Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Roland Reiss, 1997 Aug.-1999 June

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Roland Reiss on August 22, 1997. The interview took place in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Roland Reiss and Paul Karlstrom have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Roland Reiss. The date is August 22, 1997. The interview is being conducted in the artist's studio/home, at The Brewery in downtown Los Angeles. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. Again, this is a first session of several. This is Tape 1, Side A. We were talking about doing this interview just a little while ago, and, as I said then, what I'd like to do is begin by getting an idea of your own background in terms of biographical or auto-biographical information. We can go back just as far as you feel it's appropriate to the extent that where you came from makes a difference, and perhaps in some ways it explains the career you've chosen and things that have happened to you along the way. Why don't we start out by saying when you were born, and where, and maybe something about your family?

ROLAND REISS: I was born May 15, 1929 in Chicago, Illinois. And my parents are of Austrian, Romanian, Italian heritage. My mother was first generation; my father came to the United States when he was four. I was raised in Chicago. I have a sister, Marilyn, who's four years younger. She's presently teaching art in Novato, or teaching elementary school in Novato, California. I went to Catholic schools through that whole period, and it was during World War II. My mother who was a housewife actually worked as a machine gun inspector and my father was a streetcar conductor, so actually, I was a Depression baby.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very much working class people.

ROLAND REISS: Working class people, Depression baby. My father had a job but they had a hard time. He always talked about standing in milk lines and certainly was incredibly thrifty, work-motivated and never borrowed, which was not a great lesson for me to learn. He was a very stern disciplinarian, and that probably figures into the equation of becoming an artist and his effect on my choices. The only other noteworthy thing I can think of, because we were pretty well stuck in Chicago, was a trip that we took to the Black Hills of North Dakota. My father was raised in North Dakota. So there was that other connection with the part of the family that had settled there who were wheat farmers, who were basically a German Romanian mixture. My grandmother on my mother's side was Italian. Her mother was the maid to an Austrian family and was an illegitimate child. In fact, last year I went back and found the school she went to. I had her report card. I went to Lana, Italy, to find where she came from, but it had been in Austria at another point in time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was her mother? Was the maid in Austria?

ROLAND REISS: Her mother, yes. He [grandmother's father] was an Austrian military officer. My great grandmother's name was lost, and she was sent to a convent school to be raised. She had six children after they came to this country and settled in Chicago. I think her early education had given her a feeling for art. I remember when I was in a choir singing in downtown Chicago, my father didn't want to go and my grandmother lectured him about going. Even with a large family in Depression days, she managed to go off by herself to see movies, especially foreign films. She was very supportive of me and my interest in the arts. That's why I sought out her history as a young girl and have such fondness for her.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How much did you find on this quest over there?

ROLAND REISS: I found the convent school that she went to. The young man she met and came to America with had been a carver of sculpture and grave stones in the neighboring town of Prutz. There's an old medieval church and they have thousands of grave stones in Lana. So I gather that he was there carving grave stones when they met. That had to be and it was a church, so it had to be where they first came together. I remember she had calendars with hand-colored illustrations of the Tyrolean Alps in her bedroom in Chicago, and they were in those weird off-colors because the printing wasn't very good in those days. I later realized that this woman had come from what is now the fruit basket of Italy, with incredible mountains all around. So verdant you couldn't believe it!

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's northern Italy.

ROLAND REISS: Northern Italy, right close to the border. She had moved to Chicago! And spent the rest of her life in Chicago and those calendars were a reminder of the beautiful place she had left.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why did they move?

ROLAND REISS: I really don't know. I mean, the area seemed to be very rich. It could have been partly because of the sense of scandal that she just wanted to get away, and have a new life. A lot of people were moving to America, so there could have been an economic problem at that time. I don't really know the history of the area. But to see the school and have it actually still there since the late eighteen hundreds was absolutely amazing!

PAUL KARLSTROM: So she was a presence then as you were growing up, I gather.

ROLAND REISS: She was the "Grand Lady" in the family. She had six kids and my mother being one of them. It was a grand, happy family. My father's family was very dour, dark and unhappy and they didn't speak to each other for long periods of time. They were Germans who settled in Romania. My mother's family held parties and sang all the time. It was a great place to be. My father was a very difficult man. My grandmother was the one person he would not confront. It was absolutely amazing that she had that kind of power. We took her on that trip to North Dakota. I never got over my father inviting her along and she rode with us in a Model A Ford.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that was to visit your relatives?

ROLAND REISS: Well, to see family on my father's side, to see some of the farms. I'd never been out of Chicago. I'd never seen a cow before! My cousin squirted me with some milk from a live cow and I was humiliated.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You never visited the stockyards, I gather.

ROLAND REISS: You could smell them, but I never visited them. I guess my fondest memory of Catholic school was that the nuns were so chauvinistic about Chicago. I've never forgotten this. They would tell us that we were in the best country and we were in the best city in the world. We had the Shedd Aquarium and we had the museum and all that stuff. We had the best accent in the world. Radio announcers were chosen from Chicago because we were mid-country and had a balanced accent. It was just an enormous sense of pride they instilled. I remember thinking, "God, how lucky I am! I'm a Catholic; I'm in Chicago, I'm in America!" I mean, how could you do any better than all that!

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's nice that you had that.

ROLAND REISS: It was a lovely thing, but I probably went to four different Catholic schools. They were stern in most cases and it was not a pleasant education. In 1943, we moved to California. My father had been in the Army out here, up at the Presidio, as a young man. He'd always wanted to get back to California. One of his friends who worked with him as a streetcar conductor had moved to California, and then passed away, but his wife and children were out in California. He'd just be hankering to get to California, which he saw as paradise and had never been back. It was probably the most courageous thing my father ever did. In 1943, he packed up the whole family and we got in the car. In those days, that was a big deal. Now we're so mobile it's hard to imagine what an enormous move and undertaking that was, without a job. He left his job, and just drove us all out to California. He knew that we could stay with these friends, who were in Pomona.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There were four of you then, you and your sister and your parents. Is that right?

ROLAND REISS: Right, the four of us came to Pomona. Pomona was a very sleepy, little agricultural town at the time. I went to junior high school, and we moved into a house that had been taken from the Japanese, one of the Japanese families that had been dislocated. I never got over that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Felt guilty?

ROLAND REISS: In fact, I didn't at the time. I didn't know enough. Under the window sill there was a long cupboard and I remember neighbors lifting the cupboard and saying, "That's where they had the wireless to talk to Japan." That's what all Americans did; they had to justify their actions. I remember that the house was surrounded by asparagus fields and there were a lot of people from Oklahoma living in South Pomona. There had been a great wave of migration from Oklahoma and it had a great effect on California. A lot of the people in school with me were Oklahomans. There was only one black student in my junior high school in South Pomona. He became my best friend, but when I brought him home, my father told me never to bring him home again because he was black.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was junior high, South Pomona Junior High?

ROLAND REISS: Fremont Junior High School. The end of my father's life at age eighty-six, he actually had friends who were black. It's a personal testimony to the decline of prejudice in my own lifetime.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was his name?

ROLAND REISS: Tilton Smith was his name and he had an older brother named Jimmy Smith. Jimmy was an art student at Claremont. I remember going to his home a lot. The home was always full of music. Everybody sang; the piano was going all the time. He [Tilton] contracted severe arthritis and died within a year and a half. I went there constantly to see him. We were both taking an art class. His brother set it up so that he could take photographs of little table-top things while he was in bed. Jimmy's alive today. I still see Jimmy in Claremont.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, Tilton died.

ROLAND REISS: Tilton is the one who died, and Jimmy was our hero. He was in Claremont. He was an artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your father, despite his prejudice at that time, didn't interfere with your visiting a black family.

ROLAND REISS: No, he just didn't. I think he didn't want him seen going into our house. Other than that I don't think he had a problem. Of course, the Mexican American population was a very different issue in Pomona. That was the time of the Pachucos.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know any of them? You didn't hang out with them, did you?

ROLAND REISS: Well, there were kids emulating Pachucos in junior high school, the baggy pegged pants, and chains. They were a group pretty much unto themselves, because there was a large Chicano settlement in South Pomona, Oklahomans and Chicanos, which is where we were living. North Pomona was the presumably higher class territory. As you approached Claremont, it got higher and higher class. You're going up the hill towards Claremont

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in other words, your story is a great success story because you started out in South Pomona and you ascended to Claremont.

ROLAND REISS: I came into junior high school, which was a public school, with a good education from the nuns, so I was really like a year and a half ahead of the students in California. There were two English teachers who doted on me. I became editor of the school newspaper and I did all the writing and illustrations.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had literary interests as well as an interest in art.

