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Oral history interview with Mary
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Heilmann on June 16, 2022. The interview took place at Heilmann's studio in Bridgehampton, NY and was conducted by Terrie Sultan for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Mary Heilmann and Terrie Sultan 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

TERRIE SULTAN: All right. Record. So this is Terrie Sultan and I'm sitting with Mary Heilmann in her studio [. . . -Ed.] in Bridgehampton on June 16, 2022. Hi Mary.

MARY HEILMANN: Hi.

TERRIE SULTAN: [Laughs.] How are you?

MARY HEILMANN: I'm pretty good. I'm happy you're here.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well, I'm happy to be here. It's been a long time since we've seen each other, but we've had plenty of conversations in the past, so I think that, uh, this will be good. I'm excited. So let's start by your background. You were born in Southern California, correct?

MARY HEILMANN: No. I was born in California in San Francisco.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh.

MARY HEILMANN: In—in San Francisco, and we lived in the Richmond District, and I was born in 1940 when the Second World War was happening. And we used to have to hide in the hall. And my father would go around the neighborhood to be sure everyone had turned their lights out.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh really?

MARY HEILMANN: And that was—I—the war started around—a little after and—and I was two or three. I was little, and my brother was one year younger. So the two little babies, we were snuggled up in the hall.

TERRIE SULTAN: And why were you in the hall? Because—

MARY HEILMANN: Because we were scared they would drop bombs on San Francisco. Never happened.

TERRIE SULTAN: Was your dad in the military?

MARY HEILMANN: He wasn't—he was, um, no. He wasn't in the Army or the Navy. He just was, um, helping out in the neighborhood. He was about 35 [43 -MH] by then, so he was too old to go in the service.

TERRIE SULTAN: What did he do for a living?

MARY HEILMANN: Daddy was cool engineer. And the reason—yeah. He—and so that was a very interesting part of the story. We were always driving around looking at tunnels and dams, and there were a lot of really cool engineering projects in California.

TERRIE SULTAN: So he was a structural engineer?

MARY HEILMANN: Civil engineer, figuring out how to build mostly highways, tunnels, things like that. Not buildings.

TERRIE SULTAN: No. So what tunnels did he build?

MARY HEILMANN: He helped to build the Broadway Tunnel in San Francisco. I think he, uh, looked at and figured out how much, you know, how much they should bid on to get the job. And he—we moved to Los Angeles around, uh, '47 because he got a job down there to help build the freeways in Los Angeles, because right after the war they started building all the freeways. And we were sent—Johnny and I were six and seven. So, uh, moving to Los Angeles was really, really exciting and fun.

TERRIE SULTAN: What, uh, neighborhood in Los Angeles did you live in?

MARY HEILMANN: We [laughs] this is a good part of the story. My father was extremely eccentric. Yeah. And so, um, he was just a, like, math guy thinking in his head all the time.

TERRIE SULTAN: What was his name?

MARY HEILMANN: John Sherman Heilmann. And so, um, we bought a house in El Segundo, which is out by the beach. It's where the Standard Oil Refinery was built—was. And the Standard Oil Refinery is an early oil refinery. In the '40s, it's already—it's going, big. And the first oil refinery was, um, the one in Richmond, California, up by Oakland, in Richmond. And it's called El Segundo because that's the second huge oil refinery, and the town was built for the workers there.

TERRIE SULTAN: I never knew that.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. We maybe have to fact check, but I think it's true. And, um, you know, it was—because there was steam and smoke coming out, and it was down the road, so it wasn't where—our house was in a cute little town. And I remember it very happily. It was really nice, and we took a bus over the—to Catholic school in the next town over, Manhattan Beach, and it was way different than living in San Francisco. It was more like living in the country or something.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you—you said you were, uh, your house in—your home in San Francisco was in the Richmond District.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right.

TERRIE SULTAN: What was that—what was that like? Do you have memories?

MARY HEILMANN: Well that was nice. That was, um, let's see. Well, the buildings were taller. They were two-story. They were two-story flat buildings, one on top and one below. And those buildings were built, um, probably, you know, in the '30s. And it was a nice part of San Francisco. It was cool.

[00:05:11]

TERRIE SULTAN: So you didn't really start school purposefully until you had moved to El Segundo, though, because you were seven? So you would have had—

MARY HEILMANN: Well, we started school in San Francisco, and—let's see. I did. Johnny was too young for school, I guess. And then we—no, no. We both went to school out in the Richmond at Saint Monica's School. We went to Catholic School, and walked to school. We could walk to school.

TERRIE SULTAN: And then, so in El Segundo it was different because the houses were single story?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, little cottages, um, sort of ranch-style. There's tons of just that kind of, uh, little house they built for working people in the '40s.

TERRIE SULTAN: What was your mom like?

MARY HEILMANN: My mother had been a nurse, and then they got married when they were 39 years old, they got married. And John—

TERRIE SULTAN: That's old for that period of time.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. And Johnny and I showed up in two years after that. So that was kind of a miracle. And, um, so she had been a nurse, and then—and then she was just living at

home, and the main part of the story of our home life was that Daddy would go into work every day, all the way in downtown Los Angeles from out there by the beach, which is—was about a two hour drive because you had to drive on all the little streets and roads. No freeways yet.

TERRIE SULTAN: Wow.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. And then he'd come home at night.

TERRIE SULTAN: So why did he—why did he move you, the family, so far away from where he was going to work?

MARY HEILMANN: Because as I said, he was a little eccentric, and, um, before he settled, he worked as a surveyor all around California, in the hills, the dam, getting, you know, looking at properties where they were going to do jobs. I don't think he was working for a firm yet. I think he was on his own, being a surveyor. And he had studied at Berkeley. He was all educated in engineering, but he, as I say, was eccentric, which is—it's kind of okay because it kind of reminds me of my lifestyle, especially when I was young, starting up.

TERRIE SULTAN: So at parents' night at school, say, for example, did he do eccentric things?

MARY HEILMANN: No, he was quiet. He didn't do much of anything. Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So a practicing Catholic family?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. Very, very religious.

TERRIE SULTAN: And did you stay religious for a while?

MARY HEILMANN: Concerned—very concerned with sin and Hell and Heaven, and, um, that's a big memory for me, remembering the visuals of that kind of, um, God will punish you, they say. And I've stayed Catholic. I still love it, you know. I still like it. I am not involved with the Heaven and Hell anymore.

TERRIE SULTAN: You don't go to church anymore.

MARY HEILMANN: No, but I like it. You know, I love the memories of it, and sometimes I go, especially if I'm in Rome or something, or—or Paris, to go to Notre Dame. Great churches. Venice. Every—everybody has great medieval churches.

TERRIE SULTAN: So what did you like about school? What was your favorite subject?

MARY HEILMANN: My favorite subject? You know, interestingly, even when I was little, young, I mean, as soon as I started I liked to write stories. And I also liked art, and I was considered very bad as an artist because I always scribbled all around and, um, I think that's kind of interesting because it's kind of what I do now. [Laughs.] I kept it up.

TERRIE SULTAN: In a more planned way.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did the—did you have art classes at school?

MARY HEILMANN: We did art. Um, it was just one part of the day, you'd do art.

TERRIE SULTAN: And all the teachers—

MARY HEILMANN: When we were little.

TERRIE SULTAN: And all the teachers were nuns?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. Back then. And in the first school we went to in San Francisco, Saint Monica's, which was on Geary Boulevard, I think, um, some of the teachers were not nuns.

TERRIE SULTAN: And did you go to the same school all the way through high school?

MARY HEILMANN: Let's see. Then we moved—oh, no. I went to Saint—uh, I went in California, in Los Angeles, I went to American Martyrs, which was a Catholic school in

Manhattan Beach.

[00:10:04]

I imagine they've changed the name of that because it—but it was dedicated to saints who had been martyred here in the US, Jesuits who came over as missionaries, and they'd been killed. Ev—all the martyrdom, the saintly-ness of that is, um, emphasized. I should look that up now. And they—oh, the Indians in Northern New York killed them, allegedly, yeah. Probably. And so—I have to look up. I would think they would have changed the name of that school to the Amer—because it was an A, and if you were, uh, rooting for the baseball team, you'd be rooting for the Martyrs. [They laugh.] So—

TERRIE SULTAN: Well I guess there's something very Catholic about that.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right.

TERRIE SULTAN: So how was—that school went up to what grade?

MARY HEILMANN: Eighth grade.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, and then you had to switch schools.

MARY HEILMANN: Well then what happened was my father got cancer, uh, in 1953, and so I was ready to graduate from grammar school, and Johnny was a year—a year younger, 12. And, um, I was 13, and Johnny was 12, and he passed away. And so we moved back to San Francisco.

TERRIE SULTAN: Was your mother from San Francisco, originally?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. She was—we were—yes. Mom and dad—

TERRIE SULTAN: And he was, too.

MARY HEILMANN: —were both from San Francisco.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did she—

MARY HEILMANN: For generations.

TERRIE SULTAN: So she moved back to be closer to her family?

MARY HEILMANN: To the family, yeah. We didn't have that many connections in Los Angeles. Well, we had friends, but it was a really close family. In fact, we'd spend time going up to San Francisco, and they'd spend time coming down to LA.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well how—what kind of extended family did you have?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, we had—we have cousins up in the Haight, is where we lived in—wait a minute. First we lived in the Richmond. Then we moved back. We have—I have cousins. My mother had a sister, aunts, uncles, my grand—both grandmothers. Grandmother Heilmann, my father's mother, lived in Marin County, and then some more aunts and uncles that were more distant. And a cousin was Harry Heilmann, a great baseball player, who ended up in, um, Detroit. Early Hall of Fame baseball player.

TERRIE SULTAN: Do you love baseball?

MARY HEILMANN: We all were all involved in baseball way back, and I do like it, but I wouldn't say I am obsessed with it or anything. Johnny never did like it very much at all. He liked football.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you play any sports?

MARY HEILMANN: I, um, let me think about that. No, sports wasn't much of my—wasn't a very part of my—big—well, there is one sport, though. In Los Angeles, we joined the Los Angeles Athletic Club, which had a very good swim team. It had a great swimming pool on the seventh floor of the club, and a great diving team. And so I got into that. I was a diver as a young girl, um, at the LAAC, Los Angeles Athletic Club. So I, like my daddy—and of course,

he was still in the picture—would go into LAAC every day after school to work out, diving, and then come back with him at night, out to—which was more than an hour drive.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you dive competitively?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you win medals?

MARY HEILMANN: Sometimes. Let me think. I was good, and I dove in a few contests. I didn't—I wasn't, um, far enough along to really be a serious contender, but I did learn how to do some really tricky dives, and I, uh, would go and dive in other pools, too. I got—and the coach was really a great, uh, a great man, and very encouraging and just really excited about the whole thing. And there about three or four other girls in LAAC that were on the team. So we got attention. We were in the news, the *Los Angeles Times*—I mean, the *Los Angeles Examiner*.

TERRIE SULTAN: I bet you were cute, you know, as a kid.

MARY HEILMANN: Cute?

TERRIE SULTAN: Or beautiful?

MARY HEILMANN: Cute. Not beautiful. I was always concerned that I wasn't pretty enough. I was okay. I was really cute. [Laughs.]

TERRIE SULTAN: I'm sure you were very cute. I'm sure you were.

MARY HEILMANN: But I was insecure about that. That's a pretty—

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MARY HEILMANN: —interesting psychological part of the story.

TERRIE SULTAN: But don't you think all women are insecure about their looks?

MARY HEILMANN: I guess so. Especially little girls, because other ones bully you.

TERRIE SULTAN: You didn't get bullied at school, did you?

MARY HEILMANN: Little bit, yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Because? Your father was eccentric?

MARY HEILMANN: Uh, I can't remember. Uh, no. I can't really remember. I was a little eccentric, I guess. That would be one reason.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well what did you—aside from diving, which doesn't strike me as being terribly eccentric, what did you do that would make you say about yourself that you were—

MARY HEILMANN: Well I would be kind of sarcastic, and so I would sort of make fun of other kids, and that was sort of a cultural thing in my family, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, just kind of jabbing at people somehow?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Both your mom and your dad? Or—

MARY HEILMANN: Uh, I think that was just the cultural style. There were always cocktails in the evening before dinner, and that would make them warm up and get funny.

TERRIE SULTAN: So would you say, then, that, uh, your family values were, you know, largely dictated by Catholicism?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So a sense of right and wrong, high moral values—

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. It was probably the main thing in our lives.

TERRIE SULTAN: So were your parents very devout?

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TERRIE SULTAN: And they took you to church, and—

MARY HEILMANN: We went to church every Sunday, and Lent we probably went every day. They'd give up drinking for lent. No more cocktail hour.

TERRIE SULTAN: That must have been very challenging for them.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, no more cocktail hour.

