed.

BEN GILLESPIE: Al Franken.

WALTON FORD: Al Franken. Either in the left, we're doing this thing to Al Franken, or on the right, we're storming The Capitol, but we're definitely finding ways to take revenge and, you know, we're indulging in our worst impulses in those moments, and that—when you're really far away from spiritual enlightenment, where you are able to see it all as one play and that there's no one to blame, there's no one to change, you're not here to judge people in this way, and your heart fills with love and compassion and acceptance. For some reason, this universe seems to be set up so that there's this journey towards that, or away from that, in this cycle of being manifested and then realizing this thing—this bliss thing happening—a spiritual thing happening, and then passing out of that body and adapt and coming into a new one.

And this seems to be what's taught in most religions, in a weird way, that the techniques that get you back to selfless awareness are always similar. They're about being humble. They're about tamping down the ego. They're about not being materialistic. They're about, you know, walks in the wilderness. Like, they're about introspection and deep inquiry, universality, like, we're all brothers. All of these concepts come out of this play, and he honestly gave me a place in that—[chokes up]—which I had never—I would never have thought this of myself when I was drinking and when I was egoistic, which I still am, but I was—I can't really think about it without being deeply moved.

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Like, it's almost like I don't personally have any gifts. I'm just given this—I'm just this sort of messenger, and he said he could see it when he looked in the eyes of the animals that I painted. And when he said it, I think I was still close enough to my kind of drinking, cynical, mosh-pit days or whatever, that I was like, "Oh, my God, what a fucking crank, you know? He's tripping. I'm not that. I'm not some fucking bodhisattva here to paint and teach you anything. I don't know anything. And I'm just a painter, and I just paint animals, and he's out of his mind." And then I really thought about it more, and I thought, "I'm going to do some paintings where I actually take that absolutely to heart. I'm going to see—"

I thought to myself—it suddenly dawned on me, "Is there anything about what Robert said that would make the paintings worse?" [Laughs.] You know what I mean? "Is there anything in there that would somehow harm the practice? Or would it open it up even more?" And the answer was the second one. I started painting with the—bearing this in mind a little bit, that maybe this isn't about me at all. Maybe this is about what this animal is trying to tell me as I'm painting it. Even me needs to hear what this is. I'm not a hundred percent sure what it means. Oh, my God.

And so—and weirdly, I—my first wife was a Buddhist and I used to hate that. She would go chant in the attic for hours, and I thought, "Oh, God, what a fucking—" And I'd say, "Oh, I painted—I married this sort of punky, really fucking edgy, beautiful painter, and I ended up with a depressed Buddhist." I would complain, you know? But even when I was as cruel as I was about what she was up to, she would call me a bodhisattva. She said, "It's obvious to me that that's what you are. You got put here for a reason. You're doing the work of—you know, you're doing God's work. You don't even know it, but it doesn't make a difference whether you know it or not. There's many manifestations of this that are like this." And I—again, I really didn't—I was not the least bit interested in her observation in this department.

Weirdly, even when I was drinking, every once and a while, I'd be caught by surprise, usually in a very strange third-world environment. One time I was in Chiapas. My wife and I had rented horses—this is before our children arrived. We were, like, backpacking tourists around—you know, we'd save our pennies and go on a trip. Went down to Chiapas, super cheap vacation in Mexico. We rented horses and galloped into a little town called Chamula. We got out—off the horse. We went into the cathedral, and they were having a service that Mayan Indians themselves—there were no white people around, and they were lighting candles and dripping the wax on the floor of the cathedral and putting the candles into them, and there were calla lilies everywhere, and there were children and dogs and chickens walking through the church, and Mayan Indians speaking their own language and praying in their own language, and I lost it. I started crying.

And I had no—I was so bereft that I was so far away from what they were doing, that I had—that I could see the beauty in what they were doing, but I couldn't be a part of it, and I was



removed from it, and I was this ugly white tourist in this place that—I was so removed from true spirituality and love and beauty and everything that was good, and, you know, I was glorifying what I was seeing, but I was also—I didn't know that it meant that I had a sort of spiritual thing that was untapped. I just thought I was miserable and I was just feeling sorry for myself or something. But later, when I got sober, they were kind of, like, "Oh, if you can tap into that, you won't have to drink." I was—[laughs]—I was like, "I believe you." Whatever that impulse was that drew you towards something like that, because I had the same feeling when I went and saw the St. Francis paintings in Assisi.