ROLAND REISS: Well, the literary interest came first. I wrote everything for the school newspaper. It was a two sheet newspaper or something, but I designed it and I did all the drawing for it, too. I did the cartoons and the masthead for it. I was like a multi-dimensional kid! These two young women teachers, who I had in English classes, kept talking to me about being a writer and filling my head with that kind of excitement. It all sounded great to me and I was doing well with them. I went home and told my father that I was going to go to college, and I was going to be a writer. And he said, "No. You are going to work when you get out of high school and you're going to bring money home because that's what you're supposed to do."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, that's what you're for.

ROLAND REISS: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me interrupt just a moment. Maybe you would lead up to this. But, that attitude in fact seems a bit counter to much of the immigrant experience where education was emphasized.

ROLAND REISS: Oh, they were upwardly mobile and wanted you to have some education, but my father's attitude remained very old world. He was a very bright man but did not complete high school. So the idea of even completing high school was an achievement as far as he was concerned. I think being from a class that struggled with the Depression, money was very, very important. It wasn't big money; it was just money, just being able to survive. Of course, my experience in the schools was altering my view of the world.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did that come about?

ROLAND REISS: Well, I think they [nuns and teachers] were all sort of instilling values of public good, public service.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this came from school, not from home.

ROLAND REISS: From school, not from home. Maybe from my mother a little bit. She was a very sweet lady and she wrote poetry, sort of the Edgar A. Guest variety.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you get reinforcement from your grandmother and your mother about doing something beyond generating income, work and income?

ROLAND REISS: Yes. I also remember winning prizes with little posters and things when I was in the Catholic schools, and looking at our music books that had illustrations that were sort of like Prince Valiant illustrations, and thinking, "Oh! If I could draw like that! I'll never be able to do that." I remember thinking that, but anyway, the writing thing. When I went to those women teachers and told them what my father had said, they immediately abandoned me. They just wrote me off. They didn't talk to me any more. They saw me then as one of those kids who wasn't going to be able to do it. I still don't understand why. They didn't advise me about resources that might be available or how to cope with my father. They just backed away from me. I'd been taking an art class taught by this wonderful man named Art McCann. He had been the Superintendent of Art Education for the whole Pomona Valley [School] District, and had been demoted because he made some political remarks at a meeting somewhere. He was demoted to a junior high school. He was a person I could talk to, so I went to him and I said, "I don't know what to do. "I want to be a writer and these women won't even talk to me now. I'm just really depressed." He said, "Look, you are a really good artist. Why don't you go into art? You have great talent for it." Then he began to say things that these women didn't say. He said, "You could go into commercial art and you could make money and your father would be happy, but you would need to go to art school a couple of years. You just lie to your father. Tell him you're going to make a lot of money and that art school will produce this for you, and go to school as long as you want! "

PAUL KARLSTROM: No matter how long it takes.

ROLAND REISS: That's probably the most wonderful thing he said. I went home and told my father I was going to be an artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And your father liked that?

ROLAND REISS: Oh no. Oh no! He said, "No son of mine is going to be a queer."

PAUL KARLSTROM: He thought all artists were homosexual?

ROLAND REISS: Yes. He had very limited experience in life. I went back and told my teacher and he said, "I want your father here. You tell him I said he must come to the open house." My father had never come to the open house before, but he did. He didn't know what he was in for because Art McCann was a large, hairy, burly man. My father walked in with me and he walked up to my father and he grabbed him by the collar and he slammed him against the wall. He said, "What's this you've been telling him about artists?" And he went on to just lecture my father about my talent and what was he trying to do to me and all this stuff. And my father never bothered me about it again. It's actually a great story. He went on to become an osteopath and he knew he was leaving. I don't think it bothered him to throw my father against the wall. In those days you didn't sue people or call the police for things like that, in fact, my father was that kind of guy, too. It was just that McCann was much bigger.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were presumably fifteen years old or so, and then you went on to high school, grade ten through twelve, is that right? Where was that?

ROLAND REISS: Pomona High School. It was then Pomona High School and Pomona Junior College. Remember, this was wartime. World War II was still on. They had a small junior college in Pomona at that time. I remember they had a six-man football team, because there weren't enough men to have a larger football team. At Pomona High School, I was sort of the class artist. I was active in drama. I was active in sports. I played baseball and tennis, but I took art classes throughout because I knew this was my direction. There was a man named Adolph Kath who taught the art classes. I did a cartoon for the school newspaper called Podunk which was about a high school kid. He didn't live in Pomona, but he represented high school kids in general.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Kodunk?

ROLAND REISS: Podunk. P-o-d-u-n-k. It was the Pomona Red Devils so I designed the red devils for all of the schools visual material.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is Podunk how you felt about Pomona?

ROLAND REISS: Well, I thought it was at the time. I thought it was a cool and dopey word. It was a combination name, like Pomona Dunk or Pomona Dumb, that sort of feeling to it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you were, from this point on after Mr. McCann interfered and took matters into his

capable hands, focused on art school?

ROLAND REISS: Committed to being a commercial artist, yes. I was just thinking, during that period Disney was raiding all of the high schools for talent to make war films. All of the other kids, who seemed to have the most talent, left while they were in high school and some right after graduation, and went to work for Disney.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I didn't know that. So they went directly from high school with just the basic art training you get there, and not by way of the Art Center School or anything like that?

ROLAND REISS: No. They went right to Disney. Now, I think Disney had run some classes for those people. I remember seeing the work by some of them who Disney sent back to recruit us. For some reason, I don't recall, I resisted the idea, because it would have been logical, I could have had a nice job and a paycheck. I would have come home and said to my dad, "I'm doing fine."

PAUL KARLSTROM: And wouldn't that be a very reasonable career to work for Disney Studios?

ROLAND REISS: Sure. Now there were some other factors that maybe played into it a little, one was Millard Sheets. He had graduated from Pomona High School and was the reigning genius in Claremont. He was well known as a watercolorist. I was just beginning to get a glimpse of what this was all about, but probably the medium I use most in my art classes was watercolor. He came down to my high school class and gave a little talk to the art students, which was really quite marvelous that he did that because he was a very high-powered man. I was impressed with that. At the time, I wasn't quite sure what a fine artist was. I'd bought some books on Picasso and things like that, but they [reproductions] were all in black and white in those days. I think he probably began to give me an inkling of what it meant to be a real artist.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is Tape 1, Side B. I believe we were hearing a story about your encounter with Millard Sheets.

ROLAND REISS: This was during the war and he did that series of paintings in India, which were published in Life Magazine, and of course that made a big impact on me because they'd been published in Life. I think also because I thought watercolor was probably a very, very important thing to do. I did a lot of watercolor and later showed with the California Water Color Society [now the National Watercolor Society] several seasons some years later. When I think about it, he had more of an influence on my early work than I realized.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I am very interested in your art activity that it had a fair amount of watercolor.

ROLAND REISS: I'm trying to get the timing of this right. No, it was a little later. I got a job at the L.A. County Fairgrounds when it was a prisoner of war camp. A lot of people don't know it was a prisoner of war camp. They had German and Italian prisoners there. They were cutting ducks, those amphibious assault vehicles from the South Pacific, apart with torches and salvaging parts of them. I was in charge of the equipment. In fact, a little piece of history, when Dachau and Belsen were discovered, I was working there. I will never forget that they put up about twenty giant billboards all around the fairgrounds with photographs of Dachau survivors for the prisoners to look at. They wanted the prisoners to see that. They said, "This is what you've done." Of course, the prisoners all denied they knew anything about it at all. Most of them were farm boys and they'd been captured early in the war, so they probably weren't even around when some of this was happening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you personally have any interaction with any of these prisoners?

ROLAND REISS: Well, I got to talk to them all the time. We weren't supposed to talk to them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you speak German?

ROLAND REISS: No, but we managed to communicate and a few of them spoke English, so we would communicate. I was working with them and I wasn't working with many of the Italians, but it also meant that I was connected with the fairgrounds. I left high school and went to art school in Chicago. After that I came back to California and got a job at the fairgrounds again. This was two years later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was that?

ROLAND REISS: Oh, it was just a dirt job. I joined the Hod Carriers Union and I was breaking blacktop with a pick axe. Someone asked one day if anyone could replan because the fair [ground] was reconverting back into a fair. It was all being painted in brilliant colors chosen by Millard Sheets. There was an art building and Millard Sheets took charge of the art shows. We were asked if anyone could read diagrams illustrating where to put some

chairs and things in one of the buildings. I said, "Well, I can." So I did that and the next thing, I got a call. I went in to interview with a man named Bill Bruce, the principal of Emerson High School in Pomona. He was in charge of the school's exhibits at the fairground underneath the grandstand. The political payoff for all the racing above was that they could have the school's exhibits underneath. He said, "I've heard you know something about art plans and things. Would you like to go to work here?" I want to mention at this point that Millard was using the space of the upper floor of the Grandstand to paint a large mural during the off-season and it was sent to a different location afterwards. Sue Hertel was his main assistant. She was always his main assistant for most of his career, she was his main assistant. H-e-r-t-e-l. She was married to Carl Hertel for a long time and taught out at Claremont. Sue was there mainly executing a giant mural. Millard would come in and out so I never talked to him. I didn't really know him, but I would see him go in and out. I would talk to her. I may have even met him briefly. I was the kid downstairs and she was the big assistant for him and she was older than I was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said she was his assistant.