TERRIE SULTAN: So when you moved back to San Francisco after your father died, and, um, you said that both of your parents were long, uh, longstanding San Franciscans. Do you know how their family got there, and where they came from?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, in a general way. I know that they came from all different countries like England, Ireland, Germany, and Italy, and I—my theory is—we've never really talked about it. My mom—I lost my mom, you know, whatever, 40 years ago, and my dad—but, um, and they never really talked about it. Well, they didn't talk in, you know, when you're little you don't get into that that much. But I'm sure they'd all met at church because the—going to church was a big part of it.

TERRIE SULTAN: So what was—what happened then to you as a person when you—you know, you had graduated from eighth grade. You left Los Angeles. You moved back to San Francisco. What school did you go to for high school?

MARY HEILMANN: Well we came—I went to this school called St. Rose Academy, which was kind of an upmarket girl's school. It was on Pine Street in San Francisco. And, um, in fact we lived—then we lived in the Haight, and some of the girls would sort of look down on me because they said I lived in a bad neighborhood. Because some of them were very privileged, and lived over in the Marina or in Pacific Heights.

TERRIE SULTAN: Was it a challenge financially for your mother at that point to put you in that school?

MARY HEILMANN: Let's think about that. I guess not. It was a private school. After Daddy died, she, um, went back to being a nurse, so she made a living as a nurse, bought this building on Frederick Street in the Hills, up the hill from Haight Steet, and, um, and made a living until she retired as a nurse. And that worked out.

TERRIE SULTAN: So what kind of impact, aside from moving back to San Francisco, how did the death of your father at such an early age affect you, do you think?

MARY HEILMANN: It was pretty deep, and in fact all of the emotional feelings, even the happy good ones, were sort of—I didn't feel very many feelings.

TERRIE SULTAN: Do you think you blocked them out?

MARY HEILMANN: Right, I guess so. I remember I used to write diaries. I don't have them anymore. It's too bad. But, um, I loved music. I loved popular music from—even from—the whole family loved the Hit Parade and all that old fashioned kind of popular music on the radio, when it was just getting going.

[00:05:00]

TERRIE SULTAN: So you would listen to music as a family?

MARY HEILMANN: The family would listen to the radio. Bing Crosby, Perry Como.

TERRIE SULTAN: Really?

MARY HEILMANN: And we're in Los Angeles, so my mother and father used to go over to Beverly Hills to the nightclubs.

TERRIE SULTAN: But they didn't take you.

MARY HEILMANN: No.

TERRIE SULTAN: You're too little. [Laughs.]

MARY HEILMANN: Well we went—we went over there to Hollywood and Beverly Hills because my father loved buildings and houses so much, and so we would always drive around looking at the great houses. So that was one part of it that was very refined and sophisticated, interestingly, but yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Then there was this other part?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, the—my father didn't have any idea about managing money, which isn't so unusual. So it wasn't organized, and we didn't have very much. And then when he passed, there really wasn't much of anything, except we owned our house. So we sold that house, and my mom bought another house—building, in San Francisco.

TERRIE SULTAN: So off you go, to a girls' school.

MARY HEILMANN: St. Rose, which was—

TERRIE SULTAN: St. Rose.

MARY HEILMANN: Which was kind of privileged.

TERRIE SULTAN: And—but it was a day school, so you didn't board.

MARY HEILMANN: No.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did other kids board?

MARY HEILMANN: No, there weren't any kids boarding there. Any girls boarding there.

TERRIE SULTAN: Tell me what it was like at school.

MARY HEILMANN: I was just trying to think if there were any. It was pretty neat. I know some of them still. You know, I was just out in San Francisco because I did a show up at Davis. I was in a two-person show up at Davis [with William T. Wiley -MH], and, um, a couple of the girls from St. Rose came to the opening.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you still keep in touch with some of them.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. So that was pretty neat. And, um, they lived over in the Marina, so that was right over the hill, and then lots of—some other girls lived out in the Sunset. Richard Serra was in San Francisco in high school when I was in high school, so I knew him way back then.

TERRIE SULTAN: You knew Richard Serra from high school days?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, because—

TERRIE SULTAN: Did he go to the Catholic boys' school?

MARY HEILMANN: No. He went to Lincoln, 'a coeducational public high school, but you know, we should edit this because Richard doesn't want to be included in writing like this. But he won't see it, I guess.

TERRIE SULTAN: He might, and if you—we can continue to talk, but if you want to take it out when, uh, when we edit it—

MARY HEILMANN: I think we should, because he really doesn't like to be included in this kind of, uh—

TERRIE SULTAN: Why do you think that's true?

MARY HEILMANN: I think he wants to just have his own identity controlled by him.

TERRIE SULTAN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: And I—I'm sorry I mentioned it, actually, because—

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, we don't have to talk about it.

MARY HEILMANN: I do know better. He's just so interesting, you know.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. But it's just interesting to know that you knew him way back.

MARY HEILMANN: Right, but it's like because—and I'm not in touch with him anymore, but he's so important in my life.

TERRIE SULTAN: From a career point of—

MARY HEILMANN: Well because he was a really interesting, good artist when he was a kid. We both went to Santa Barbara to school because of the beach and surfing, and, um, we both moved to New York and were in part of the same scene in New York. It's just a great story.

TERRIE SULTAN: So did you have better art classes and more direction towards becoming an artist potentially when you were in high school?

MARY HEILMANN: Let's see. In high school, um, yes, some San Francisco artists came. I can't remember who they were, but I remember one woman artist who is a known person came and taught it at St. Rose. And I was kind of good at—at figure drawing and, um, making sculpture out of clay.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: And I was good at writing, too. I did a lot of writing when I was in high school.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you have an idea at some point that you might be a writer?

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TERRIE SULTAN: And then what changed your mind?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, at Santa Barbara, they had a really good English department. And, um, and right—in fact, I've just been looking up some of the people that came there. Visiting artists were Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, yeah. Really great people came up from Los Angeles to be visiting—visiting artists at Santa Barbara. And—

TERRIE SULTAN: What year was this, that you went into school?

MARY HEILMANN: It's in the '60s.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, wow. That's a pretty heady time to be starting into college.

MARY HEILMANN: It was—it was great. And we went there because of the beach and surfing, too, you know. So that was great. And we'd travel up and down the coast.

TERRIE SULTAN: Who were some of your other classmates at Santa Barbara that were maybe influential to you?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, you know, I don't really know any of them anymore, but there were Hollywood people there, um, who were kind of known. I can't—I'm blocking on the names. I'll let you know later. I'll remember.

[00:10:02]

And, um, there was a creative writing class that I took that I really liked, and so I was thinking—oh, and then I was thinking I would go to graduate—let me see. I'm at Santa Barbara for college. I'm thinking I'd go to graduate school for writing, but I wasn't getting good grades in undergraduate school, just all Cs.

TERRIE SULTAN: In your writing classes, or in general?

MARY HEILMANN: In general.

TERRIE SULTAN: Because why?

MARY HEILMANN: Well mostly I was an English major.

TERRIE SULTAN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: And so, uh, yeah mostly average.

TERRIE SULTAN: Because you were too much at the beach?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. I didn't—I didn't spend very much—I passed, but um, and when I did the creative writing class, they thought I was good. Marvin Mudrick was the teacher for that, and he was kind of a known person. I know of—I have a few friends now who went to Santa Barbara, but it was not when I was there. It was later. Like Steve Westfall went there, and so sometimes we talk about it.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you take any, uh, visual art classes in Santa Barbara?

MARY HEILMANN: No, but—but what happened there was I learned—one of my—there was a whole scene, a hippy—well, a beatnik scene where a lot of these alternative kind of—what would you say, Bohemians lived on Mountain Drive. And, um, and a lot of people were throwing pots over there, and then the art department had a good ceramic department, too. So one friend of mine showed me how to throw pots on the potter's wheel, and I instantly was really good at it, and it's tricky. It's hard to do it, you know. You have to have a certain kind of talent to do it. And so—

TERRIE SULTAN: And dexterity.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, and strong, and patient, and that was in the beginning, with a kick wheel. So pretty amazing. In fact, someone should make a movie about that.

TERRIE SULTAN: You know, you and I have an awful lot in common. I went to Catholic school, Catholic girls' school, and, uh, my first engagement with art was with the ceramics instructor at the University of North Carolina.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh.

TERRIE SULTAN: So I was the lab technician.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, so you figured out about making glazes?

TERRIE SULTAN: Yep. Yep.

MARY HEILMANN: We even learned how to make handmade—handmade glaze.

TERRIE SULTAN: So what did you like best about pottery?

MARY HEILMANN: Well I love throwing on the wheel, and, um, and that was it. Throwing pots was the beginning. And let me think. At Santa Barbara that was just like a hobby there because I was an English major. And I was getting by. And then after Santa Barbara I went up to—I was going to go to Berkeley, and—

TERRIE SULTAN: For writing.

MARY HEILMANN: No. It was going to be art. What happened?

TERRIE SULTAN: Something happened.

MARY HEILMANN: I met somebody at Santa Barbara who, um—oh no. My mom—I wanted to go to graduate school, but my mother insisted that I get a teaching credential so that I could always make a living because she always made a living as a nurse, and her sister always—who was single—always made a living as a schoolteacher. So I went to State, and, um—

TERRIE SULTAN: Was that Sac State?

MARY HEILMANN: San Francisco State.

TERRIE SULTAN: San Francisco State.

MARY HEILMANN: And so I, um, took a pottery class there, and that was a really cool scene, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, what was it like in those days, then?

MARY HEILMANN: The throwing pots?

TERRIE SULTAN: Well throwing pots and being at San Francisco State.

MARY HEILMANN: It was very cool because now it's the hippie generation. And I did take some writing classes at State that were really good. And also, I'm studying education, which was all about child psychology.

TERRIE SULTAN: And did you enjoy that?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. I loved it. And I was working to make a living—let me think. Was that—? Yes, part time doing—teaching Head Start, to little guys, preschool. And so then, um, and one of the people at State, um, told—oh, got me into Berkeley, to graduate school. That's it. Even though I didn't have good grades, I got into graduate school at Berkeley.

TERRIE SULTAN: Because of your success at San Francisco State? Or—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, and that I was so good at throwing pots and doing—yeah, and doing, uh, sculpture, too. Little clay sculpture.

TERRIE SULTAN: So when you—when you went to Berkeley, was the idea then to be in the ceramics or sculpture department?

MARY HEILMANN: It was sculpt—well, it was, yeah, because ceramics—

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MARY HEILMANN: —wasn't really considered, um—anyway, it was a kind of sideline. They were really good ceramics.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, you could have gone to CCAC and been brilliant with pottery.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right, and Peter Voulkos was teaching at Berkeley, you know, and that was a big thing. He was amazing.

TERRIE SULTAN: And did you study with Peter?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, I was in the class.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah? And how was that?

MARY HEILMANN: That was great because he was a super radical nutjob hippie.

TERRIE SULTAN: And a good artist.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, and he'd throw these great big pots and then he'd walk across the room and trip—allegedly trip. Fake trip—and drop the pot on the floor, and it would be about this big. And he'd pick it up and make it into a sculpture, or a sculptured pot.

TERRIE SULTAN: So what do you think the message of that was, that there's accident and control?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, it was really a great, huge influence on me, you see.

TERRIE SULTAN: And who were the other teachers there? Was Manuel Neri there in those days?

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. Manuel Neri was around. I think he came down because he was up at Davis.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, he was teaching at UC Davis?

MARY HEILMANN: I think so. He was certainly—and I was, uh, connected to the art scene in San Francisco, so he was showing there.

TERRIE SULTAN: Who were your pals in San Francisco in those days?

MARY HEILMANN: You know, I was kind of a loner.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. I had—I hung out with a whole gang, but, um, I had some—they had one place called the New Mission Gallery, where there was a whole gang of people, and, um, Jack Hanley, who's Cindy's boyfriend now, was around for that [these events with Jack Hanley occurred in the 1970s, not during graduate school as suggested by this sequence - Ed.]

TERRIE SULTAN: And he's a dealer, right, still?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, now he's an art dealer. But he did study art, and so I haven't hung out with them together. I want to talk more about that because there was this really cool gallery on—out in the Mission District, and this is also in the '60s. So when I'm at State, there's a pretty cool art scene there, and so I'm part of that. So there was, um, who else was it? And then Ron Nagel was there teaching at, um, first at State and then later on at Berkeley, or being a tech for Pete Voulkos.

TERRIE SULTAN: Like a—uh-huh [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you—did you ever pal around with him [Ron]? Or—

MARY HEILMANN: I was kind of friendly with him.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah?

MARY HEILMANN: He was a little guarded and distanced, but I've seen him since. I went and gave a talk at Mills a few years ago, and he was teaching there. Very eccentric also.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, what—what art museum was of interest of you in those days? Did you go to the Oakland Museum or the San Francisco Museum?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: de Young?

MARY HEILMANN: I did, and we went, um, we went to—I went to, uh, like I saw a Philip Guston show in Los Angeles [1962 at the LA Contemporary Music of Art, 1967 at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art -MH]. I think I was at Santa Barbara, so that would be in the '60s. Oh, we used to go down—let's see. We'd go down from Berkeley to Los Angeles to see the LA scene shows, so that was pretty great. Ferus Gallery was a big part of it. Kenny Price, um, everybody.