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I had—I lost it. I felt emotionally overwhelmed by the beauty of it all and the devotion of it all. Yeah, and now I tap into it all the time. I didn't know there were techniques. I didn't know, "Oh, you can—" Just even sitting and being quiet, like, unbelievable. Wow, suddenly it comes—it feels like it comes rushing in, but all it really is, is that you've revealed it. It's there already.

So the ethical part comes out of a sort of spiritual part, which comes out of a belief that there's something a hell of a lot bigger than me that animates all of this, and that isn't in anyway a fundamentalist or exclusionary thing. It's not about—you know, words like creation sound like they come from some horrible—or creator. Now we're talking about creationism that denies evolution, and all of that. I don't have any of that. But it's very interesting to read certain quotes from even Einstein, where he says, "If you want to tell me that there's a dogma I have to believe, that's one thing. But if you want to ask me if being a spiritual person means being in awe of the forces around us that create the universe, that are beyond our comprehension or even ability to discern—even the human mind's inability to even grasp the perfect beauty of everything around us, if you can't—" He goes, "If that's what it means to be spiritual, then I'm spiritual, you know? Because the whole scientific inquiry is just that I get a corner—a glimpse of the perfection of all of this sometimes, and I'm, like, blown away by it," basically is the upshot of what Einstein would say. "And I can't believe the power and the beauty and the perfection of some of the things that I'm able to discover because of the—" Some of the gifts that he had that allowed him to see these things.

He just says, "What's revealed to us is so astounding that it's so obvious there's so much that isn't revealed to us that's so astounding, and there's no reason not to be in awe and have a sort of feeling of worshipful reverence towards that. And there's nothing unscientific about that feeling." He didn't even struggle with it, which I thought was really interesting, because I think shallower takes on what science are, obviously the guy was seeing very vast vistas of what is out there, and all it did was make him more, like, "Oh, my God, thank you, you know? Thank you for this. I don't even know what to say. I'm staggered by what I see."

So that humility in the face of something that is behind all of this, which is impossible for us to really grasp, is this sort of ethical core of it all, and it's funny that you could be, say, Robert Thurman, coming from a completely spiritual place, or a person like Einstein, and it would overlap, for me, in a sort of belief that I don't know, necessarily, everything I'm doing, and I don't know why I was given the chance to do these things, and there's only a small part of it that's really my doing, in a weird way, because the gifts that—this hardwiring that allowed a small child to do something like that drawing is beyond me. I don't really know why I got that, and understanding how it would sort of feel for a person who didn't have that just hardwired into their brain for whatever reason, which now Robert Thurman says, "This is the reason"?

You know, I was already trying—okay, I looked at—interestingly, I looked at—with this. I remember. I was looking at a field guide that had them like this, so I did paint one very much like it was in front of me—this little bird. This is going to be unclear in the video, but—painted a little side view of a bird when I was about eight years old. But then I painted the female, and I guess for some reason—maybe—I decided to—

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WALTON FORD: —pose it and give it some sort of attitude, and that wasn't in front of me. That was just—that was my—so this one was sort of more of a cribbing, and then this one was more of a creation, and already I was trying to get, "Okay, it's a thinking creature and I'm trying to get life into it." On my own, I think.

But, you know, again, Thurman would argue that that's the begin—that's how it starts. Like, you're starting to tell a story already. You're training for this thing that you're going to do later that's going to be what people in the Christian tradition might call God's will, not my own, you know? That kind of thing, which is a type of talking about it. That creates a duality, which I don't think really exists in a spiritual life for real, but is also, like, just a helpful metaphor, in a sense. When people talk about God the Father and all of this kind of thing, you know, it's not relatable for me. It's not separate. Obviously, I am as much a part of this whole thing as it is. There isn't an it and a me. This whole thing was—is—has been put in motion. It's not some parts of it that are separate from it itself, you know? If there's a—if there's something going on here, we're all a part of it.

And so I have—had no idea, I guess, the thing that was so moving about it all for me, was just this idea that I couldn't have been more kind of selfish and egotistical when I was making a lot of this work, and it didn't make any difference to someone like Thurman when he looked at it. He was like, "This is deeply moving. This animal is alive. This animal is telling me its story. This animal is teaching me how it almost feels to be caught up in human culture as a wild animal that doesn't want to be a part of human culture." This is what I've read into his comment. He didn't really say all of this, but it was the message I got from him, was that simple one, that, "You're here to paint these for the animals, not for yourself. They are calling upon you to do this, and they're spirits, basically. They're spirits of slaughtered animals. All of this is coming through you."