ROLAND REISS: She was his main assistant all the years he had the place across the highway on Foothill, in Claremont, even in later years after he had left Claremont, she was still executing work for Millard there. She had his style down and could do anything with it. In fact that was her problem, even though she did finally distinguish herself with her own work with horses and things, she had to fight her way out of that style. It dominated her work. The whole story of artists' assistants would be an interesting story. I know a lot of people who worked with artists a long time and did major work for them who are unknown. It just some how ought to be known that they were there and they were mainstays in these large careers. She certainly was for Millard a major person. So there was that consciousness. I have to say also that those shows at the L.A. County Fair were very important. He pulled off shows there that the fairgrounds would never mount. They were major regional exhibitions. He did a historical show of American art that meant a great deal to me. I'm sure that show was hugely influential for all artists in the area because there was so little available to us. . He did wonderful shows of interior design and a big competitive art show several times. I remember the year that Keith Finch won the big prize, and I began to learn all those names.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this really was your first real contact with art in Southern California on a professional level?

ROLAND REISS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You began to learn the cast of characters and the important people in about '48?

ROLAND REISS: '49 probably, somewhere in there. In fact, I entered the competitive show as a novice and I got in. They hung my painting on a door which was sometimes open and sometimes closed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the painting?

ROLAND REISS: I was a young boy. It was a girl, a nude, with some flowers. It's funny because people I got to know years later at Claremont like Paul Darrow, were working there at the fairgrounds for Millard. Paul worked there as an assistant. I want to back up just a little bit to say several other things about my high school experience. One of the things I did was get a job in downtown Pomona in what was the best of the two men's clothing stores, the John P. Evans Clothing Store. I was hired there because I was the class President. I was very visible at school and they chose those kids to help attract high school business. After a few weeks, the owner came to me and said, "I think I've got a special job for you. How would you like to work on window display?" They had a wonderful window display guy, who did crackerjack windows. He took me on as an apprentice and taught me window design. That's what led to my display work at the L.A. County Fair. They would have contests with window display and I actually won the prize for the best window at Christmas in Pomona one year. The other person I want to mention who was very, very important to me was a man who lived in south Pomona named George DeBeeson. He was an incredible man! He worked for Disney and left over a dispute about one of his inventions. He painted California landscape school oil paintings and he was kind of a Renaissance man misplaced. He had invented the first automatic pilot for the airplane. He showed me photographs of him with Marconi. He had flown "Jennys" [Curtis JN-4D] and all that sort of thing. He had a ceramics factory in south Pomona where he made black panthers and tigers. I have to show you this one of little girls with lambs which in those days were sold at Bullocks. They were never painted. They were glazed white. The tigers and panthers were glazed in color. I painted some of them for him. I would just come in and work on things now and then. Before meeting George, I signed up for an art class at the Recreation Department and a graduate student from Claremont was supposed to teach this class. He came down twice and then we were told he wasn't going to come any more, but we'll get an instructor for you. So the next week there was this old man named George DeBeeson standing there. He immediately adopted me as his art apprentice. It was an incredible experience because behind his large concrete block factory he lived in a tarpaper shack. He was probably sixty-five years old and his wife was twenty-four. She was a church organist and he built this giant organ for her to rehearse in the home. His son-in-law was Korla Pandit, who was the great figure on television in the early days, who played

the organ and all the women would sigh over his playing. Korla would come out on weekends and they would have dinners and I would always be there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you spell his name again?

ROLAND REISS: K-o-r-l-a is the first name. P-a-n-d-i-t is his last name. He was a Hollywood East Indian. He would talk to me about walking on coals and East Indian philosophy. DeBeeson also had this life-size plaster fountain in which one of his sons was peeing amidst a group of swans. Even though it was in their backyard, it became a major scandal in the little town of Pomona. He was an incredible character. I think what impressed me was his restless, inventive mind. He was firing ceramic tests for the government which would later become the kind of ceramics used in space technology, ceramics that would withstand very high temperatures. He taught me California landscape school painting. I would go out on weekends with him to do that. He made me study Michelangelo, Vermeer and Cézanne in large books published by Phaidon. He taught me everything he could teach me. He was just a wonderful, wonderful man. I recalled years later when I finally wound up at UCLA and thought I was really a hot shot. I brought back all my slick junior year work to show him. He was very wise, he said, "This is exactly what I'd be doing if I were your age." And then he said to me - I will never forget this - "You are better than all those people in Claremont." Millard set off this terrible love/hate relationship with all the artists in the area. He was so powerful. He obscured the existence of other artists. All of them had to contend with him and even George was feeling Millard's shadow in South Pomona. Not that he was out there competing in the same arena as Millard, but all the action was in Claremont.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was Sheets teaching?

ROLAND REISS: At Scripps.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So he was all entrenched there.

ROLAND REISS: He was entrenched there, and there he became a "Wunderkinder." He designed things; he built that rammed earth home, everything that he did turned into money and magic. He was a model for a new kind of contemporary artist with business savvy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean?

ROLAND REISS: Millard could talk straight on in those days with major business people. Very few other artists could do that. He had the charisma, the intelligence, and the confidence. He knew how to charm and he knew how to handle himself. I would say many artists now can do that. Many artists today can speak with corporate heads and make things happen actually convince them of projects and all of that. He was one of the few artists who could really do anything like that, certainly in the Southern California area. They called him "The Genius in Claremont."

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm very interested in the stories about Sheets and how he fits into the bigger story of the development of art in California, because there are very strong feelings about Millard Sheets who's viewed in some ways a touchstone for certain directions in California art.

ROLAND REISS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Peter Selz, who knew the scene because he was down there at Claremont, thought that Millard Sheets was a very bad presence, damaging to what Peter viewed as the healthy proper unfolding art in the area. I think he particularly would cite the story of Millard Sheets firing Pete Voulkas at Otis. You were in a position there to interact with and evaluate this kind of influence that Millard seemed to have. I'd just be interested to hear anything you have to say about your own view of the role he played.

ROLAND REISS: Well, he was very, very important. He was not only beloved by many of his students, he was also feared. He was just very strong, and at times something approaching ruthless. I often tell my students, most artists are quite ruthless in order to get done what they have to get done. They really can't tolerate much that gets in their way. I think he was pretty much like that. He did cast some people aside, apprentices and so on. Jon Helland had been a graduate student with Millard before he worked with me at the Fairgrounds. He was devastated when Millard refused to grant him his MFA degree because he hadn't completed work for Millard on one of Millard's projects.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did Millard expect his students to basically follow the correct path, which would be his own style?

ROLAND REISS: I can't answer that. McPhee was there and he had some small influence. I think he was so powerful and so dominating that people just automatically followed his style. But there were people who didn't. Karl Benjamin did not. There were some who worked like McPhee. They didn't want to work like people outside of

Claremont I must say, Karl was the most independent of the bunch in a marvelous way. The relationship between Pomona and Scripps is one that extended forward in time and is very interesting in that Pomona always styled itself as the intellectual school. On a scholarly basis, it was the most impressive school. They saw themselves exclusively as committed to fine art. Millard's net was very wide at Scripps. it included all the crafts, and that was still going on when I arrived at Claremont. In fact, the Pomona faculty voted to do away with ceramics when it had begun to develop spontaneously. So, Millard's embracing of the crafts and of projects involved with industry, fairgrounds, ocean liners, and the banks was seen by some as crassly commercial. Remember, Scripps had the Ameses who did the enamel cloisonné and always had very good potters there. Before Soldner, they had Petterson.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh yeah, the Eames. You mean.

ROLAND REISS: Not Pomona. I'm speaking of Scripps. Not Eames, Ames.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I want to make sure.

ROLAND REISS: Two of the Ameses at Claremont, A-m-e-s, were both very noted for crafts, especially enamel cloisonné. Ricky Pederson in pottery before Paul Soldner, who was world famous, was at Scripps College. The Pomona College art department saw crafts as a corrupting influence up until recent times.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Low brow.

ROLAND REISS: Low brow, corrupting of fine art and of course with some envy because Millard and all of his friends, like Betty Davenport Ford, a former student, just dominated the whole area, in fact, almost dominated Southern California for a period of time. I tried to pick up the legacy of the success of both the Pomona and Scripps art programs when I came to Claremont because it had been largely lost before I arrived.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't mean to interrupt, but you see in many ways then Millard's presence and, for instance, sort of embracing philosophy towards art as a positive influence.