TERRIE SULTAN: When you went to galleries at that stage in your education, did it—was it something that occurred to you that you might want to do that one day, show in a gallery? Or—

MARY HEILMANN: Totally. Totally. Yeah, I really loved the scene, and actually when I finished Berkeley, I thought that I would move to Southern California to be an artist, but then it was the case that girls were very, um, not noticed as artists. There were a few, and there were a lot of really good young women artists, but only a few got any attention.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you feel that way while you were in school, too?

MARY HEILMANN: A little bit, yeah. That's right. Um, and I had a big attitude, too. Um, like I was just thinking what, like, the way people just handled the issues of art and aesthetics and judgement, making it into kind of a joke. I was kind of like that too, so I had a lot of trouble at Berkeley because the teachers didn't like me because I was such a wiseass and—or not respectful when they were doing crits. And then also, the sculpture department at—at

Berkeley was very conservative. It was like New York and England—London sculpture which was very sort of David Smith and, um, like traditional sculpture.

TERRIE SULTAN: Who were the other sculptor instructors in those days, then?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, there was Melchert—Jim Melchert, then Pete Voukos, and then there was Harold Paris. There was—I can—Bill King was there, and he was a teacher, and I—we got along. He thought I was good, and I liked him.

[00:05:00]

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, I could see that being a good relationship, and I can see you getting along with Voukos, too.

MARY HEILMANN: Well except that—yes, I did.

TERRIE SULTAN: But he was probably a misogynist a little bit.

MARY HEILMANN: Well, he has a reputation of being a real hard ass with women and stuff, whatever. But, um, he was mostly a sardonic character for everybody. Yeah. And with no idea, which you can tell from the way his career life went. He didn't know how to socially relate in a productive way, which—like, to be an artist, it used to be that way. Not anymore. You have to say—it's probably part of the teaching is that they teach you how to call somebody to come and look at your—

TERRIE SULTAN: But not in those days.

MARY HEILMANN: No.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. So—

MARY HEILMANN: Because there was no options really that anything would happen.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well also, in San Francisco, there weren't that many galleries at that point.

MARY HEILMANN: No. It was really underground.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: But it was a fun scene, like Manuel Neri lived there, or was in that scene.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you have any interaction with people like Bob Arneson or William Wiley, or any of those guys?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. Wiley was a teacher—well, and then I was going to get to this part of the story. The—at Berkeley, they wanted to dismiss me from the school, the graduate school, because they didn't like—they didn't think I was good. Now, that would be one group of the teachers, not all of them. And, um, and it partly was my personality, that I—and then the artwork. I was always trying to do radical work, like I was inspired by Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman and, um, so—and I started using resin and that kind of stuff early on. So—

TERRIE SULTAN: You know that's interesting that you say that they wanted you to—they wanted to push you out of the school because—and then you mentioned that in relationship to Wiley because when he was teaching at Davis, his colleagues wanted to, uh, expel Bruce Nauman.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh.

TERRIE SULTAN: And it was Wiley that saved him from getting expelled.

MARY HEILMANN: And see I'm in—I'm at Berkeley, and Jim Melchert said that I should go up to Davis and study with Wiley, and so I did. And Jim was on the faculty at Berkeley, and respected, so I did, and then I went up and possibly maybe transfer to Davis was the i—was the thought. But, um, then I met Wiley and Bruce was there, and the three of us totally bonded, and we would just hang out and talk, and it was amazing.

TERRIE SULTAN: I can see the three of you.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: I really can.

MARY HEILMANN: And they ca—they'd come down to Berkeley and visit me at my studio, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: So why didn't you transfer?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, I was almost finished at Berkeley, and then when—after that, then I was okay to graduate from there.

TERRIE SULTAN: How long did you stay up at Davis? Like a semester?

MARY HEILMANN: It was one semester. And by the way, right at that time, Bob Hudson at Berkeley, and he liked me, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, but he didn't like Bruce.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, he didn't.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-mm [negative].

MARY HEILMANN: No because Bruce—I didn't know anything about that.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, Bruce was so radical. Oh, imagine. And then after he finished at Davis, he came down to San Francisco and lived there for a while and worked there. You know him? You see him? He's great.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. I'm much closer to Wiley but, uh, you know, I did know Bruce a little bit. But then he went to—he—but Bruce went to LA then.

MARY HEILMANN: Let's see. Yeah. He was up at Davis. He was San Francisco for a bit. He was married when he came out to Davis to study, and that marriage ended, and he was living out in the Mission. I think he was still married to—I visited him in his studio when he was making the first early radical neon pieces.

TERRIE SULTAN: So where was your studio while you were at Berkeley?

MARY HEILMANN: When I—well you—oh, I did have a studio down on 3rd Street, right near where Wile—where, um, where Peter Voukos was, by—right by the bay, on the edge of, uh, Berkeley.

TERRIE SULTAN: So it was like a warehouse space?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, it was. It was a warehouse.

TERRIE SULTAN: I guess everybody had warehouse spaces in those days.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: How'd you find it?

MARY HEILMANN: I guess someone told me about it.

TERRIE SULTAN: Was that somewhat the norm for the students, that people would have off campus studios?

MARY HEILMANN: I don't remember. I don't think so. I'll—one person lives out here, Joel Perlman, so we could ask him. He remembers everything.

TERRIE SULTAN: So any particular classmates of the—you were at, uh, Berkeley for two years?

[00:10:05]

MARY HEILMANN: I think three years.

TERRIE SULTAN: Three? Any classmates that you're still close to that stand out as being influential to you other than—

MARY HEILMANN: Not really, no, because I was kind of separate.

TERRIE SULTAN: You really were kind of an outsider.

MARY HEILMANN: I was a, uh, loner.

TERRIE SULTAN: Why were you such a loner?

MARY HEILMANN: I think it's psychological. I think it's kind of like how my dad was, and also I was always high and drunk, and I'm an—I'm sober now, and so, um, it's a big part of my story that that—and even in my family, there was hardly any acknowledgement of girl stuff, even about finding you a person to marry and stuff like that, you know, putting you in a situation where you would see boys. And my mom married very late. My aunt never married, so I think, you know, it was culturally kind of weird.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well that is interesting. Your dad and your mom were both—

MARY HEILMANN: Older.

TERRIE SULTAN: —almost 40.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: What had they been doing all that time?

MARY HEILMANN: Daddy was being a surveyor engineer guy.

TERRIE SULTAN: And she was being a nurse.

MARY HEILMANN: And she was being a nurse. She and her sister lived with their mom. Um, super Catholic, so they weren't gay, but you never know. [Laughs.] You know—

TERRIE SULTAN: So do you think that really affected you and your potential personal relationships with people?

MARY HEILMANN: Totally I think so. Yeah. Because usually, you know, you get your little teenage girl to be friends with the teenage girls and have all the boys come over, and you cultivate that kind of culture.

TERRIE SULTAN: And you didn't have that.

MARY HEILMANN: No.

TERRIE SULTAN: No little parties at home, dancing in the basement or anything like that?

MARY HEILMANN: Not really.

TERRIE SULTAN: So is your brother similar in personality to you?

MARY HEILMANN: I just lost him, you know.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, I didn't know that. I'm sorry.

MARY HEILMANN: In March, yeah. He's one year younger than me up in Heaven, and, um, Johnny, yes. It was very, very eccentric, Johnny's development. When my dad died, we came back, and we had—Johnny went into the seminary to be a priest because we were very close to the church. And we had good friends who were priests. And he was all alone in this girl power household, house family, and my cousin and his family and his two sons, my two cousins and then their father, they kind of, um, turned away from Johnny even though they had been really a gang as growing up boys.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did he become a priest then?

MARY HEILMANN: Then he—no. He went for three years. I'm sure he—it was just because of, you know, being—because he didn't want to be—well I don't know any of that. However, to be a little teenager in the seminary in, uh, high school, you know, must have been pretty weird stuff going on.

TERRIE SULTAN: Could be, yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: He never talked about it though.

MARY HEILMANN: Just naturally weird stuff. But, um, I've met some other guys who were in the seminary as kids. Yeah, even priests who say how weird it was. Well it's nat—you know, it's natural.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: Hey, he's cute. [Laughs.]

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So you're finished with Berkeley. You were kind of a loner outsider.

MARY HEILMANN: But I had my teaching credential.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you had your teaching credential, and then once you graduated then, what did you—what were your thoughts? What did you think?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, the choices was where to move to be an artist and it was—I was very drawn to LA, but I figured out that it would be impossible in LA to make a go of it because, um, driving all over the place, you know. It's very hard to connect. And I even got a job offer in Long Beach, teaching high school. But—and I liked that. I liked that whole coast of LA, but I was smart enough to know that I just couldn't make a go of it. So I moved to New York. I did know some people here.

TERRIE SULTAN: Who did you know in New York that made it so that you felt like you could do it? Because that's—that's pretty brave, to just pick up and move to New York by yourself.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. I had been here a few times, so I kind of knew the scene here. And —

TERRIE SULTAN: So what year was this?

MARY HEILMANN: 1968.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh boy. What a year to move to New York.

MARY HEILMANN: It was cool. Yeah, Woodstock is the next year. We didn't go, but—and, um, so—and it was really a great scene. So much better than LA because you could almost walk. You could get to Max's Kansas City and—

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MARY HEILMANN: —you could go in there and meet everybody, and even if they were like kind of cold, you could still have sarcastic conversations with everyone.

TERRIE SULTAN: So where did you go to live when you moved to the city?

MARY HEILMANN: So then I moved into, um, a loft on West Broadway, um, and Reade, and so right down in Tribeca. It didn't have that name yet.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, you were really early in Tribeca.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Who else was down there?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, um, I got the loft because it had been Richard's loft, and—

TERRIE SULTAN: Because most people, you know, like Chuck and all those people were on Greene Street in SoHo, and that's where a lot of people had—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, in early SoHo. It wasn't even called SoHo yet.

TERRIE SULTAN: No.

MARY HEILMANN: And I met Chuck Close. I met him when he was at Yale because he—Richard knew him. And, um, so I got that loft from Richard, and I got a job teaching kids, preschool and all that kind of stuff. Oh, because when I was at Berkeley I was part of this situation where you taught little guys, preschool kids, as part of a teacher training program for people at Berkeley because I had already had experience with that. And that was great because it was really early radical way to figure out how to teach young kids.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you preferred the little itty-bitties to the, like, middle school?

MARY HEILMANN: I taught all different—I liked all kinds. And I always made a living by substitute teaching or teaching, and then later on college and everything. But I taught young children a lot, and I always tell—told my students that teaching is a really good idea to do at the same time as being an artist.

TERRIE SULTAN: So your mom gave you some really good advice.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. Make a living.

TERRIE SULTAN: Make sure you have something that you can make a living.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you moved into Tribeca when it was before it was Tribeca.

MARY HEILMANN: Right. I lived there for a while, and—

TERRIE SULTAN: And where was your school? Because there weren't any families down in Tribeca at that time, were there?

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, where I—well then I—'first of all a substitute teacher in New York, and I go in Brooklyn and—let me think. How did I make a living? Then I got a job—I'm trying to think. I'm living in—and then I'm living over in Chinatown after a while, in this whole kind of hippie commune we had.

TERRIE SULTAN: [Laughs.]

MARY HEILMANN: And then I got a job teaching out here at Stony Brook. So—

TERRIE SULTAN: Well that must have been a bit of a shock.

MARY HEILMANN: Then I commit—commuted out here. Well I started out teaching education at Stony Brook because I had that experience. And then someone told me he lost his job in the art department and so I got that job. I walked across and went in and I got—I talked to Lawrence Alloway and got the job in the art department.

TERRIE SULTAN: Lawrence Alloway taught at Stony Brook?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Art history.

TERRIE SULTAN: I didn't know that.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. History and theory, I guess.

TERRIE SULTAN: So were you pals?

MARY HEILMANN: We got to know each other because I used to drive in every—two times a week from New York, but then there were about four people driving in from New York twice a week, and Lawrence Alloway was one of the people who shared the ride. So for about a year, um, we drove in and back and forth together.

TERRIE SULTAN: So what did you think of him, and what did you talk about?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, uh, we were four people sitting in the car.

TERRIE SULTAN: Who were the other two? Do you remember?

MARY HEILMANN: It was—one was, like, I guess art history. I don't remember anything about them. So maybe they weren't even in the art department. I don't know. And it lasted about a year. I was teaching ceramics. First education, then over to art where I'm teaching beginning sculpture and stuff, drawing, I guess. And I just got that job like that. I wasn't totally qualified for that either. And then teaching ceramics, where they just were setting up a ceramic department, and I wasn't really qualified to do that. Like, I—I'd studied, um, glaze, glaze making, but I didn't know it well enough to be able to teach it. So—

TERRIE SULTAN: Well the thing is is that you always know more than the students, so as long as you can stay one step ahead of them, you're okay.