And the idea that a drunk person who wanted to be famous, and wanted to get drunk, and wanted to—you know, and half-abandoned his family, you know, just this sort of ridiculous person that I felt that I was at that time—deeply flawed ethically on a personal level, on an individual level with my loved ones—it makes no difference to someone like Thurman, or even the universe, you know? It's all like, "Oh, that's—" There is—it's just all part of it.

And Nietzsche talked about amor fati, so—that means love of your fate. So love of your fate—amor fati—is really different than even what they teach in LA—in LA! In AA, which is acceptance, which sounds a little more grudging. [Laughs.] You practice acceptance, but Nietzsche was saying, "The next step is amor fati, where you don't just practice acceptance. You practice love." And honestly, that is what I feel when I'm around Robert and Nena. Yeah, it's—there's no—it's all love. They're fine. There's no—and it's not because, "Oh, I have money and I am handsome and—" Because he was all those things, but—because he did—he was in a fucking horrific accident when he was young. He has a glass eye, you know? He's not like someone who's never suffered. I don't know what it's like to lose an eye.

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I'm convinced he would be blissed out if he was dealing with a firing squad, you know? It's just—you—that's not an issue for people like that. They really don't see the body as something that they have to hang onto, and they—and that really is different. That's like, they're not freaking out under fire. If they're in Ukraine and the missiles are coming in, they're not screaming and yelling. It's a very different type of creature, and they do exist. People like that exist. I didn't know it. I thought it was all about selfishness and self-protection and all. I didn't know this, until you learn about it, and then you suddenly—it starts cropping up all the time. You see all this selflessness happening all the time, but you didn't even know it existed before you are aware of it.

I have—[laughs]—sponsees in AA, and many times, people who are just sober think all these miracles are happening to them because they'll be like, "I was just about to go in a bar and drink and then somebody from the meeting showed up, and it was God that did it," you know? And I said, "None of that—" I don't need to tell them that. I think it to myself, because it's not God putting angels in your path. It's simply that you weren't tuned into any of this before. You can't see—until I could identify birds, of course they're all just birds, and you don't even notice them. And then you start saying, "Oh, my God, there's a warbler in my backyard. I can hear it singing," because you know the song. Then you go out and you see the plumage. "Oh, my God, it's a male. It's a male, like—" You know, whatever it is. A hooded warbler. You know, it's something that you can identify because you've been taught to identify it.

So in a spiritual sense, I didn't know there were people that were kind of, like, good. I didn't know there were decent people, even. I kind of thought it was every man for themselves—come to this violent city, come out of a violent household into a violent city, scraping by, trying to

make it as an artist, seeing hustling people, seeing [Jean-Michel] Basquiat get famous, you know, blah, blah, blah. You know, watching all the celebrities moving around the city, thinking, "I want a piece of mine." Just really caught up in it, getting really drunk, hanging out with, quote, unquote, cool people, meeting celebrities, all that kind of shit. It all is going to your head. You're going along this wave. You don't know that there's some other way that you could live.

Meanwhile, I didn't even know what I was doing at my studio. All I knew was I felt really good in the studio and I knew what to do. Weird shit, man. Honest to God, can believe a bit what Robert's talking about, because the hypnogogic moment right when I'm about to fall asleep or right when I'm waking up in the morning, painting ideas. They're all there already. It's like, ready to go. It's like, "This is what you're going to do next." You know, like—I don't know. Recently it was, like, "Oh, the Russians are in Chernobyl, you know? And there's all these wolf packs there." And then I'm like, "You're going to paint the wolf packs in Chernobyl. They're coming right at you." And that just happened on my own. "The Chernobyl wolf packs are going to come straight at you."

Then I was like—then I do a little research. I'm like, "Who's—is there—" So I order some books, you know? And then it starts to flesh out, you know? So now I'm going to do a Chernobyl painting of wolf pack, but I get the images in my head—the little fox as Walt Whitman and stuff. All of this is this sort of late night—last night, I got up and wrote some of the Walt Whitman stuff down. It just comes spontaneously, and there's never any—there's always a glut. There's always a glut of ideas. It's like—it's a giant tortoise that lives to be 300 years old, and then I thought, "Little tiny drawings of 300 years of pornographic imagery of people fucking while he's just in one place. Like, he's just a turtle that lives 300 years and watches all of this insanity." So it's, like, people in powdered wigs in places like Versailles and everything, and all this crazy stuff, and it's all just *tick-tick-tick-tick-tick*. But they're all drawn, like, this big. You have to get, like, a magnifying glass to see the people having sex. And, you know, it's generation after generation after generation.