ROLAND REISS: Yes. My views are very catholic about art and I'm not an elitist. I think much of that work, which has been trashed recently in critical circles, will be re-evaluated. I think that work is better than current critical outlooks are willing to acknowledge. I mean, just because much of the work appears corny and dated now does not mean that it was not good and that it will not re-emerge again to be appreciated. The renewed respect for the work of someone like Thomas Hart Benton when understood in context would be an example. Some of Millard's work was quite marvelous, as was work by many other people in that period. He was a great watercolorist, but that medium is currently out of favor. Milford Zornes, Phil Dike, David Scott and Jim Fuller were among the many great watercolor painters from Claremont. I think the work will be appreciated in the future.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting. I don't want to interject myself or my recollections of Millard's remarks.

ROLAND REISS: Although it helps me bounce off of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But, on the other hand, I think important because here was a major presence in Southern California, one that came to stand for what was counter to progressive tendencies. Millard Sheets is practically an anathema, along with a few others, unfortunately, and even more unfairly, Rico Lebrun

ROLAND REISS: I have a lot to say about Rico Lebrun when we come to that. I think that whole group, with Millard at the head, had to be seen as regionalist painters. I think there's nothing wrong with that. I think that's a very important contribution. No one has painted the California landscape, those hills, well, but certainly he's one of the people who painted those hills in a way that's really very special. It really captures the unique quality of Southern California landscape. The modernists abhorred the regional outlook and it formal limitations and these are reasons this work did not become important internationally. Nevertheless, Millard was a force and his ideas were carried out of Claremont to Otis and eventually across the West Coast.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing an interview with Roland Reiss. This is Tape 2, side A. Roland, we found ourselves right in the middle of a key issue. We started talking about your encounter with Millard Sheets and the influence that he had and then we moved on from that to the consideration of the very influential, important role he played in the art scene in Southern California. At one time he was the leading artist of not only Southern California but of California.

ROLAND REISS: Millard went on to Otis and then on to CalArts [California Institute of the Arts]. I know at CalArts they considered him a very troublesome character on the board. Millard did want the position of Dean of Visual

Arts at CalArts that he did not get and left over that issue. For my own part, from the perspective at that point in time because I was just beginning things at Claremont, he was never really pleased with the program that I began to develop at Claremont. Not that he had much to do with us, because he was also unhappy with what was going on at Scripps. He would come back and say, "These students don't know how to draw anymore." He had super conservative views about art education. I don't know how much that's the product of a basically conservative view, because I don't view his watercolors as that conservative, and how much a product of an old man getting cranky and maybe more conservative with age. He never really did a non-objective painting that I know of, he must have experimented with it, but there are no examples I am aware of.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Except in, perhaps, the sense of design -- that would be it as far as I know.

ROLAND REISS: Certainly there were a lot of derivative elements in that work. Gauguin figuring very heavily in the stylization of horses, figures and so on, but there are derivative elements in everybody's work. Again, I think, that takes perspective. But to look on the other side of what was happening in the latter part of his career in Los Angeles, there were two major figures, Lorser Feitelson and Rico Lebrun. It was like two camps. The third camp was on the wane, never really became that important, and that was Stanton Macdonald-Wright with Jan Stussy and Gordon Nunes at UCLA as his protégés. So maybe you could say there were three currents, but the dominant currents were Lebrun and Feitelson for new ideas in Los Angeles. Lebrun did figurative work, highly romantic, affected by Picasso, as you well know. Feitelson represented non-objective art. In my mind, by the early 50s he was representing that, earlier than that I really don't know Feitelson's history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, there was that whole post-surrealist movement, which was actually very interesting. Some people think that's the most interesting part of Feitelson.

ROLAND REISS: Of course, that is in early Rothko. It was in the work of most of the non-objective painters in the early phase of their work in that period.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Feitelson, Lundeberg and the post-surrealist movement of the 30s is actually quite interesting. They probably made more of a claim to a position in American art history with that movement.

ROLAND REISS: Really? Because I certainly know that about her, but for some reason I never knew . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: She was a student, of course.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, but she remained in that territory until later and he moved into non-objective painting. They were the two big figures. Actually, I got caught right in the middle of that. There's another funny story, about another graduate student at UCLA, named Paul Rivas. We were in a seminar with Fred Wight. Seminars in those days had only two students in them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was Wight teaching at that point?

ROLAND REISS: He was running the gallery at UCLA and he taught art history, and, of course, this was an art history seminar. He had us work on a Morris Graves catalog that he did, and then we were to undertake a project. We took these two currents which were affecting our own work at the time. Paul took Lorser Feitelson and I took Rico Lebrun. As a result, I have a tape of that interview somewhere with Rico. If I can locate it, I would love to have you hear it. I don't think it was Fred's idea; we gravitated to these two artists. I wanted to do Rico Lebrun and Paul Rivas wanted to do Lorser Feitelson. I didn't have any particular problem, of course, with Feitelson. There is a funny anecdote which has to do with this. Underway was a lot of discussion about hiring Rico Lebrun at UCLA. Bill Brice, who was at UCLA, was one of Rico's protégés, the other big one, being Howard Warshaw. Rico was angling for this job at UCLA and there was considerable interest at the time in hiring him. Bill Brice was the main one who was connected, but Jan Stussy, through his interest in Berman, was also interested in Rico Lebrun and that romantic, figurative work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because of his close connection to Macdonald-Wright. How does that work?

ROLAND REISS: Yes, Wright's late figurative work could lead that way and his earlier abstract work could lead into Feitelson. My anecdote starts with an interview with Frank Perls in my research for Rico Lebrun.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you tape it?

ROLAND REISS: No, I just made notes. The weird part about this story was, while I was interviewing Frank Perls in his gallery, Paul Rivas came in to see the show and listened to this interview surreptitiously and then reported its contents to a faculty member at UCLA. At first it was thought that I had broken Frank Perls confidence. The man who had complete faith in me, who stopped the whole thing dead in its tracks, was Bill Brice. I said, "Bill, I didn't do this and Paul should step forward and apologize." Of course, he wouldn't come forward and Bill just stood by me, and he is still my dear friend to this day. It was tense stuff. The politics were very complicated and

there was a group at UCLA that didn't really want to see Rico Lebrun come to teach there; after all, it meant bringing a powerful figure to the faculty who would have obscured the rest of them. In fact, that went on when Diebenkorn was on the faculty. Ultimately, Rico was not hired there. As a result of my interview, I with Rico himself, I worked as his assistant, sporadically, because I was a graduate student. I would go in now and then and I would also show slides for him when he lectured. He seemed to think that since I was a graduate student I could handle his slides.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wait a minute, you worked as an assistant for Rico? He was teaching at UCLA?

ROLAND REISS: No, he wasn't teaching at UCLA. As a result of this seminar, I did an interview with him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was he teaching?

ROLAND REISS: I don't think he was teaching anywhere. He had a studio on San Vicente at the time. I think all he was doing was working.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about his slides?

ROLAND REISS: He was doing the big collages. He needed somebody when he was called on to lecture to show slides for him. Sometimes he needed help in his studio. I wasn't a regular assistant, I want to make that clear, but he needed additional help occasionally.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We don't know exactly when this is and we need to. You're a UCLA graduate student.

ROLAND REISS: This has got to be 1955, '56. His studio was on San Vicente Boulevard in Brentwood and he lived about ten blocks away. So it was really handy to UCLA and I thought maybe he got the studio there because he was expecting to get the teaching job at UCLA. I don't know that story for sure, but it never worked out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who did they like at UCLA besides themselves?

ROLAND REISS: I can't think of who it would be. Rico was very good to Bill Brice. He got him teaching. I think they had a very good friendship. Bill admired Rico's work and was influenced by it, especially in drawing. I learned the Lebrun style of drawing at UCLA and that is probably one of the reasons Rico liked me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There were really a lot of politics in this art scene during that period, more than I realized. Of course, the view has been of the Bay Area that there really wasn't an art scene in Southern California. Of course, I disagree with that and we know that's not the case. It seems that these camps were more polarized, at least within the schools. That matches very much the current situation in the Bay Area.

ROLAND REISS: I would say that's true. I think that the scene in L.A. was less advanced than in San Francisco, absolutely no doubt about it. Feitelson's brand of abstraction really relates to constructivism and things like that. All of the San Francisco development relates to contemporary ideas in painting. In fact, I remember in that period, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy writing an article in which she claimed that when Abstract Expressionism was in full flower the true line of abstraction had been lost. She was referring to the brand of formal abstraction practiced by Feitelson and her husband [Laszlo Moholy-Nagy].

PAUL KARLSTROM: You started out talking about Millard and from that gave a quick description of the different camps, which actually didn't make a Millard camp. You talked about the Rico camp, the Feitelson camp, the Macdonald-Wright camp, but where does Millard fit into this?