MARY HEILMANN: However, like Voulkos would glaze really crazy, and once I was having them glaze, and I put all this cobalt without any other medium in it on the pots, and of course it's—I've got a very low melting point, and all the pots stuck to the kiln, the brand-new kilns. So I lost that job.

[00:05:11]

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh really? Did you get fired because of that?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Yeah. At the end of the term. They let me finish the term. And the kids were freaked out because I ruined all their pottery they made.

TERRIE SULTAN: So that—did that end your college teaching career?

MARY HEILMANN: At Stony Brook, yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you teach anywhere else?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Let me think. Well for—then later on I got a job at School of Visual Arts for the whole time until I retired.

TERRIE SULTAN: I didn't realize that you spent so much time there.

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TERRIE SULTAN: So how many years did you teach at SVA?

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, I don't know. Maybe 15 years, 20 years?

TERRIE SULTAN: And did you—and you liked that?

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. Twice a week, you know, two classes.

TERRIE SULTAN: So when did you switch—I mean, you never stopped making pottery, I know. But when did you start paint?

MARY HEILMANN: Oh that's a good part of the story because when I came to New York, it was a really tight scene, competitive, and again, girls weren't totally mainstream as artists. And, um, so nobody liked painting either. There was like Smithson and Serra and Carl Andre and—and I'm doing my allegedly radical work, like inspired by Bruce and Tony Smith, and, you know. Not Tony Smith so much, but outside—and Eva Hesse was a big influence. And so —

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you ever meet her?

MARY HEILMANN: No. I saw her, but I never met her. I never spent time with her.

TERRIE SULTAN: But her work was certainly influential, too.

MARY HEILMANN: I saw it even when I was in school. And Bruce, use of—using the fiberglass and—

TERRIE SULTAN: So how'd you contend with these guys that—

MARY HEILMANN: Well, I was a wiseass still, you know. So I would, um, like I remember telling Smithson that David Hockney was my teacher at Berkeley, and he just [scoffs] he just said, "Uh, I can't believe we're even talking about him," you know.

TERRIE SULTAN: Was David Hockney your teacher at Berkeley?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, yeah. He came—he came to Berkeley from England in the '60s, in '67, and I think because it was such a cool scene. And so none of the conservative painters took his class. And we had a little workshop, a seminar, and all the people in there were the radical sculptors. The allegedly, like, the sculptors.

TERRIE SULTAN: And why do you think they were drawn—you, why were you drawn and your other radical sculptors drawn to David Hockney?

MARY HEILMANN: Well I—I don't know. I just always like off the edge type of art, you know. And, um, I liked how he's—his style and everything. He was doing his—I remember going to his—when you're teaching there, you have a studio in the art department in your, like, office, a room about this size. And, um, he was doing the swimming pool paintings, and he'd go down to LA all the time. And in fact, we would have these seminars together in my studio or other people's studio, and then he would want to make a phone call to some guy in LA".

TERRIE SULTAN: Well, there's no secret. It's no secret there. What did you make of him as a person?

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, he was great because he was brilliant. Um, he liked the edgy kind of sculpture. He always was telling stories. Like these seminars were always about us telling stories, all of us.

TERRIE SULTAN: How did he respond to your work?

MARY HEILMANN: Now we're talking about—we're in, um, let's see. We're in Berkeley. Bill Wegman already—oh no. Bill Wegman came in the picture in New York. But I remember I did a piece for the class—David Hockney. I think he kind of liked my work, you know? Well, he mainly was just talking about all his own ideas and stuff, so it wasn't a really serious critique or anything like that as far—now Joel Perlman, he was in the class, and he would know—and they became very close. Joel went over to England to teach after he graduated. He taught there for a while.

[00:10:00]

TERRIE SULTAN: So why do you think that when you told Smithson that David Hockney had been your teacher at Berkeley that he made a face?

MARY HEILMANN: Well because the Hockney work was so, like, pictures of swimming pools and houses and stuff. Um, I mean, if Smithson thought about it more, he would appreciate it because he was a little way off the edge, too. But it was probably partly because of my style and attitude. Because those paintings were so—gosh, David Hockney did stuff about normal houses and things, you know.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: I mean Smithson did, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yes, they did.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you hung out at Max's Kansas City?

MARY HEILMANN: A lot, yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: With these men.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Any women that were there?

MARY HEILMANN: I don't remember. I remember, like, Eva Hesse was around sometimes. I don't know if she was there. That's a good—well, see I was just as prejudiced as they were.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you were just vying for your little piece of, uh, attention with those guys.

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], meeting everybody.

TERRIE SULTAN: And were they at all nice to you?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. I went and—

TERRIE SULTAN: Did they make studio visits or comment on your work at all?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. Once Dan Graham and, um, not Eva Hesse [likely Lee Bontecou -MH Studio]. The other crazy girl that, you know, she's so major and sort of off the edge.

TERRIE SULTAN: Painter? Sculptor?

MARY HEILMANN: Painter.

TERRIE SULTAN: Off the edge painter.

MARY HEILMANN: Put trains around them and—I always block out her name, so when I remember her name I'll tell you.

TERRIE SULTAN: Okay.

MARY HEILMANN: Darn it. That always happens.

TERRIE SULTAN: What's her work like?

MARY HEILMANN: Mainly painting.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: And then she moved away from New York out to Texas or something, and then died at a young age and was considered, uh, sort of psychologically dysfunctional.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, that's going to take me a while to figure out who that was. But you'll remember at some point.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Maybe while we're even having this conversation. Anyway, she was good friends with Dan Graham, in fact, a girlfriend with Dan Graham. I'm trying to figure out how you can have a connection to—like she probably showed at Dick Bellamy.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did—so where was your first show?

MARY HEILMANN: Well then that's such a good story. I wish there was someone we could call. Richard was very good friends with her.

TERRIE SULTAN: You're not talking about Nancy Graves?

MARY HEILMANN: No, but Richard was married—

TERRIE SULTAN: Married to her, yeah. So they came to your studio?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, right when I first got here, and I think it's because of—I met them at Max's, and, um, I think they were interested in me because I was from California. And then they told me that my work looked too much like Eva Hesse, which should have been a compliment. They should have said, "Oh, you're great. This is kind of like Eva Hesse."

TERRIE SULTAN: But that's not what they said.

MARY HEILMANN: No. They said I wasn't any good.

TERRIE SULTAN: Are you talking about, uh, Emma Cottrell [ph]?

MARY HEILMANN: No.

TERRIE SULTAN: Because that was one of Dan Graham's wives. Anyway. We'll figure that out later.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So how long did it take before you got an exhibition in a gallery?

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, so let's see. Well when I first was here in 1972, we showed at this gallery called Paley and Lowe, and, um, Pat Steir showed there also. And it was Paley's son, Jeff Paley, William Paley's son, and his mate Jillen Lowe, and they started a gallery in SoHo before it was actually SoHo on Wooster Street and showed me, Pat Steir, Joan Snyder, so it was kind of about girls, although some men showed there too. Back—you could look that up.

TERRIE SULTAN: And did you feel, uh, any kind of connection to Pat or, uh, Joan?

MARY HEILMANN: Not, uh, well I knew Joan. I knew them. I sort of—and the women's movement was '72. It happened right around that time. But again, I wasn't—I didn't really bond with them. Joan and I ended up teaching at—Joan ended up coming over to Stony Brook to teach, too.

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MARY HEILMANN: I think I got her that job. So for a little while there I knew her.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: And Pat I've known the whole time.

TERRIE SULTAN: Do you feel like you had a friendship? Or it was just sort of like somebody you knew?

MARY HEILMANN: Kind of friendly.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: But I don't see much of her anymore. But—

TERRIE SULTAN: So after that first show, what happened after that?

MARY HEILMANN: Well I showed with Holly—oh, then first it was Paley and Lowe, and that gallery stayed open for maybe five years. And then I went off to Holly Solomon.

TERRIE SULTAN: And she showed a lot of California artists in that gallery.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Kim MacConnel and a bunch of people like that. Is that why you decided to work with her?

MARY HEILMANN: Well they just came over. I wonder why—she just came over, Holly. I wonder how she found out about me. I don't know.

TERRIE SULTAN: She had a way of sniffing out interesting artists.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, it was good. It was a fun scene. It was really great. We'd have parties at their house. Robert Mapplethorpe was part of that. Yeah, a lot of really good people, and I don't know, because she really didn't have a very deep focus on the art. Holly and Horace, the money came from his business. She had started out as an actress, in Actor's Studio and that whole scene.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well, she had good artists that she worked with, and it was very much a scene in her gallery.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. So did she do—did you—did she do well for you with shows? Did you get—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, we did well.

TERRIE SULTAN: —reviews in the *Times* and things like that?

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. I did, and, um, did some business, got the job at SVA probably partly because of that. Yeah, all along it's kind of worked out.

TERRIE SULTAN: So do you think that getting a—working at SVA really, uh, being accepted in that group of people was sort of contingent on having a solid career?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, I think so.

TERRIE SULTAN: Showing in galleries and—

MARY HEILMANN: Right.

TERRIE SULTAN: —sales and stuff like that?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you weren't making enough sales to not have to teach, or what—

MARY HEILMANN: No, no. I didn't make very much money.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. I guess nobody really did in those days.

MARY HEILMANN: And you didn't need much. Everything was way cheap.

TERRIE SULTAN: Do you remember what your rent was when you first moved to New York?

MARY HEILMANN: The rent on West Broadway was about \$150 dollars. And then in Chatham Square was—we rented this whole building, and—

TERRIE SULTAN: So who—you put together a consortium of people and you just—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, like Dickie Landry the musician and Tina Girouard. We were the—

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, the New Orleans people.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, we were the three. And then it was the whole scene, all kinds of Cajun cooking happening.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well how did you get involved with those people?

MARY HEILMANN: Keith Sonnier I met in the very beginning at Max's. And Jackie. They were married. They had just come over from Rutgers.

TERRIE SULTAN: That's Jackie Winsor that you're talking about.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. And we became good friends.

TERRIE SULTAN: And so he introduced you to Tina and—and Dickie, I would assume.

MARY HEILMANN: I guess that was the connection.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: They had just moved up from New Orleans.

TERRIE SULTAN: So did you, um, ever hang out at Food?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, then I started dating Gordon Matta Clark, Gordon Matta he was called then. And, um, I met him at this event that—this performance piece that Joan Jonas did at her loft, where Gordon was part of that, and so I dated him for about a couple years, and then, um, we broke up. And then Food, he some other people started Food, and so we had broken up, so I wasn't part of that.

TERRIE SULTAN: Because I know that Tina and Keith were—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: —you know, very involved there.

MARY HEILMANN: That was pretty hip. Everyone was cooking and I barely even went there because I really wasn't part of that scene.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: Carol Goodman.

TERRIE SULTAN: So if you weren't part of that scene, uh, what scene—

MARY HEILMANN: What was I doing? [Laughs.]

TERRIE SULTAN: What scene were you a part of?

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, I don't know. Let me think. I was busy, though. I was doing okay. Let's see. That would be—Gordy died in the '70s, so that's in the '70s.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: Right? He died a few years after, and we were friends by then again, and he was with Carol. Let's see. No, no, his last wife. Carol Goodden. And Carol Goodden was his partner, and they started, uh, Food together.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, right.

MARY HEILMANN: Or his mate. I don't know if they were married [they never married -MH]

TERRIE SULTAN: I don't—they weren't married at that point anyway, but it was mostly her money, I think.

[00:05:02]

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, I guess so.

TERRIE SULTAN: His idea and her money.

MARY HEILMANN: Pretty cool. But I really didn't fit in there.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you sort of feel like you didn't really fit in anywhere?

MARY HEILMANN: Kind of. And that's psychological. I—when I finally stopped drinking and getting high and going to AA, and then getting a little counseling, I learned how to not be so sarcastic, basically, and just engage with other people in a productive way.

TERRIE SULTAN: Sounds to me like the sarcasm and everything was sort of a defense mechanism to not let anybody get too close.

MARY HEILMANN: It's really interesting, psychologically. And an interesting choice to be an artist and then—and then coming from this Catholic culture where one of my fantasies was to be a nun who never—you know, one of those nuns that just lives all alone and never talks to anyone, like a monk.

TERRIE SULTAN: Carmelite.

MARY HEILMANN: Car—yeah. And in the—in the medieval kind of stone building way over in the mountains and like, um, that was a real strong fantasy that I had, even, like, in high school I told the Sister Superior that I was thinking about being a nun, and she just dismissed that idea.

TERRIE SULTAN: Said, "Not for you."

MARY HEILMANN: No because I was so naughty in school. Um, so and then being an artist was sort of like being a rebel and a, you know, outsider.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But it also allowed you to be in the studio by

yourself and not have to, you know, not have to really interact.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: But then you—but then you chose a teaching profession which of course put you in very close contact with people.