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And the turtle abides, and it might be laying eggs or something, you know? Simple image that comes in a dream state, and it's done. I haven't done it yet. I write it down quick before it gets away. I have so many. I don't even know when I'm going to get to them all.

But I can believe that that turtle wants that story to be told. "Your fleeting-ass human culture, and my actual body outlasts the rise and fall of your empires, and if you can't be humble in the face of that, I don't know what your problem is, you know? I don't know what to tell you, but you've driven me right to the edge of extinction. You've given me almost no habitat and you're making my life really difficult to live right now, so, you know, what, are you going to change your ways so that you get to get a little closer to this enlightenment that is the journey that we're kind of trying to point you towards?"

So I'm like, "Wow, it's, like, almost—it's almost like the tortoise wants to help us out." Like, "I don't know. I gave Walton this idea. He's going to execute it if he lives long enough." You know, good. And maybe—I used to think, "Oh, my audience is so limited. Hardly anyone sees my stuff." These go into rich people's houses. The rich people have a lot of influence over this fucking planet now, you know? If Bill Gates or fucking Bezos or some douchebag like that buys them and sinks in, good, you know? Maybe—and it's not my message. It's their message. It only works if I don't put my ego in it. If I put my ego in, it becomes toxic. It's like, "You need to listen to me." But Robert's like, "No, try to say—" He's like, "You need to listen to the animals that are speaking to you so that you will get their message across. Take yourself out of it." That was his message to me, which is, like, wow, it's still sinking in, obviously, because I get kind of messed up when I talk about it. I have a hard time controlling my emotions when I talk about this stuff. Yeah, I think that brings us right up to the present. [Laughs.]

BEN GILLESPIE: Yeah, I think you've covered so much ground that I was interested in for the—you know, dealing with all these different threads of the natural history, the mythical, folkloric, and then also these, like, sporting paintings, luxury consumer culture. I think, yeah, you wrapped it all up beautifully in a bow there.

WALTON FORD: Feels like it, yeah. Feels like a conclusion, because that's what the third act offers me. I had a shrink say, when I was really in the—in my most kind of villainously drunk

state, I—he was—I had a shrink. He died. He was in his 80s then. Amazing character. Anyway, he said, "Imagine your life is a three-act play." I was, like, 50 at the time. He was like, "You've just sat through two of the acts. You have one left. How do you feel? The curtain just came down. We're going to have an intermission and go in the lobby and talk about what we just saw, but it's an absolute truthful rendering of your life up until now. How do you feel about that character? You're the main character. The play is your name. It's Walton Ford. That's the play." I was like, "Oh, my God, he's such a—I'm embarrassed." He goes, "All the stuff that you've hidden from even me has been up there." Every time I lied to my wife, every time I cheated, every time I—I was like, "I don't like what I see—[laughs]—at all. I don't like the character. I don't—I really don't like the character. He's unethical. He's mean-spirited. He's egotistical. He's drunk half the time." He said, "You've got one act left, you know? You can turn it around. That's a really—that's a good dramatic structure. It's not even a bad thing to do. It's like Dickens's *Christmas Carol* or whatever. You can see that there's many versions of this, and it may—it's nice. It's in your hands."

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WALTON FORD: So the third act is just what I described. It was sort of, like, the pointer—the spiritual pointer I got from Robert, which is, like, "You can live the rest of your life like that if you want, without ego, without—channeling this thing, really removing yourself from it, trying to let it unfold on its own, and don't try to control it. Just let those images pop into your head and go ahead and paint them. Know that it's the right thing to do. It doesn't have to be for the market. It doesn't have to be for anything."

And I sometimes think about maximum impact, which I think might help. Maybe the animals don't mind. Like, I'll think, "Okay, I'm going to paint this tortoise for the Max Hetzler show in Paris," you know? Or, like, "I'm going to save a certain painting for an art fair or something, when I really know a lot of people are going to see it or something like that." So I'll place them. I'll place them. But maybe that's all part of it, you know? But I try not to think I have as much control over everything as I used to.

BEN GILLESPIE: I think that's a beautiful spot to leave it—

WALTON FORD: Yes, please.

BEN GILLESPIE: —because we can think about act three. So thank you very much.

[They laugh.]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]