ROLAND REISS: It was already fading. The last of it was the California Water Color Society, with people like Leonard Edmundson and other figures. It was fading and by that time Lebrun and Feitelson were so important. There were still a few people like the young Jack Zajec and Doug McClelland, who was teaching at Claremont and was my immediate predecessor. Felix Landau Gallery was showing these people, but Millard was disappearing from the picture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In his interview for the Archives of American Art, I got the sense that his story was one of being eclipsed and that he was history, but what I'm hearing from you is that you are willing to give him a lot more in terms of his role and even the quality of his art that his detractors aren't. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

ROLAND REISS: As I've already mentioned, I think his role was very important and the quality of the work is higher than anyone wants to admit. It's the same kind of argument against Andrew Wyeth, who I also think is a marvelous artist. The year that they said that Wyeth and de Kooning had sold $50,000 paintings each, they represented extremes within art production and it's sort of wonderful that they both sold at those prices; but, of course, the art world saw Wyeth as a trivial artist and de Kooning as the reigning master. I think a similar thing happened to Millardm that he wound up representing the figurative tradition on the West Coast. It's interesting

that he became more prominent as an administrator, director at Otis, and then a trustee at CalArts. That seems to be happening to me, that one is eventually viewed less as an artist and defined more as an administrator. In a way, the interest in his work was decreasing. So on balance, he became even better known for his skills as an administrator later in his career. Many artists become bitter as their careers wane and paranoid about revisionist history. Thank God not all of them. Many of us do worry, however, that particular groups may preempt historical moments and exclude other significant artists and developments. I am sure this is one of the reasons that many artists appreciate the opportunity to do these interviews. Certainly, a variety of voices will produce a larger overview. Different perspectives can produce entirely different understandings and evaluations, especially in retrospect. It is important that Millard was able to tell his version. I know that Clyfford Still was obsessed with the notion that history would be rewritten to the advantage of other artists. It was for this reason, he told me, he kept extensive notes on interactions he had in the art world. My own experience of developments in Los Angeles in the 1970s, for instance, is very different from the current official critical version of that period. Millard Sheets was an early artist celebrity on the West Coast. I imagine it was difficult for him to confront the criticism of his life work in later years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I have to watch myself because I can come into this discussion 50-50. Millard's success, as you suggested, ironically in part, was because of his whole package and personality, his ability to work the patrons, and work the press, but exactly the skills that have served many contemporary artists so well. It becomes a media war not just an art war between Millard and his camp, which has been described as an anti-modernist in the extreme and reactionary. He makes a case for that, but it seems inherent in his approach and the way he structured a career, which he claims he didn't do strategically. He acts as if all these marvelous and wonderful things happened to him.

ROLAND REISS: I just thought of another aspect of the work that caused a problem. He was open to the influence of Mexican artists like Jean Charlot, Rivera and Orozco. Charlot did many of his mosaics in Mexico, and brought an interest in Mexican Art to Southern California and to his paintings. You can see Orozco in Millard's famine figures from India which were among his best paintings. I think he absorbed more Mexican style into his work than did Rico

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course, Lebrun studied in Mexico for a while with Siqueiros. I'm not sure of that.

ROLAND REISS: I know he was in Mexico. Who he studied with, I don't know. With Lebrun, it was always historical artists he talked about like Signorelli or European and American contemporaries like Picasso and de Kooning. Millard's involvement with Mexican art was an anathema to those in Southern California seeking a place in the international art scene. Mexico was not seen in those days as a great art center. The Mexican muralists were recognized as important figures but Mexican art was largely regarded as provincial and nationalistic at best. It had no vital relationship with the developing issues of modernism, so the idea that people like Tamayo . . .

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing an interview with Roland Reiss, Session 1, tape 2, side B.

ROLAND REISS: I think the soft, romantic figurative aspects of artists like Tamayo, which he [Sheets] supported did not represent hard-core modernist kinds of interests, and was, therefore, an embarrassment. The new perspective embracing cultural diversity is a recent phenomenon allowing contemporary art to expand its range and engage in cross-cultural dialogue. We are not talking about Mexican art being done in the United States by Mexican artists or by Americans of Mexican origin. We are talking about contemporary American artists in general deriving expressive and stylistic qualities from the art of Mexico. Having grown up in Southern California, I feel very much related to Mexico. My minor in college was Anthropology, and Pre-Columbian art was my main interest. I took courses in the history of Mexico and I took classes in Spanish. I grew up in Pomona where Spanish was spoken everywhere. While in Claremont, Millard developed a similar affinity for Mexico and for its art before it was artistically correct to do so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's happening now in this post-modernist era we are opening up and willing to even give Millard Sheets his place. I find this all very interesting, particularly from the standpoint of your perspective.

ROLAND REISS: The appeal to modernism in the work of Feitelson and Lebrun is all European in its orientation, I think, Picasso to [Kasimir] Malevich, but it doesn't find deep roots in Mexico. There was an embarrassment about being a California artist, if you wanted to be an international modernist. In its own way, Regionalism was important and that's why Millard's brand of Regionalism managed to be quite distinct. It doesn't look like Thomas Hart Benton or Grant Wood or Anton Refregier or other artists who represented regional territories. Millard lead a very distinct regional development.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting that you mention Refregier, because there is a lot of interest in him, whereas,

not the same kind of interest in Sheets. I'm inclined to think that it is the political dimension to his work.

ROLAND REISS: I think Sheets' work was very romantic, poetic and sometimes historically didactic and it didn't strive to do things other than that. We may come around to thinking that's enough, at some point, for an artist to do. I have never chosen to be highly political either. I've been criticized for that because politically-driven work has been fashionable in critical circles. I just think there are more important issues beyond the political. In my miniatures, I wanted to be more philosophical, which differs from the romanticism of Millard's landscapes. Many artists have chosen not to get highly political in their work. Certainly, art has a much greater range than that. I believe there will be a reevaluation of a lot of work when a larger perspective returns to the field of criticism.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Before we abandon our friend, Millard, you said something earlier and it occurred to me that ironically he was most inclusive and, democratic about his approach to art and what qualifies and what can be included, which is very much the cry of the time.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, but as you point out, I think it was right on, there was none of the political dimension, the stridency or the angst that comes with it. In Millard, if it's there at all, it's seamless. I recall the painting he did of the California hills, some round hills, and sent out to all the schools in Southern California. Someone decided that the hills looked like two breasts. It was a giant scandal and the paintings were removed from many of the schools, because of its supposedly subversive intent. That's as close as he got, as far as I know, to a political controversy involving his work and it was an erotic issue not a political one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There are certainly several anecdotes that are repeated about some completely distorting the work where the "red baiters" were looking for subversive messages.

ROLAND REISS: Right. When I say that Sheets' work is better than is allowed, I wouldn't put it up there with Clyfford Still or Mark Rothko, or someone like that, but in terms of regional importance, I certainly would put it on the level of Thomas Hart Benton.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The issue is the term regionalism as a way of explaining the problems that Sheets and the California school encountered and to be identified with a place.

ROLAND REISS: I would say essentialist/internationalist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the closer you get to the specific, unless it's some sort of explosion of Abstract Expressionism, the further you're working away from anything of significance.

ROLAND REISS: Generally speaking, unless it is very political.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you respond to the notion that art among of other things responds to the environment, not necessarily the landscape. What's different about this place, Southern California, and to what extent is that appropriately expressed in the art?

ROLAND REISS: I think that's very, very important; to some extent, it's inescapable, I think, when artists try to become international, they try to eliminate their personal environment from their work, but it creeps in nevertheless, even in the most minimal kind of work. The difference between Ed Moses' monochrome paintings and Brice Marden's monochrome paintings reflects the psychology of place. You can tell one is a California painter and you can tell one is a New York painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: For you, how does that show?

ROLAND REISS: I think you can see it in the color, the density and even the attitude about paint. In a positive way I would say that the Moses' paintings are more decorative, just in the application of the paint. I'm talking about the very hermetic way of painting in both cases, but in Moses' work the touch causes color to expand and sit more lightly on the canvas. The paint itself is less dense, more open and almost playful. Marden's work seems aesthetically focused; more urban, closed and ultra serious in the workman-like application of paint and its greater density. I think their work exemplifies their individual environmental experiences, psychologically and physically. These artists would probably reject my thesis, but ultimately, whether it is conscious or not, I believe the influence of place cannot be discounted. I don't know. The dilemma is that on one hand you have arguments for regionalism and for national in the work and then you have the drive toward an international art where primarily nationalistic and regionalistic work is less acceptable. At the moment it is fashionable to emphasize different national characteristics in the name of diversity in large international shows. It is clear, though, that work which is exclusively national or regional in character seldom rises to a sustained position of importance. There are, of course, some exceptions. It is a post-modern idea that national qualities can be played out and subsumed in international art. Basically, there are two arguments going on. There's an argument about government getting smaller and smaller communities and with an art centered on its own roots and its own

immediate environment, rather than the whole world. The other argument is that the whole world is getting smaller but our environment is getting larger and we will all be absorbed into a global view, and cultural differences will be extremely minor. This may be where electronic communication and world economics are taking us. I think artists are beginning to examine the idea that there are hundreds of thousands of artists in the world and most can have a meaningful local career of consequence while not being major players on the world stage. We are still a celebrity-oriented star-crossed culture, but I see more artists moving toward a deeper, more meaningful and less competitively destructive relationship with their own art by embracing a sense of place and community.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You are obviously in good position to observe that because you have been head of the graduate art program at Claremont and obviously you interact with students all the time.