MARY HEILMANN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. I did pretty good at it, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. Maybe that was what—your outlet.

MARY HEILMANN: Well I could really relate to kids.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But you never had any kids of your own.

MARY HEILMANN: No. No, I wasn't into that. My brother had three kids. A lot of—like, I spent time with them when I was out there at Davis, and so it was amazing. Like he had dementia, and so he was really spaced out, and he was as handsome and as cute as he ever was. And it was a wonderful experience.

TERRIE SULTAN: Were you close to him? Careful for the mic.

MARY HEILMANN: I loved him, but both of us were very guarded and unemotional, I guess you'd say. Everybody in the family was like that.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: So—

TERRIE SULTAN: When did you get sober?

MARY HEILMANN: But—I got sober in '83, almost 40 years ago.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you were still young, and you had—

MARY HEILMANN: I was 43.

TERRIE SULTAN: You figured out that that wasn't a good pathway.

MARY HEILMANN: To be high?

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Yeah, I had a major boyfriend. I had a number of men that I—boys, guys—that I really liked, and, um, one left me that was a very important boyfriend. And he—then all I did was just drink all the time. And then, um, went to AA.

TERRIE SULTAN: Was he an artist?

MARY HEILMANN: Mark. He, um, he was a—is a filmmaker. Uh, he, yeah. He was creative. He did, uh, graphics. He did cut and paste graphics. I think he studied that in school, too. And then Mark and I worked together on the book, *The All Night Movie*.

TERRIE SULTAN: What was Mark's last name?

MARY HEILMANN: Mark McGill. And, um, that book is being republished now.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, congratulations.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. So Mark and I are going to give a talk, remembering that, and that book was made with—well I guess Hauser Wirth, when I hooked up with Hauser Wirth gallery.

TERRIE SULTAN: When did you start your relationship with Hauser & Wirth?

MARY HEILMANN: That was in around early '90s.

TERRIE SULTAN: That long ago?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Yeah, Ivan was, uh, it was 50 years ago. No, no. 30 years ago because Ivan's 50 now and he was 20 then.

TERRIE SULTAN: Wow.

MARY HEILMANN: And he didn't have a gallery yet. He was just coming over to look at our women's art for Ursula.

TERRIE SULTAN: Ursula?

MARY HEILMANN: Hauser. His business partner whose daughter he married.

TERRIE SULTAN: How how—how long were you with Holly before you left there?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, I was with Holly about—let's see. In the '70s, probably about five years.

TERRIE SULTAN: And then what?

MARY HEILMANN: And Gordon was part of that world.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:00]

MARY HEILMANN: And then '78 I had this big show there at Holly, the pink-and-black show, which was really a good, good radical work, but, um, they wanted to cut me loose after that.

TERRIE SULTAN: Because?

MARY HEILMANN: They wanted me to leave the gallery. They didn't like the pink and black paintings. And it got a bad review in the *Voice* and, um, I was fine with leaving, though. Because they were doing all pattern and decoration.

TERRIE SULTAN: Right, yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: Which didn't fit with me.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: And, um, so for a couple—let's see. So that is '78. '83 I get sober, so then I'm with Mark. I meet Mark in around '80, and, uh, then that ends, and then around '83—and so let's see. When Holly—I guess it was sort of just without a connection until I met Pat Hearn in let's see. I think I was sober already [her last show with Holly Solomon was in 1981 -MH Studio].

TERRIE SULTAN: She was amazing. How was she with you?

MARY HEILMANN: She was great because she, um, I was having a few people—oh, I know. When I got sober I got some counseling on how to work professionally with the art world, and so, um, I started calling people and inviting them over like Ross Bleckner I invited over, and he said, "Oh, I have someone I want you to phone. I want to—I want to call somebody." "Hello, Pat? I have an artist I want to—you to get to know. It's Mary Heilmann." "Okay." And so then she came over to look at the work.

TERRIE SULTAN: What did she say? How did—how was she with you?

MARY HEILMANN: Well she came and she just stood and looked at this painting for the longest quiet time, and then she said, "Oh." And then she left. She came back the next day, did it again, and then decided that we'd have a show together. And that's when she just was—well she had been on Avenue B and then she's over on 9th and D, and that's where I had my show with her.

TERRIE SULTAN: And how'd that go?

MARY HEILMANN: I think she did some business. Big people came, and, um, she was showing Phillip Taaffe, Peter Schuyff, all guys 20 years younger than me. I was the first girl. I was 40. And we became very close. It was a great, great thing. And then Ivan came along,

and, um, we started—he was doing private dealing mainly for Ursula to buy. And so she and Ivan started talking, and then we sort of made, um, ventures in Europe of selling the work, too, with Ivan. And then—

TERRIE SULTAN: And so were you still working with Pat at that time?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. And then Ivan—

TERRIE SULTAN: She didn't mind that?

MARY HEILMANN: Well no. She would—was talking to Ivan, and together, he would be doing, like, arts representation or something. And then he and Ursula decided to open the gallery in whatever, whenever that was.

TERRIE SULTAN: When—when did Pat die?

MARY HEILMANN: Um, in about '2000.

TERRIE SULTAN: So were you still with her until she died?

MARY HEILMANN: I guess I was with both of them. Then Ivan opened the gallery. I guess when she died is when then I was with I—with Colin de Land, took over her gallery.

TERRIE SULTAN: She actually died in 2000.

MARY HEILMANN: Right. 2000.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. So, yeah. So—

MARY HEILMANN: So—

TERRIE SULTAN: —I didn't realize that that relationship with Hauser & Wirth had been such a longstanding one. Do you feel that it was with them, and when they started—when they really opened their galleries that things started to really take off for you?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, we did pretty well right from the beginning. And it was small in the beginning, you know. It's massive now. It's hard to—it's hard to connect in the same way.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: But, um, I went over to Switzerland for the first show in 1997'. No, let's see. Pat came, too. Wait a minute. I think Pat was part of the beginning. Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So switch from the galleries to curators because it seems like, um, things started to really pick up for you, well we'll—

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TERRIE SULTAN: —off in a little bit. Things started to really pick up for you, and you started to get some, you know, some really important art museum exhibitions.

MARY HEILMANN: Right.

TERRIE SULTAN: So who—do you remember who the first—was it, um, Orange County? Was it, uh, Liz?

MARY HEILMANN: Well that was huge, the Orange—and then before that, Marcia wanted to do a show at the New Museum.

TERRIE SULTAN: Marcia Tucker?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. And so we did something together, and then we did—oh yeah, we did something at the New Museum. I forget exactly what it was. We can figure that out. And then, um, we did the Orange County show, and, um—

TERRIE SULTAN: That was Elizabeth Armstrong?

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. And that was her idea. I forget how we can—I connected with

her. And then that show went to the New Museum when it was Lisa Philips.

TERRIE SULTAN: And it also went to the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes it did.

TERRIE SULTAN: So it had—

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, and you were there.

TERRIE SULTAN: I was.

MARY HEILMANN: Right down the road.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. I saw that show actually twice. I saw it at the—in Houston, and I saw it at the New Museum too.

MARY HEILMANN: That—and that worked out. That has—

TERRIE SULTAN: That was a wonderful show.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, that's the—the turning point in my work life.

TERRIE SULTAN: That's what it seemed to me, that that show really kind of launched you.

MARY HEILMANN: Well I was getting kind of strong myself, and then the social connections for Liz Armstrong and Orange County was so cool and sort of off the grid. And part of my story, Southern California, yeah. It's a great, great story. And then, um, Houston and Ohio. It was also at the Wexner.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, I didn't realize that.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you had quite a few museum venues and then that, I think—

MARY HEILMANN: That was four, yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: That seemed like a kind of a breakout, uh, thing for you.

MARY HEILMANN: It was, yes. It got a lot of attention. Um, and nice books were made to go along with it. Adam Weinberg was part of it. Yeah, so then I connected with the Whitney. Yeah, I think I'm safe now.

TERRIE SULTAN: I think you are, too.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So Mary, I think that we're going to stop here.

MARY HEILMANN: Good ending. We're safe now.

TERRIE SULTAN: And—and, uh, well yes. You're safe now. So we're going to—we're going to stop here. Uh, it's 4:30 on, uh, Thursday the 16th of June.

MARY HEILMANN: I'm running out of gas.

TERRIE SULTAN: We're both running out of gas.

MARY HEILMANN: Well thanks for saying that.

TERRIE SULTAN: But, uh, we will resume again, uh—

MARY HEILMANN: Another time.

TERRIE SULTAN: —in another—another time.

MARY HEILMANN: Okay.

TERRIE SULTAN: So thank you so much for today.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: It's been very illuminating.

MARY HEILMANN: Right.

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TERRIE SULTAN: Testing. One, two, three.

MARY HEILMANN: You see? Keep the faith.

TERRIE SULTAN: This is Terrie Sultan. I'm sitting [in -Ed.] Bridgehampton, New York, with Mary Heilmann on February 1, 2023. Hi Mary.

MARY HEILMANN: Hi.

TERRIE SULTAN: How are you?

MARY HEILMANN: I'm happy to be here, and I'm happy to have you here.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well I'm happy to be here, too. I loved speaking with you, and the last time we talked was in September when you were preparing for your big show at 303 Gallery.

MARY HEILMANN: Right. Uh-huh [affirmative].

TERRIE SULTAN: And, uh, so tell me, how—how did that go?

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, that was really—it was a big push. Um, it had—it—we filled this great big beautiful, uh, cubical room with a lot of pieces, mostly medium or small. A few big ones, and, uh, we all worked together on the installation.

TERRIE SULTAN: Who's all?

MARY HEILMANN: It was Liane, Cristian Alexa, and the other techs that were in the gallery. I—there was about six of them. And everyone was having an opinion about how something should go, higher or lower, left or right. So it was really—it was fun. It was like being a bunch of kids playing together.

TERRIE SULTAN: So when you—when you do a show like that, uh, you know, you obviously are making the work in your studio piece by piece, but do you have in your mind then a totality of what everything will look like?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. I always think about that. That's a big part of it. And how they relate to—to being near each other, the two pieces, the clusters of pieces, the height, um, so it's really—it's really fun and serious and good to work with other people who we have good empathy with. So it really was—it was really, it really worked out.

TERRIE SULTAN: It's—what struck me about the exhibition was that it had a similar sensibility to what it's like in your studio.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. Sort of—sort of, um, free and easy in appearance, but actually really thoughtful in reality.

TERRIE SULTAN: So when you start a body of work like that, is there a story that—that you want to tell, uh, from piece to piece, and how you envision it going in the—in the gallery?

MARY HEILMANN: Well as—as I go along with the work, the, uh, connections and the narrative start to come out in my mind.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: And, uh, and mostly that's not verbal. It's not really written down or talked about, but the titles sometimes give an idea of what the narrative is, what the backstory.

TERRIE SULTAN: So what was the title of the exhibition?

MARY HEILMANN: This show was called—I forget what it was called.

TERRIE SULTAN: *Daydream*.

MARY HEILMANN: *Daydream*, right. That's right. We worked a lot—we talked a lot about whether it should be called *Daydream*. But the idea—and that is the title. The idea was that just what we're talking about, even when I'm here in the studio I look at the work, I look outside, I think of all the stories, all my memories, and the work always kind of includes some of that information in the work. And sometimes it comes out in the titles.

TERRIE SULTAN: You said once, a long time ago, I think it was when you were being interviewed for the Art21 film, that there's a backstory to every piece that you make.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, that's an important part of my abstract work because it really is realistic.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well and I just want to point out to our listeners that when you said the word abstract, you put the little air quotes behind it.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: So what do you mean by that? I mean, it's pretty clear, uh, just in looking at the work that geometry and abstraction is very much a foundation for the actual object, but you're saying that it's realistic. What do you mean?

MARY HEILMANN: Well the imagery, um, is metaphorical to a visual reality, really. And so if it has a title that kind of relates to the more or less abstract imagery, then you put that together, and then you continue in your mind to make up the story on your own.

[00:05:16]

TERRIE SULTAN: So all your titles—and I know that of artists in your generation, there's always been a big conversation about whether things should be titled or not because there was a time when nobody wanted to title their work because they didn't want to tell people what the piece was about.

MARY HEILMANN: Hmm.

TERRIE SULTAN: Tell me about—I mean, titles are obviously very important to you.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Titles of exhibitions and individual works, and they're very poetic, your titles.

MARY HEILMANN: That's—yeah, they are about telling a narrative story, really, or a daydream. A dream. A story that you might make up in your own head with a few little clues to make you think of certain things.

TERRIE SULTAN: So it's not a question of telling a viewer exactly what they should experience when they're looking, but more a hint—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: —at what you were thinking.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: The other thing that struck me about that exhibition was that in reflecting back on your big survey exhibition that Elizabeth Armstrong did in 2007 that you combined all of the three major food groups of your studio practice: painting, ceramics, and furniture.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: You don't always do that, though. What made you decide to go ahead and include all of those aspects of your work in the show?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, that—all of the work really adds up to what I'm doing, and I guess that's the first time I really did it all like that. And what made me do it? Well, I started out with ceramics. Then I started doing sculpture. Then I started doing painting. I was a writer. I did a lot of writing, and so telling stories is a part of it, and different ways of working is a part of my—my way of doing it. So it sort of tells a story when you go in a show and see all different kinds of stuff all over the place.