ROLAND REISS: I have all of my life, forty years of teaching.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The pattern, as it seems to me in the 60s and 70s, became careerist and the notion was that you have to participate in this big international art world, which is basically centered in New York, so a number of artists make that decision to go to New York. What I hear you saying is that other factors came strongly into play and it's not just careerism or the perceived advantages of being in the center.

ROLAND REISS: Things have really changed since the 60s and 70s in terms that centers for art and art careers. Realism is now centered in the schools, students realize that some professional artists today can support themselves on art sales, can have extraordinary exhibition opportunities, make serious money and become celebrities. Young artists now have many opportunities that were not available when I entered the art world. In the 50s, there were perhaps only a hundred or so serious fine artists in the country who could live off their work. Los Angeles and other centers have come of age and it is possible to have a full-blown career outside of New York, although with a few exceptions New York artists command larger reputations and bigger prices. I think this is because the East Coast controls the major art publications, there are more important collectors in that area, and the sense of critical history runs deeper than anywhere else. The enormous growing population of artists is overwhelming a burgeoning art scene. Competition makes success ever more difficult for most artists to achieve. I think it is for this reason that artists four or five years out of school and beyond their "emerging artist" shows are beginning to take stock of their lives and seriously entertain a less driven attitude and the acceptance of their place in a regional setting, even if it is within a larger art center. Highly successful artists today tend to be somewhat sociopathic, manipulative and ruthless of the intense competition. Fortunately, I think, younger artists are being compelled to develop a larger perspective about their lives as artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it isn't automatic, I gather, that they graduate and some still try to go to New York and think that is the only place to achieve success.

ROLAND REISS: No, they graduate and try to make the scene anywhere they can. Of course, many of them have to pay their bills and pay off their loans, so they can't do much of anything for the first couple of years. A few years after that they begin to see careerism for what it really is and how intensely they will need to hustle. It means redefining their belief system and values, it means where you live and virtually all friendships and activities will be totally focused on career opportunity. Many buy into it for a while, but increasingly more artists are opting for a healthier path.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This seems to make sense, since the focus of so much art that we have been discussing seems to be on the self as a whole cult of the individual and the autobiography and personalism and I guess, if that's the case, then you are going to have to face these issues, "Who am I?" Is that asking too much?

ROLAND REISS: I don't know, but I remember a review of Judy Chicago's autobiography in which the reviewer said that the problem with the book is that Judy's life lacked panache. I actually thought Judy's life had panache, but I thought, "My God, is that the important part of an artist's life and work?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's break here and pick up sometime soon.

[END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE B]

[SESSION 2, SEPTEMBER 8, 1997]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Continuing an interview with Roland Reiss. The date is September 8, 1997. This Session Two is being conducted at the artist's studio/home at The Brewery in downtown Los Angeles. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom, and this is Tape 1, Side A. Roland, we were just reviewing a little bit what we talked about last time and how we meandered around a little bit but, I think, productively. And what we would do is sort of move back a little bit now and fill in some of that which may have

been missing from the latter part of our interview, in terms of chronology. And I think you wanted to go all the way back to art school in Chicago.

ROLAND REISS: After I arrived in Chicago in 1947, I worked in a large commercial art studio by day and went to the American Academy of Art at night. It was the largest advertising studio in Chicago, named Bielefeld Studios for its owner. During my time there I formed a friendship with the owner's son and as a result he developed a personal interest in me. After a year there he suggested I go to college before doing any more commercial work, and I took his advice. I also wanted to mention a man who was at the American Academy of Art because he got me a scholarship there. I couldn't afford to continue in school because I was only making twenty-one dollars a week. He believed in my potential and arranged for me to attend school for free. His name was Alexander Mirsky, and a years later he was implicated in an authentication scandal. He was a Russian immigrant who had studied under Repin and he taught figure drawing at the American Academy. . After class he would take a small group of us out for coffee and rolls, enough rolls so we could each take one home for breakfast. Anyway, I came back to California and took a job at the Los Angeles County Fair in Pomona, designing displays for the schools exhibits underneath the grandstand in order to support myself. Some of the display fixtures I did back in 1949 are still in use. It was a great job for me and I got to handle a lot of school children's art and draw upon my experience in window display, sign painting, and fine art. We showed art work collected from over 300 schools in L.A. County. Installing this work and helping run the programs for the schools during the Fair was challenging and great fun. I was also going to junior college. Adolph Kath was my art teacher at Mt. SAC, the same art teacher I had worked with in high school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mt. SAC is Mt. San Antonio

ROLAND REISS: Mt. San Antonio College. Yes, it's in Walnut, California. I was in actually the second class after college began. I spent two years there doing college prep for UCLA. After graduation I did not have the funds to support myself in order to enroll at UCLA. It was during the Korean War, 1951. I was drafted because I did not have a college deferment. I was the only member of my high school class in the draft call-up that month, I was very bitter about that. There was some irony in the fact that I had received an award as the "Outstanding Senior Boy" at Pomona High School and then being one of its few representatives in the Army because I lacked the financial resources or family connections that others used to avoid service.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean?

ROLAND REISS: The others found ways to get out of it. If you were in a defense industry, you were deferred. My school friends all went with me to take the physical but later I was the only one of us to get on the train to Monterey.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the year?

ROLAND REISS: I think it was '51. I keep going back whether it was '51 or '52. It was like our worst moment in Korea. We were being pushed way down south and we were drafting massive amounts of men. I was sent to Ft. Ord for basic training. After training they gave us a series of tests and wanted a small group of us to become officers, but it would have meant signing up for an additional year. Those of us who refused the offer were sent to Camp Roberts to train new troops. I was fortunate because most of my basic training company from Fort Ord were killed or badly wounded. I discovered there were several places on the post where art was being done. I transferred into one called Training Aids because they needed someone to paint a mural. They had had a contest and an artist from San Diego had won but he had transferred out of Camp Roberts. I had painted that mural with George De Beeson and large things at the Fair so I applied for the job. I was sent to San Francisco to buy materials, given a warehouse, assistants, a scaffold, and a promotion to corporal. The mural was actually a full stage backdrop that unfurled as the commanding general made his speech each month to incoming draftees. It was pure Norman Rockwell in style, with infantry and tanks going up a hill under fire and with the 7th Armored Division insignia emblazoned in the sky against rays of light. : General Partridge was very pleased with it and gave me an official commendation with a promotion to sergeant-first-class. And I was put in charge of art production for Training Aids. This was a position equivalent to art director and I was supervising the work of about 50 artists. We produced all the visual aids for training the troops. We did charts, graphs, maps, plans, billboards with lots of illustrations of machine guns, camouflage, tactics and so forth. We had sketch class at night with WACS for models. We lived in the Headquarters Company with the clerk typist and band members, who basically wanted to be writers, poets, and musicians. We ate our meals at the WAACS' mess hall. We had our own little art world there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was just at Camp Roberts?

ROLAND REISS: Camp Roberts. And I was put in charge of -- that is, of course, the officers were really in charge -- but I was the one who was like an art director where I really handed out the work and supervised the work for some fifty artists, because all of the education was done with these giant oil cloth charts which were illustrated.

They would take them out in the field and unroll them and show them to the troops. We did billboards and illustrations of machine guns and camouflage and everything imaginable with lots of lettering. There were a lot of people doing lettering and we had kind of a little art school at night with models, which was great! We ate in the WAC's mess. We were in Headquarters Company. All the clerk typists were writers and poets, so it was like a little art world there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean, some sort of military bohemia.

ROLAND REISS: Well, yes, sort of. We did have permission to wear paint-splattered fatigues. This is a digression, but I really learned something about the human need for decoration and art. Everything in the Army was supposed to be "G.I." which meant plain, khaki-colored or olive drab. One day someone would get an idea their unit should have colored shoe laces, next it would be epaulets and neckerchiefs, then helmet liners with decals, multiple colored stripes and chrome plating, The uniform would become more and more decorative approaching the splendor of an Aztec warrior. This was true of the equipment as well. I think it reflects the human tendency to distinguish ourselves as individuals, members of subcultures. A new colonel would arrive and say, "Out! G.I.! and then it would slowly start all over again. There was also a sense of being an artist at the court, painting portraits of officers and their families, decorating for their parties, making special furniture for them and so forth. Serving an elite class has always been part of the artist's role. There was another art area called Special Services where they made the posters and set up things for visiting USO Entertainment. Robert Irwin worked there but I did not meet him at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you never served in Korea.

ROLAND REISS: No. They had a time limit beyond which you could not be sent over seas, so when my time limit came up, they put me on orders to Korea. I was given shots and told to report to Camp Stoneman for overseas duty after my leave. While on leave I got married and we went to Catalina for the honeymoon. While there I received a telegram from Camp Roberts ordering me to return. They had received a telegram from the Pentagon stating I had won the Army Art Contest in Washington, D.C., which said that if I concurred I would be sent to Arlington, Virginia, to teach sketching to Secret Service. I did not concur because they told me my overseas transfer had been stopped and I could reassume my job at Camp Roberts, which was nearer to my new wife who was a graduate student at UCLA. Bob Irwin and I both won prizes that year. He won 1st prize at Post level and I won 2nd. He submitted a painting of a G.I. with a rifle. In later years I kidded him about that. I was doing a lot of that kind of painting on my job so I submitted a watercolor of a stream at Mount Baldy. [Wilhelm R.] Valentiner, a San Francisco art critic, reversed the prizes at 5th Army Headquarters, Presidio of San Francisco, and I spent a week up there doing "This is the Army" television. Our paintings went on to Washington where we both won prizes. It saved me from going to Korea so I am really grateful for that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What happened to Bob?

ROLAND REISS: Well, Bob must have had good things flow from it, too. I don't really know, but I never did meet him in that whole period.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One would think that you would have had some occasion. You're at the same place, right?

ROLAND REISS: A big military base. Probably twenty or thirty thousand men were there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But not that many artists.

ROLAND REISS: No, but we were in very different parts of the base and it was a very large place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were both what?, in your early twenties then?

ROLAND REISS: Yes. I stayed on at Camp Roberts and got out in two years which was the minimum if you didn't go overseas. Oh, what I wanted to mention that many artists survived first by volunteering to work on the ship's newspaper on the way over and then getting assigned to various areas of visual work in Japan. Since we were in a Headquarters Company, we had contacts in Japan who would help artists find work reading aerial photographs in mapmaking, illustration, and filmmaking. I look back on my time in the Army as a great experience. I got to do a lot of art and was able to choose premium assignments with the work we did with illustration, posters, advertising, and display design and brochures.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Basically you were working with educational imagery.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, educational stuff of all kinds.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about propaganda? I suppose it's how you define it. But, did you get much involved with that?. .

ROLAND REISS: Actually, much of our work was kind of psychological propaganda, some of it almost subliminal. For instance someone had discovered that only one out of three soldiers actually fired their rifles in combat. There was an investigation of this problem and we were asked to put billboards around the camp showing soldiers firing rifles.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm trying to figure out the sequence here. You hadn't gone to UCLA yet?

ROLAND REISS: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you had been a practicing artist in different ways.

ROLAND REISS: Painting, illustration and display design.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In what way did that focus your interests or help clarify what you wanted to do with your art? Or did it at all?

ROLAND REISS: I don't know that it did particularly. In junior college I certainly glimpsed the fact there was something called fine art. Before that I didn't really know the difference between commercial and fine art. I was aware that there were famous people like Picasso and Matisse. After my discharge I went to UCLA as I had planned and where my wife was a student. I went with the notion that I was going into fine art, not commercial art. I didn't sign up for commercial art courses. I only took one course in illustration while I was there with Don Chipperfield, who was a great teacher, but basically I went into a fine arts program. By then I knew what I wanted to do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What is your wife's name?

ROLAND REISS: Her maiden name was Betty Ravenscroft.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was she an art student there also at UCLA?

ROLAND REISS: No, her main area of study was languages. She was a real scholar. In fact, when we got married we thought that she was going to be a scholar and I was going to be an artist. We weren't going to have any kids and we'd be completely committed to our professional life. We wound up having six kids - which is sort of ironic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that seems to me that she is part of this story. Ending up with a brood like that had to have a considerable impact certainly on your time, certainly on her time.

ROLAND REISS: Right. Well, she was further along because she'd been going to school while I was in the Army. When I came back, I still had my last two years of undergraduate work to do. So I went to school full-time. She had completed her studies and was planning to do some graduate work. For a brief time, we were in a little house down on Cotner near the phone company in West L.A., waiting to get into G.I. housing. I was one of the first Korean veterans to go into G.I. housing, which was still full of WWII veterans. It was just over the hill from the university right along the upper end of fraternity row. It was prophetically called maternity row, and indeed my wife became pregnant shortly after moving in and we had our first child there. She became involved in raising the baby and eventually stopped taking classes while I devoted myself completely to school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So she didn't finish then?

ROLAND REISS: I think she got her Master's. She was a brilliant student. She had been class valedictorian at Mt. SAC and received outstanding honors at UCLA. When I started at UCLA, the major figures were Gordon Nunes, Jan Stussy and Clinton Adams. And Gordon and Jan were considered to be the protégés of Stanton Macdonald-Wright who was still there in his last few years of teaching. He was beyond retirement age but he was still there. Two important women on the faculty were Dorothy Brown and Annita Delano, and you know that Annita was Robert Delaunay's niece. Students felt pressure to choose between Stussy and Nunes as mentors, Jan was very extroverted and Gordon was a quieter more mystical sensibility. Jan taught life drawing and anatomy and I was very interested in him because I had considerable skill in drawing. There was only a handful of graduate students. There was Jim McGarrell, myself, Craig Kauffman, Les Kerr, Adele Feinberg, Art Lindgram, Ray Brown and several others. It was a very small graduate program.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Les Kerr then ended up in San Francisco, and we actually have some of his papers in the Archives from Mary, his widow.

ROLAND REISS: Oh really? This little group was a very select one. We thought we were all hot shots. We were all working on M.A. degrees because the MFA had not yet been instituted at UCLA. It was very competitive for teaching assistantships, and if you knew your stuff in life drawing/anatomy, then an assistantship with Jan Stussy was almost guaranteed. He also had large night classes. He was running fifty people at a time and his courses were in great demand. so I set my sites on that. I took his course in anatomy and determined that I would learn

the material twice as well as the other students and it worked, I got the job. I think by that time I knew as much as he did about anatomy. Jan was a great showman, and very inspiring to beginning students.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me interrupt. We did talk about some of the faculty and those years at UCLA. Jan, of course, is renowned almost an adopted son of Stanton Macdonald-Wright. And if you were assisting Jan, did that give you certain entree to Macdonald-Wright?

ROLAND REISS: The faculty tended to stay quite separate, and I felt really privileged to visit Jan's home at the time because they seldom socialized with their students. Stanton was very aloof and very tough and very fearsome to students. You bring up an interesting point, because for some reason he took an interest in me. He invited me to go landscape painting with him. He wanted to teach me oriental painting, which was a great compliment, but I was not able to do it at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you have had to travel somewhere?

ROLAND REISS: No. It was just a day on weekends. It was all very distant. It was just this invitation. He seemed to see something in my work and in me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you suppose it was? .

ROLAND REISS: I don't know. Well, I'm thinking, I wonder if that had something to do with the fact that I was a veteran and a bit more mature than the other students. In class he was very stern and didn't appear to have favorites. Several times he made us sit there and look at a painting for three hours. We couldn't go to the bathroom while he stared at us. It was his way of teaching us to look at painting, and maybe I stayed awake better than some of the others. When I came back to school, I loved it! After the Army, I thought I was in paradise that made my perspective different from some of the other students. In fact, none of the others had been in the Army that I know of. Ed Moses was an undergraduate and I don't believe he had been in the army, but I'm not certain. I just thought school was terrific! I was dead serious about it and really into it. My fellow students had an air of casualness about them that I didn't have, perhaps because the Army had been such a deprivational experience for me in contrast.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[SESSION 2]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interview with Roland Reiss Session 2, Tape 1, Side B.

ROLAND REISS: I don't know how much you want me to talk about these individual instructors. One of the reasons I became interested in Jan Stussy was because of an article about him in American Artist Magazine which said he painted 15 watercolors a day. So I took his watercolor course, and I set out to paint twenty-five watercolors a day. It was really good for me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was sort of your model at that point, is that right?

ROLAND REISS: He was a model when I started at UCLA. I think he was a terrific teacher for beginning students. The problem was that he did not seem to be able to help with dialogue and critique at a more advanced level. A lot of people brushed him aside as they gained more experience. He had great value as an introductory teacher. He was very dramatic and made art seem really important. Another teacher there, Clinton Adams had a big influence on me, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How was Clinton?

ROLAND REISS: Well, Clinton was very dry and nit-picking about everything. I remember him calling me to account for things I said. He'd say, "You can't say it that way." He would stop you in your tracks. It was humiliating at times, but I developed enormous respect for his rigorous mind. Adams and Wright exemplified the intelligent artist for me. Wright was just mind-blowing, and, of course, he was a living piece of world art history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did Wright talk about world arts? Did he bring the whole world of history and ideas into his teaching?