TERRIE SULTAN: Just like the studio.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. You think, oh. Why doesn't she focus on something?

TERRIE SULTAN: I don't think I've ever heard anybody say that about you.

MARY HEILMANN: [Laughs.]

TERRIE SULTAN: Because I do think that there's a through line, a definite through line from one to the other.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, that's right. I put it all together.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mostly it occurs to me that it's about color.

MARY HEILMANN: Color's a big part of the story, yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: How did you learn so much about color?

MARY HEILMANN: Well I always—I always liked color when I was little, when I was growing up, and then—and then when I started doing art, I noticed all the different colors. When I was in school, I, um, was interested in the technical theory about colorism, and the abstract, the mathematical aspect of it, how it primary, secondary, and then, um, I was very influenced by Josef Albers, that kind of work. Josef Albers and Anni Albers and I, uh, when I was at Berkeley, he came and gave a talk up on the stage. It was amazing. With visual images projected. And, um, color, and like the after images you get when you see one color next to another, that theoretical aspect of color has always interested me a lot. The way culture—color makes you have, uh, emotional feelings is really a big part of my psychology.

TERRIE SULTAN: So have you read a lot of, uh, of psychology about color and feelings?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, I've thought about it and read about it, yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: It's interesting because so much of your painting looks completely intuitive, but in talking with you and learning more about your work over time, I've come to realize that there's a huge intellectual structure about something that looks like you just go into a fugue state and make it.

[00:10:12]

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, and it's—and it goes both ways. I'm not really a theoretical intellectual, but that kind of information comes in—comes into my life, into my brain, and I read a lot, and I think a lot, so it's part of the story. But I'm not really that, um, you know, seriously academic about that sort of thing.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well it's also interesting because at Berkeley at the time you were there, and then when you went up to UC Davis and palled around with Bruce Nauman, uh, color wasn't necessarily an issue for him in particular.

MARY HEILMANN: Right, no. That—that didn't come up.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you—but your relationship with Nauman, you've said several times, um, was very key to your development as an artist.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, right.

TERRIE SULTAN: What was it about him that made that—

MARY HEILMANN: Well, he was always also kind of, um, theoretical and playful at the same time. And the same as me, not really, uh, concretely academic and, uh, you know, seriously

researching and such, but just taking in ideas and feeling the energy of them in a kind of playful way is how it was when we were together talking about ideas.

TERRIE SULTAN: And the other person at UC Davis that you spent time with was, uh, Bill Wiley.

MARY HEILMANN: William Wiley, yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: Same reason?

MARY HEILMANN: Same kind of guy, yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: Although color for Wiley was important, too.

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TERRIE SULTAN: I'm trying to imagine what your conversations with those two guys must have been like in those days.

MARY HEILMANN: I don't know. [They laugh.] It was about everything, you know.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: You know, all over the place.

TERRIE SULTAN: Were they more welcoming to you as a woman artist than what you experienced later in the city, in New York?

MARY HEILMANN: That's right, and we didn't even notice a difference. Yeah. Yeah, that's a good story.

TERRIE SULTAN: So when you were at Berkeley, that was when you really kind of switched over from ceramics to sculpture. And last time we talked, you said that you felt pressure to not do ceramics at Berkeley.

MARY HEILMANN: Right, because traditional regular ceramics was really not the way Pete Voukos did it either. He was our main teacher, and that was kind of playful and theoretical at the same time. Early, early, um, art of that kind, you know. And, um, and they were doing all kinds of really hardcore traditional sculpture at Berkeley. Bronze casting, um, carving, welding, woodcarving, welding, welded steel, um, and it was quite—for the most part quite conventional and traditional modernism, but not avant-garde. And, um, Smithson, Andre, Eva Hesse showed up. Polyester, resin, plastics became a big part of the way to make things, and so that changed sculpture a lot. And I was very inspired and influenced by that kind of craftsmanship.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: And, um, and actually I was having trouble at Berkeley because they were more like David Smith type of sculpture, which I think is great, but I was going the other way a little bit. And I did have a kind of playful attitude, ornery playful attitude, which didn't really—is not a very good diplomatic strategy. I didn't realize it at the time, but that was why I was that way.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well, you have a sense of humor.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah—

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TERRIE SULTAN: And—and as you say, that's the same kind of sense of humor, really, that both—you shared with Nauman and Wiley.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right.

TERRIE SULTAN: This kind of irreverent—

MARY HEILMANN: That's right, and it was—and it was a little laissez-faire up at Davis in comparison to Berkeley.

TERRIE SULTAN: Now where was Stephan de Stabler? Was he at, uh, Davis?

MARY HEILMANN: De Stabler, um, he was—yes. He was at Davis, I think.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did you have much interaction with him?

MARY HEILMANN: We'll have to fact check that. I don't remember much about him.

TERRIE SULTAN: I guess he wasn't much of an influence.

MARY HEILMANN: I don't remember.

TERRIE SULTAN: [Laughs.] Well that says something in and of itself. You know, um, you have a long and very storied career. You moved to New York City from California in '68, I think.

MARY HEILMANN: I came back to—I went over to New York, yes, to be an artist.

TERRIE SULTAN: And then pretty much immediately, you started showing in galleries.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. That was—

TERRIE SULTAN: You showed—Holly Solomon.

MARY HEILMANN: Well we first showed at this gallery called, um, it was a gallery that was called Paley and Lowe.

TERRIE SULTAN: Paley and Lowe.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. That was right, and it was a woman and man, and he was a man who had some family money from the Paley family, and she was a woman who liked art. And they were a couple. And so they wanted to show women—girl artists, and that was in early '70s when the major thing was that women were very un—hiding under the radar, not—Eva Hesse was a really big deal, and she was a big influence on me, uh, because of using alternative types of materials for her work. And, um, and so we show—they had a very nice space in SoHo. Pat Steir was the other—one of the other artists. Joan Snyder. There were men in the gallery, too, but what was interesting was that we were the girls.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well that was innovative in that time—at that time.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, right.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: And we—and we got some attention, and it was early, you know. We were in our 30s.

TERRIE SULTAN: And then—and then you moved over to Holly Solomon.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, Paley and Lowe closed because Jeff—they broke up, and then Holly Solomon came along.

TERRIE SULTAN: And it seems to me that, you know, as I recall from Holly, uh, a lot of the artists that she showed at the time—well, she did a lot of pattern and decoration.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, that's good. Yeah, that's interesting.

TERRIE SULTAN: Uh, but also a lot of color.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: And, uh, you know, even though you're not really part of the pattern and decoration movement, um, I mean, there is a certain patterning to the way you work with your abstraction.

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I didn't think about it that way at that time, but yes, you're right. And playing with the installations in a sort of classic, decorative kind of way, playful kind of way, is part of my way of working.

TERRIE SULTAN: And that was really Holly. I mean, she—that was really—she was kind of known for that.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. That's right.

TERRIE SULTAN: Who else was in that gallery at the time? Do you remember?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, yeah, there were a lot of people that were doing the pattern and dec —

TERRIE SULTAN: What like Kim MacConnel?

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. Um, and we could find their names. You know, we could figure out those names.

TERRIE SULTAN: But anybody that you felt particularly—any particular affinity to or close to?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, you know, um, in those days I was kind of a loner. I wasn't really a socializing type of person. As I said before, I would take on this kind of attitude of distance from people. So, um, but Gordon Matta Clark showed there, and he was really important to me. So—and that was a whole different thing. That was about architecture and installation and anti-architecture. And Ned Smyth was another one that showed there who was doing really interesting sculpture.

TERRIE SULTAN: You stuck with Holly for quite some time, until Pat Hearn came along.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right—well I'll tell you the good story about the Holly Solomon gallery story is I did a show in '78, I think.

[00:05:07]

And it was a very, um, geometrical—yeah, clear, very big, uh, huge paintings. And they were about—they were called—I think something like pink and black. So it was kind of playful, culturally hip kind of color, which was kind of what was going on at that time in that era, and it also was a big part of my story from when I was coming up, when I was growing up. So pink and black, and it didn't get a good review. And Holly and Horace Solomon didn't like it, and so they invited me over for a meeting and said, "We'd like you to leave the gallery." And that was a big part of the story, and I was perfectly happy to go because I wasn't into the frilliness and the silliness of pattern and decoration. Now I see what was really good about it and was really interesting about it, but I just didn't like the attitude of the art at that time. And my art—I had this sort of, um, playful sarcastic attitude with the paintings that I was doing at that time. However, they were very, very serious, and formal, and colorist, and—

TERRIE SULTAN: Tough.

MARY HEILMANN: Tough. Pretty and tough at the same time.

TERRIE SULTAN: You know it's funny, I never would use the word pretty to describe your work.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah?

TERRIE SULTAN: Because I think that there's a pejorative attitude around a word like that.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: And I'm wondering if, you know, your persona that you put forward for yourself at that time of being this kind of sarcastic loner sort of person—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: —was a protection against the prettiness of thinking that, you know, women painters make pretty paintings?

MARY HEILMANN: Totally. Yeah. And then pink is a pretty color. But it was a hip, culturally hip naughty color, or a rough, rough color.

TERRIE SULTAN: It was a hip pink, not a childish pink.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Not a, like, fluffy dress pink.

TERRIE SULTAN: So tell me about Pat Hearn. She kind of came on the scene with Colin.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Well first she came on our—in—came into the art world on her own. She came from Boston, out of school at Boston, which was a very cool scene in the '70s. And a lot of good people went there: Nan Goldin, Jack Pierson. And Pat came down to New York and opened a gallery on Avenue B, which was new, and then she came over to my—well, no. Ross Bleckner came to my studio, and I called him, I think, because I had left Holly and I was looking for a new gallery, and I knew him. He lived right in my neighborhood. And so he went over. He said, "Oh, I want to make a phone call. Pat. I have an artist for you." And so Pat came over the next day, Pat Hearn came over, stood and looked at the paintings for—one painting especially—for a long time, and, um, came back the next day, and we decided to—she decided she wanted to show my work. So that was when she had the gallery on Avenue D, way over in the Lower East Side, and all the artists in the gallery were young, young men. Peter Schuyff, Phillip Taaffe, young up and coming really good artists. I was the oldest and the girl, and the woman.

TERRIE SULTAN: The only one?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you can see, with showing Peter and Phillip's work, that the context for what you were doing at the time was perfect.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. That did work out. That's right.

TERRIE SULTAN: Because they also had this weird, quasi-patterned relationship.

[00:10:01]

MARY HEILMANN: That's right.

TERRIE SULTAN: But in a completely tougher, same kind of way.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, theoretical kind of way.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, so it was a perfect scene. A beautiful gallery, wonderful energy, wonderful collectors came around. People liked it that it was so weird on Avenue D, in the heroin marketing neighborhood.

TERRIE SULTAN: And you stayed with her for a really long time, more than 10 years.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, until she ended—her life ended.

TERRIE SULTAN: And then you didn't really leave except because she passed away.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. At the end of her life, Ivan Wirth showed up, and he was just starting to get involved in the art world. He was looking around America for the—for art made by women, for Ursula Hauser's collection, because she was collecting art over in Switzerland before he married her daughter. That happened as part of the deal, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: [Laughs.] Well that's interesting.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So he had a mission.

MARY HEILMANN: He was young. He was about 20 years old, and he met her how—up in the Alps when he was walking around door to door trying to sell art door to door that he had. Some sort of notable work, and he was a kid. And so he met Ursula when he was doing that, and she liked him, and so he started coming over, and he spoke English. He was Swiss-German, but—so he started coming over to New York to find women artists for her collection,

such as 'Louise Bourgeois

'TERRIE SULTAN: 'She lived for a good, long time, Louise.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, and she, um, she kind of hid out for a long time, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: But then Pat was very interested in her, and she did a show that had Louise Bourgeois in it.

TERRIE SULTAN: So she was very forward looking in her—

MARY HEILMANN: Pat.

TERRIE SULTAN: —her attitude, yeah, Pat.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. Correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems to me that the show that you did with Elizabeth Armstrong at the Orange County Museum that traveled to the New Museum in New York and then also to Houston Contemporary Art Museum was kind of a turning point for you, career-wise. I mean, to have been showing, obviously people had been buying your work and supporting it, but do you—is it true that that show kind of opened up new doors for you?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah I think so, because first of all, the New Museum was a really— architecturally a very interesting place to look at art, very eccentric really. And, um, we had a chance to make this really interesting arrangement of the work.

TERRIE SULTAN: And plus include the furniture.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right, and that was new.

TERRIE SULTAN: So how did furniture come into your—

MARY HEILMANN: Well I—

TERRIE SULTAN: —field of vision?

MARY HEILMANN: That's always been a part of my biography. Like, as growing up I was always interested in the house and architecture and home décor. We lived in Southern California when I was a kid. My father loved architecture. We'd be driving all around LA looking at the, um, modern architecture that was just going up there, and he'd drive all the way over to all the weird neighborhoods to find it. And, um, I liked that. I was interested in that. And then they were always putting art on their walls in the house and arranging it around the living room. So I think that that was a big influence on my psychology. And then the other thing is—and then I was interested in architecture and modern furniture myself, like Charles and Ray Eames and that art deco and that thing. And so, um, and I always want, and I—

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MARY HEILMANN: —feel that way. I always want there to be a place to sit down in a—at a gallery or a museum, so you'll stick around a while without having to stand up. So that's a big part of it, too. And so we had some chairs in the New Museum.

TERRIE SULTAN: There's a—there's a picture, uh, of somebody rolling around in one of your chairs in that show, and then stopping in front of paintings and looking—I mean, just a visitor, not an installation person or anything.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Just somebody using the chair that way.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. That was part of the idea.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. But again, your color. It has, you know, it's like very Mary Heilmann

color. I mean, nobody would ever mistake your furniture for anybody else.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, the chairs really are in a décor kind of way relate to the paintings, which is sort of off the rail, and naughty, but sort of interesting, too, theoretically.

TERRIE SULTAN: Do you think of your color sensibility as being particularly Californian?

MARY HEILMANN: Not really. Um, you could look at it that way because I'm big into California style, especially Southern California. And color was a big part of growing up in San Francisco, too. But, um, I'm also interested in a theoretical, serious way of looking at color too.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did your color palette change when you moved out to the Hamptons?

MARY HEILMANN: Out here?

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: Well, I think getting out here had a big, uh, influence on all the ocean paintings. I have always done them, but, um, it's hard not to do them now. Um, for a long time when I started painting, after I evolved from doing sculpture into doing painting as a sort of, um, ornery way of dealing with the art world, which were not interested. We, including me, did not like painting. We only liked really hardcore sculpture, theoretically. I liked painting, but for reasons of, um, of having a place to go, it was a really sculpture, you know. Tough sculpture. But then when I switched over to painting and had started making sculpture with polyester and fiberglass and everything, color became really the main thing about that. So, so no more gray and black and white. All pretty colors.

TERRIE SULTAN: What is it that you like about painting?

MARY HEILMANN: I like pretty colors. Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: There's got to be more to it than that.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Well I like the fact that it's—it's two dimensional, but it's also three dimensional in what you see. And, um—

TERRIE SULTAN: Are you talking about perspective as it relates to composition?

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. That too.

TERRIE SULTAN: Plus you always paint the sides of your canvas.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right. So that comes from coming out of sculpture.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you want it to have that dimensionality as well.

MARY HEILMANN: Right, and that they have a sculptural aspect to them. They're dimensional even though they're—they're not just pictures.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well that's one of the things that struck me about the ceramics pieces in the—in the show at 303 from October of 2022 is that there are ceramic wall pieces that could be mistaken for paintings.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right, yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Same color palette.

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TERRIE SULTAN: I mean, I remember one bright yellow piece that I had to really look at it for a long time and got very tempted to touch it to determine in my own mind and eye whether that was a painting or a sculpture.

MARY HEILMANN: Hmm. Yeah, that's good.

TERRIE SULTAN: So I guess it was both.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: But how did you get that yellow glaze? I mean, I threw pots in North Carolina, and I used to calculate glazes for the ceramics lab, but I never made anything that looked like that.

MARY HEILMANN: [They laugh.] Well they exist, you know. Most of them are commercial glaze. They're not really handmade glaze, glaze chemistry glaze.

[00:05:05]

I did study that, but most of my glazing is made with commercial—with regular glaze that you buy in a jar. I—

TERRIE SULTAN: So you can actually shop for a particular color in a ceramic glaze?

MARY HEILMANN: Oh yeah. You just look in a catalog online.

TERRIE SULTAN: I didn't even know that.

MARY HEILMANN: But I'll—I'll tell you a good story about that. I was teaching at Stony Brook, and I was teaching in the art department. They gave me this job teaching ceramics, and I had studied with Peter Voukos, was a really hippie, beatnik teacher, and he'd just throw the glaze on the pots and stick them in the kiln. And so I was teaching the kids at Stony Brook, and we made—we glazed these pots with cobalt—cobalt. And I don't think it was really mixed into a glaze. I think we just used it, the chemical. And it melted at a really low temperature, and it spilled all over the kiln, and all the pots were glued to the kiln, and they fired me. And so I was teaching—they gave me the job without really researching how qualified I was for it, and so that's a pretty interesting story.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did—you obviously didn't know that was going to happen.

MARY HEILMANN: No. I didn't even think about it.

TERRIE SULTAN: You just thought, "Well, cobalt. Great color."

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Blue.

TERRIE SULTAN: Blue. [Laughs.]

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. But it was a heavy—you know, it was heavy to get fired.

TERRIE SULTAN: That's also dangerous, isn't it?

MARY HEILMANN: I don't know. I have no idea because I left right after that.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well you know, I did not know that you could actually buy commercial—

MARY HEILMANN: Commercial glazes.

TERRIE SULTAN: —glazes.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, sure. Because when you were doing pottery, you could, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: I guess we could, but that was never given to us as an option.

MARY HEILMANN: It's part of the deal. Yeah, we studied glaze chemistry at—when I first studied ceramics.

TERRIE SULTAN: And aren't you surprised at yourself that you were actually able to do that? All that chemistry, to make those colors?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, I can't remember very much about it.

TERRIE SULTAN: Me either, but I know that I did it.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: And so did you.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. That was at San Francisco State College, which had a real traditional ceramic department. Kick wheels, we'd sit up on the kick wheel, and then after I finished there, I went over to Berkeley, which it was a more hippie type of place. Late beatnik.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you didn't—you didn't graduate from Berkeley, though.

MARY HEILMANN: I got my master's degree at Berkeley.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh you did.

MARY HEILMANN: I got my BA from Santa Barbara. My bachelor's from Santa Barbara.

TERRIE SULTAN: so you had already gotten your MA when you went up to Davis?

MARY HEILMANN: Right, I was at—oh, that's another good story. I was at Berkeley, in graduate school, and they—a lot of the sculpture teachers didn't like me because I'm trying to be like Eva Hesse, and I have this big attitude. So one of the teachers, Jim Melchert, said I should go up to Davis because William Wiley would be a good person for me to study with.

TERRIE SULTAN: He was right.

MARY HEILMANN: And Bruce was there, in the graduate school.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: And I already knew about Bruce's art because he was in graduate school, but he was already showing in Los Angeles. [Phone rings.] So that's another good story.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, you have a lot of good stories.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, the—

TERRIE SULTAN: And then there were all the interior stories that you tell yourself as you're making your paintings.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: I remember last time you talked, you talked about your Catholicism and your desire as a little girl to be a martyr. [Laughs.]

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you never really were a martyr.

MARY HEILMANN: Well, that is one way of looking at it. I was very, uh, masochistic, and very —

TERRIE SULTAN: How do you mean?

MARY HEILMANN: I really, um, appreciated suffering.

TERRIE SULTAN: Can you be more specific about that?

MARY HEILMANN: I don't know. I just would, like, sort of put myself into situations, like being a girl artist going and hanging out with the guys, and trying to get their attention by being not sexy and cute and flirty, but by being provocative and ornery, and then making art that was provocative and ornery. So it was real psychological thing the whole time.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. So now you're in the revered generation.

[00:10:00]

MARY HEILMANN: It's lucky because when you're an old person and you're off the wall like that, it isn't so funny anymore.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well I think you've mellowed out considerably.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes I have.

TERRIE SULTAN: Is that because you feel like you don't necessarily have anything to prove now?

MARY HEILMANN: I've just evolved. You know, I was a real heavy drinker and stoner and druggie, and so a long time ago I gave all that up and got sober, and that was a big turning point in my life because the recovery program is about—very much about a spirit—having a spiritual connection.

TERRIE SULTAN: Which you did.

MARY HEILMANN: Before.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: And then also in a non-religious way, in a social way, or a psychological way. Jung is a big influence on recovery.

TERRIE SULTAN: Did getting sober change your art?

MARY HEILMANN: I think the art still had all the little edgy ideas in it, provocative ideas, but my social personality and my psychological relationship to people in the world was much more open and connected and productive than being ornery and provocative all the time. So both ways of being a person in the world work, but to change and become softer and more, um, connected with other people is a wonderful thing to happen. And it's good if it happens when you're young, too, if you're a kid.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: So that's a big part of the story.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well it is a big part of the story, and you know, it's the story that you tell yourself, but it's also the story that's read in the work.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So you said that, you know, you obviously are still the same person that you were before.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: But there's a lightness now, and I don't mean, uh, that in a negative sense, but there's—the work seems to be infused from within.

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TERRIE SULTAN: With a kind of a—well, I mean, you could say it's a spiritual sort of lightness —

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TERRIE SULTAN: —to the work. Do you feel that? Or am I just making that up?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, I do, and it's positive and spiritual. It's Heaven and Hell. It's rough and it's soft.

TERRIE SULTAN: So when you start a new work, what happens? Do you think about those kinds of things?

MARY HEILMANN: Well that's a good question because as I sit here and look at these, I'm thinking about those ideas that I just said, and I make—I do some moves. I make some beginnings, and then I spend a lot of time looking at it and thinking it—about it, and doing the psychology and narrative and storytelling about it, and that makes the work evolve into becoming more of what it is. So daydreaming and thinking about it is a big part of the practice.

TERRIE SULTAN: Do you make preliminary sketches?

MARY HEILMANN: Not really, no. I mostly just think.

TERRIE SULTAN: Also in this film from Art21, you showed some very interesting photographs that—that inspired some paintings. I noticed that there were some certain patterns in the photographs that you picked up into a painting.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Do you still do that?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, I do. I take pictures a lot, and look at them on my phone, mostly.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you don't sketch out ideas based on them, you just start?

MARY HEILMANN: No. Not now. I used to use, um, photo images collaged onto the canvas and then painted over and stuff, but lately I haven't been doing that.

TERRIE SULTAN: There's also been some shifts in scale, certainly in the show at 303 where most of the paintings are domestic size.

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: On purpose?

MARY HEILMANN: Well it's because I've been working in this studio full time—studio full time, and the studio in the city is really big, but that isn't where I work anymore. This is where I work, in this small scale room, and—

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MARY HEILMANN: —where I experience the work, with the inside of the room and the outside. So I like it that way, and I like making work in this kind of scale.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah just for the record, this isn't the tiniest studio I've ever seen. [Laughs.]

MARY HEILMANN: Right, no.

TERRIE SULTAN: I mean, it is smaller than the studio in the city, but it's not—

MARY HEILMANN: It's not a big warehouse.

TERRIE SULTAN: It's not a big warehouse, but it's a—it's a nice big—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: —room, with lots of—

MARY HEILMANN: And I had—the show that I did out—let's see. I did a show out here that had really big paintings in it, and I made them here.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. You could make big paintings.

MARY HEILMANN: I just had to just make them sort of one at a time.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, you could make big paintings here. Now everybody talks about the famous light on the east end of Long Island and how it's, you know, that's why artists came out here to make their work, and while that's certainly true of the late 19th century artists like William Merritt Chase and, um, you know, those people, but Ross Bleckner once said to me that the light had absolutely no influence on his work out here at all, but what did have an influence was the fact that he could walk out his door and be outside, which is very different than in the city where—

MARY HEILMANN: That's right.

TERRIE SULTAN: —you know, you have to take an elevator downstairs.

MARY HEILMANN: You walk out and you step on the dirt.

TERRIE SULTAN: So tell me your feelings about that.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, it's the same for me, that you really feel like—and in fact, the reason I chose this property is because it was surrounded by land.

TERRIE SULTAN: But just—

MARY HEILMANN: And the reason I moved out here was that, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: For the land, but not the light.

MARY HEILMANN: Both.

TERRIE SULTAN: For both.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, I love the light.

TERRIE SULTAN: Does it influence the way, uh, your palette and the way you work? I mean, I'm—we're sitting and it's—

MARY HEILMANN: Beautiful.

TERRIE SULTAN: It's in the afternoon here. It's four o'clock in February.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: And the sun is low, and the light is streaming into this room.

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

TERRIE SULTAN: It's a beautiful warm yellow. And you use a lot of yellow in your paintings.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Is that because of this?

MARY HEILMANN: That's a big part of it, the living in this room and working in this room.

TERRIE SULTAN: I mean even the walls look yellow.

MARY HEILMANN: We did. We made it especially off white. Mellow yellow.

TERRIE SULTAN: So now that you are I would say the painter that a whole other generation of artists is looking at and aspiring to—

MARY HEILMANN: Oh yeah, that's cool, you know, because forever young is the way I look at it because I, um, the whole time almost, until about 10 years ago, I taught. And, um, all kinds—college, but also kids in high school, and so working with young people was a big part of my life, and learning from them was as big as me teaching them. And so now, even my work is kind of, uh, ageless, youthful. It doesn't feel like having a timeline to it.

TERRIE SULTAN: I think that's true. I mean, if you put these pictures against the pictures you were making 10 years ago, you'd be hard-pressed to say that there's a big difference in your approach.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. That's interesting, and I'll have to think about some—well they are playful and childlike in a lot of ways.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, but not in the same way as, say, our mutual friend Louisa Chase. Not playful and childlike in that way.

MARY HEILMANN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay.

TERRIE SULTAN: Do you agree or disagree?

MARY HEILMANN: No, uh, yeah, I've been thinking about Louisa because we're going to do

this show that's going to have some of Louisa's in there that the Parrish is doing.

TERRIE SULTAN: So yeah, just to clarify for the listener, you've been invited to participate in the Parrish Art Museum's 125th Anniversary Exhibition where they've invited select artists to work with the collection.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right.

TERRIE SULTAN: And show, along with your own work, is that correct?

MARY HEILMANN: I think so, yeah. Yeah, I was just there yesterday and choosing some of the artists to show.

TERRIE SULTAN: So in addition to Louisa, who else are you looking at to show along with your own work?

MARY HEILMANN: Well, um, I always forget. One of my favorites that just died, and they said we should try to choose people that have passed because, um, for some reason they don't want people just choosing their best friends.

[00:05:09]

TERRIE SULTAN: Jennifer Bartlett?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, Jennifer Bartlett's one. And, um, Eric that just died.

TERRIE SULTAN: Eric Freeman.

MARY HEILMANN: Freeman, yeah. Louisa Chase. I chose Chuck Close as the artist who did the photograph of Ross Bleckner because Ross Bleckner is a good friend of mine, and a really, you know, helped me by introducing me to Pat.

TERRIE SULTAN: And did you choose Ross to be in your installation too?

MARY HEILMANN: His art—no, I didn't. I just chose that photograph because he's alive. [They laugh.] I don't know if they're all passed, but—

TERRIE SULTAN: They told—they asked you to choose artists that were no longer with us?

MARY HEILMANN: They mentioned that it would be—Corinne Erni—mentioned that people weren't supposed to just choose their best friends.

TERRIE SULTAN: And that would be hard to do out here, because, you know, people like you or Ross or David or Eric or any of the other highly recognized artists that are out here that would be invited to participate, everybody is their friend.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: [Laughs.] It's a very tight community out here, isn't it. It's very supportive.

MARY HEILMANN: And that's great, you know. It's really great. It's better than being in the big art world.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well you are in the big art world, it's just—

MARY HEILMANN: I'm in both.

TERRIE SULTAN: —quieter.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Yeah. And having 303 Gallery and Hauser Wirth is great because 303 is much more intimate than Hauser Wirth. I've been with them forever, you know, since Ivan was 20, but, um, and it's very interesting how huge the art world is, and how commercial and commodified it is. And I think that's interesting and fine and good, but way different than what you expected when you came into it.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, it's completely changed, and you've seen a huge scene change in that way.

MARY HEILMANN: I've been there for the whole thing.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: And I love the whole history of it. Like we lived in LA in the '40s, and we'd drive around Los Angeles and Beverly Hills and Hollywood looking at the galleries, little galleries that are like the galleries we have out here. And so those kind of memories—and even buildings that were built way back then, too. Like the Hauser Wirth Gallery out here. So those kind of memories are such a big part of the story. Hauser Wirth is opening another gallery in Hollywood in a small space, so I love that idea.

TERRIE SULTAN: So do you like to show in small spaces better than—

MARY HEILMANN: Both. I like both. Because I like—the 303 space is really big, and really—

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah it is.

MARY HEILMANN: I mean, it's not like Hauser Wirth, but it's very, um, grand, and inspiring, too. That was a wonderful experience. Someone's coming along here. Oh no they're not. They're just walking around.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, that—I loved the atmosphere of that show.

MARY HEILMANN: That's right, at Hauser Wirth, yeah. I mean at 303.

TERRIE SULTAN: At 303. But it did remind me of the show from Orange County. It had that same kind of spirit.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh.

TERRIE SULTAN: You don't—did you think—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, no, I know what you're saying.

TERRIE SULTAN: I mean, because you had furniture and you had ceramics, and—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: I mean, I loved that show. I saw it in three different venues.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: And it was different in every one.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah I know. That was—well you saw the one in Houston, too.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And in Orange County.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So what was it like working so closely with somebody like Elizabeth? I mean that—was that your first big survey museum exhibition?

MARY HEILMANN: In Orange County?

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. That was 2007.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: That's what I thought.

MARY HEILMANN: And then New Museum was after, but it's—

TERRIE SULTAN: The same show.

MARY HEILMANN: —started in Orange County, yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So how did she approach you? Do you remember? It was a long time ago.

MARY HEILMANN: [Laughs.] Yeah, I don't remember too much about the details of that. I don't, because it was so big. It was sort of a—LA, Southern California.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well that must have felt good, to be, like, invited to come back home.

MARY HEILMANN: The old days, yeah. Orange County was a big part of our life down there. Laguna Beach and, so yeah, it was full of memories. And then the '60s was big for me and Los Angeles, too. So the whole thing was great. And everybody was great. All the people were nice.

[00:10:04]

TERRIE SULTAN: It was a nice book. Good show.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Great work, and a lot of people saw it because it traveled.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, my story is a really great story, you know. And it didn't used to be this way for girls because, like, Jackson Pollock's wife.

TERRIE SULTAN: Lee Krasner.

MARY HEILMANN: Lee Krasner. Great artists like that, because she was married to a dude like that, and that was a normal story, and actually I think that might have been what attracted the sadistic Mary, masochistic Mary Heilmann to go into that world. And I know what it was, because I grew up all around all boys. It was like a girl wanting to play sports, and be in with the boys. Yeah, that's another big psychological part of the story. So, um, the—and the fact for women to be in evolutionary—evolving to be equal to men is significant.

TERRIE SULTAN: I think you had a lot to do with that.

MARY HEILMANN: Me and my pals. Yes. I do think it's evolution. I think it's sort of a natural—

TERRIE SULTAN: I don't think it's natural evolution.

MARY HEILMANN: Evolving.

TERRIE SULTAN: I think, well, but like a lot in evolution, it doesn't just happen. I mean, there's some kind of a catalytic event.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Sometimes a catastrophe event—

MARY HEILMANN: Oh yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: —that move these things along. And I do. I think that you and people like Pat Hearn, for example, and Hauser and Wirth, you know, starting with women.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes. That was a big part of Hauser Wirth, yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: But in your generation, I mean, things didn't really start to happen in a big way for people like you and Jennifer Bartlett or Elizabeth Murray until you had established—really established a pretty strong career.

MARY HEILMANN: Right.

TERRIE SULTAN: But if you put your early trajectory against some of the guys, you know, you have to say that you had to work twice as hard to get where you were.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. Get psychological counseling in order to learn how to relate to other people, how to be diplomatic, and it's a great part of the story. And yet still make really strong work—

TERRIE SULTAN: Right.

MARY HEILMANN: —that has this undercurrent of the other side of the story.

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, it's a great story, and it's very soft and empathetic in the big picture.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you made that happen that way.

MARY HEILMANN: The cruelty and the sadism are not foregrounded. Um, yes, in learning how to live with other people, it's a wonderful—makes a wonderful story, because it's really a happy way to live. You don't hate anyone. You know, you think, ooh, stay away from him. Oh wait a minute, he's kind of nice. [Laughs.]

TERRIE SULTAN: So yeah, you've kind of created a whole—a completely different life for yourself.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, it's great. And I survived because of that, you see.

TERRIE SULTAN: Survived and thrived.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: And here you are at 83?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Still making work as if you were 38.

MARY HEILMANN: Lots of friends, all ages. Oh, because when you go to these recovery programs like AA and Narcotics Anonymous, you get to hang out with all the young, new ones getting clean, and you're, you know, can have a big, fun effect on them.

TERRIE SULTAN: Do you think of yourself as a role model in a certain way?

MARY HEILMANN: I get a lot from them, too, you know.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah?

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, well again, it's like teaching the kids, you know. And of course, the whole culture of that is so great, you know, because hey, it's a wonderful thing to be able to get high, and when people figured that out it was such an important part of culture.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. But learning how to have that same feeling without it coming from alcohol or chemicals is a real trip.

MARY HEILMANN: Yes, and not being an addict. You know, lots of people can—

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MARY HEILMANN: —lay around and get high, but not be addicted. So it's a really, really great story.

TERRIE SULTAN: It is.

MARY HEILMANN: And the culture of recovery is, um, really mainstream now. It's not underground and secret anymore because it's so normal.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. Well, yeah, everybody seems to go through—well not everybody, but lots and lots of people go through that cycle.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, and figure out that that's okay, you know, that that's a good thing to do.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well it certainly worked for you.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. It did.

TERRIE SULTAN: I mean, your work is strong and optimistic, and I think, yeah. That—

MARY HEILMANN: And I'm looking pretty good.

TERRIE SULTAN: And you're looking really well.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: [Laughs.] So anything else you want to say?

MARY HEILMANN: Well I guess one of the most important things is being able to connect with everybody in the art enterprise, you know? The professional movers, players, like you and Gary Garrels and Richard Armstrong and, you know, and knowing people like that personally and in a friendly way, and hearing all the backstories of what it's like to be in that business of trustees and museums and everything is another really fun, good part of it—

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: —that you have to learn how to manage, and live with, you know?

TERRIE SULTAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARY HEILMANN: Like Gary Garrels has a great story.

TERRIE SULTAN: He does.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, and he's a survivor.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well, I guess anybody that's in this business—

MARY HEILMANN: And a thriver.

TERRIE SULTAN: —is in some ways a survivor, right?

MARY HEILMANN: Yes.

TERRIE SULTAN: It's not an easy business.

MARY HEILMANN: No it's—and it's changed, you know. It's evolved to where it's really big.

TERRIE SULTAN: And it can be very fickle.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh yeah, like really corporate and businesslike, but also, like, psychological and playful.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah, I mean, you could say that—

MARY HEILMANN: And sadistic.

TERRIE SULTAN: —you were a real survivor because you kept your artistic integrity and, uh, and you made your work. And you made it work.

MARY HEILMANN: And you also—and a person like me could have also hurt myself by acting wrong, you know, getting in big fights and slamming the door.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you didn't.

MARY HEILMANN: No, no. Yeah, it's a great story.

TERRIE SULTAN: And it's still ongoing.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: So any exhibition plans coming up?

MARY HEILMANN: Not really.

TERRIE SULTAN: Just in the studio working?

MARY HEILMANN: This—and this big show that Gary Garrels is doing, which is a group show.

TERRIE SULTAN: Right. And that will be next year?

MARY HEILMANN: In April.

TERRIE SULTAN: Oh, of this year?

MARY HEILMANN: In London, at Larry Gagosian's.

TERRIE SULTAN: Great.

MARY HEILMANN: So that's a kind of good cultural, commercial, um, theatrical—

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah.

MARY HEILMANN: —global.

TERRIE SULTAN: But you work every day.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. A lot of it is daydreaming, though. A lot of it is sitting, thinking.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well I mean you have to think in order to make.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah. And now I don't—I'm not under pressure, so I'm just chilling a little bit now. But yes, I work every day. That's the whole thing of my life.

TERRIE SULTAN: Yeah. But I mean, it's not like you have to—have to have an exhibition deadline in order to feel motivated to work.

MARY HEILMANN: No, no. I always work. In fact, when I'm not—when I'm not under pressure, it's better. Yeah. And this is part of the job, hanging with people like you.

TERRIE SULTAN: Could be worse.

MARY HEILMANN: And talking about everybody else, you know?

TERRIE SULTAN: [Laughs.] Well, you're very forthcoming and generous in sharing your life, and, uh, and your thoughts about your work and—

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: —I appreciate it, and I'm sure that the Smithsonian appreciates it.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, that's right. I hope so.

TERRIE SULTAN: And all the readers that will come many generations after us.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, right.

TERRIE SULTAN: That's the value of this—

MARY HEILMANN: We're doing history.

TERRIE SULTAN: —project.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: Is that scholars research in these archives.

MARY HEILMANN: Oh, get the information, yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: And they look for this kind of information, so.

MARY HEILMANN: Yeah, and these are good stories.

TERRIE SULTAN: Getting it firsthand—

MARY HEILMANN: To tell the story, yeah.

TERRIE SULTAN: It's very important.

MARY HEILMANN: Well thank you for including me.

TERRIE SULTAN: Well, you're very welcome. It's been a lot of fun, and, uh, I'm sure there will be more to come.

MARY HEILMANN: Okay. We'll do it again. Come up with some more stories.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]