ROLAND REISS: He tailored ideas and his own history constantly plus endless anecdotes about his time in Paris and people he knew. He didn't talk about his later interests very much. I remember he'd get onto Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas and he would say that Alice was the brains behind Gertrude. And, of course, we all knew his brother was Willard Huntington Wright, the first great American contemporary art critic, and also SS Van Dine. Did you know that?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

ROLAND REISS: SS Van Dine was the greatest mystery writer at that time. The day before yesterday in Texas I repeated one of my favorites of Wright's anecdotes in which he recounts that there was no electrical light in the early days in Paris. Artists went to the cafes and they argued all night, and then he said they would run to their studios when the sun came up to paint their arguments. You could make a case for that being the beginning of art theory, if you don't want to go back to the academy in Florence. He knew most of the important figures in early modernism. When he talked of Matisse, we listened. When he said, "Picasso said," we knew we were getting it first hand. It was almost overwhelming because everyone worshipped Picasso when I was in graduate school. All of our instructors talked about him, but to be talking to someone who actually knew him was really something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was Wright admiring of these figures that he would talk about? Was he respectful?

ROLAND REISS: I thought it was balanced. Obviously, in repeating their names, he was giving them respect. He was putting himself on a par with them in terms of dialogue. I don't think he ever tried to downgrade them. He never questioned their accomplishments. It was mostly "he or she said" and "I said." You were aware that he knew many of these people quite well.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But he obviously brought to the students a sense of a larger art world.

ROLAND REISS: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was a very exciting thing to participate in.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, the department at UCLA was also adding impressive new faculty members who further helped to expand our horizons. Jack Hooper came my second year as a graduate student and we became great friends. Jack had an interview with Wright many years earlier. And Stanton said, "You want to be an artist? Go to Europe!" So Jack went to Paris for a while, and then worked with Siquieros in Mexico before coming to UCLA. If you really want to be an artist, go to Europe. That had been very common advice before the success of Abstract Expressionism. Of course, I was one of those who didn't go, but thought I probably should have. I had other things in life to deal with that didn't allow me that choice. In retrospect, I don't regret not studying there at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, you had a few responsibilities.

ROLAND REISS: It has certainly all turned around in my life time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean, the necessity of going to Europe?

ROLAND REISS: Yes, instead artists would come to the United States rather than go to Europe to study.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Jackson Pollock is famously quoted as saying that's a bunch of shit.

ROLAND REISS: Oh, that you should go to Europe? Well, that's because French art has been so dominant in recent history, but with the rise of American painting in the 50s things were reversed. Artists gravitate to the centers of action in their fields.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you were able to experience that while at UCLA at that time because of the presence of a few people, some of that second hand, admittedly, especially through Stanton Macdonald-Wright.

ROLAND REISS: Oh yes. I mean, that was the whole orientation. The original faculty was almost exclusively oriented toward Europe and not New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell me a little bit if you would about Clinton. He can be a little bit curmudgeonly at times.

ROLAND REISS: Well, he was. I don't know. He was a difficult instructor. He was always challenging you, putting you on the spot, but somehow, I respected that and understood it was a teaching persona.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Again, I don't want to set us off in another direction, but your work has been viewed in many respects as being heavily laden with ideas, basically intellectual, conceptual, and smart. It just occurs to me as we're talking that this could have been a key moment for you not just introducing yourself to that way of looking at the world and thinking.

ROLAND REISS: Absolutely! The first word that comes to mind with Clinton is "rigorous." That was the first time I encountered it. Wright was grand in his intelligent style, but in contrast Adams was precise, he was a perfectionist about language. I don't think I ever got close to him in terms of rigor or clarity, but it certainly made me sharper than I was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Also, it would seem that you could maybe draw up some connection to the whole idea of language and the importance of language and meaning for some artists, which was their right.

ROLAND REISS: Right. Well, I just remember thinking to myself, if you're going to be an artist today, you have to be smart. You have to be intelligent, so I'd better start to improve my mind. It's not just about making work. I wanted to mention that my oldest son, Clint, was named for Clinton Adams out of admiration.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You obviously respected him and his mind.

ROLAND REISS: I think he saw something in me because, years later, he wanted me to be the chair at the University of New Mexico, where he was Dean. We hadn't had all that much contact over the years except when I was a visiting artist at the University of New Mexico for a week. I remember also spending time with him the year I was on a panel at the College Art Association Conference. I came to realize he had a lot of respect for me. His work was extremely modest. He did those meticulous little egg tempera paintings and taught us all how to do egg tempera painting. He was very good in critiques. I learned a lot from watching him do that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I can understand a bit of what you're saying because there is a precision in his speaking.

ROLAND REISS: I think most people feel a little sloppy around Clinton. He was the graduate dean at New Mexico for many years. He was at home in academic circles. More than any other artist I can think of in that period he was a true academic, a scholar I have come to know a warmer side of him in very recent years, perhaps because we have a kind of academic parity now. I think that the rites of passage in those early days were meant to be much more severe. It's still like that in a lot of South American countries and in Italy where professors still require deference and submission.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I certainly don't want to turn this into a kind of equal time conversation between us, but this seems to me that your experience was rich with potential and implications. I don't want to say that art was approached without a sense of meaning and of understanding, but that was a period when Abstract Expressionism was ascending.

ROLAND REISS: I have a great story about that. I've got to mention a few more instructors. Just don't let me forget that, because it's all connected. I wanted to talk about Annita Delano, who's very important to me. At the point I met her, she was an older lady. Students were no longer interested in her. I took a watercolor course from her and she had this terrible habit of grimacing and looking down as though to say, "You won't really care what I'm saying." But she did say something that caught my interest. She said "Henri Matisse, said. . ." and I realized she . . . said it to me. She went on to say that her goal was to bring three-dimensionality to the color of Matisse. I thought, "WOW," she really knows Matisse and she has a really interesting idea. After class, when I walked in she just lit up. Eventually she told me her story. She would go to Canyon de Chelly every summer by herself, to camp out and paint. Then everything about the Barnes Foundation, where she worked with Matisse and the philosopher, John Dewey came out. She taught me the Barnes system of analysis which is still of great value to me in teaching. Do you think it's worthwhile to talk about it?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

ROLAND REISS: Well, it does relate to education in that period. Basically, you would sit in front of an original work of art and write. It had to be an original. You'd start by writing what you thought the artist's intentions were, and then you would go into an analysis of line, light, space, shape and color. The idea was that you would write as long as you could on each formal element. You'd sit in a chair in the hall at UCLA writing because that was there, believe it or not, they had original paintings hanging by artists like Courbet, Marin, and Léger. I remember analyzing Matisse's painting, Tea, while it was on loan from the Stendahl Collection. At the end of the analytical work, you did a synthesis in which you discussed how these elements supported the artist's intentions. Intent was broadened into social, psychological, political, and philosophical areas. We did not entertain the bizarre value judgments Dr. Barnes had attached to his system.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So starting with basically the formal elements, you describe as thoroughly as possible.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, It really taught you to see. It was actually parallel to Wright's idea of looking at a painting for hours at a time. Both methods created a deep immersion in the work. Anyway, Annita gave me all that and I am grateful to her, but, like with the others, her basic orientation was European art. Then, new instructors appeared at UCLA, Sam Amato, Bill Brice, and a little later, John Paul Jones. I believe Sam had been in the Navy with Jan Stussy, which probably had to do with his being hired. Sam, too, loved European art, but he was much more American in outlook, very warm and poetic, in his analytical method. Analysis was very much in fashion at that time and it was a tool for making the connection between art history and contemporary art. In studio classes, all of the instructors talked about Vermeer, Velasquez, and Piero della Francesca incessantly while teaching at the University of Iowa. It was a part of Bill Brice's repertoire as well, but at the same time he was the most contemporary in outlook. He was a brilliant man, towering above all others intellectually and physically.

He, too, was analytical, but with a romantic sensibility that made him very open to new art and new ideas. He was a fabulous storyteller complete with accents and amazing insights about virtually everything he discussed. It was fascinating to hear him talk about a movie, for instance; it still is. I still see him, and love to hear him talk about anything. Bill was showing in New York when he came to teach at UCLA and his whole orientation seemed to be more American and creative. He was seen as a protégé of Rico Lebrun along with Howard Warshaw. I know Bill does not agree with that, but he did teach a version of Lebrun's drawing method. I learned that from him and found there was a strange connection to Stussy's style derived from Eugene Berman. Also at USC there was Francis de Erdely drawing in a related manner. There was a romantic quasi anatomical quality in each of these styles which in one way or another connected to the Jepson School.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How different was it from the California School of Fine Arts/San Francisco Art Institute at the same time? My impression is that they were polar opposites, very different approaches in the instruction and in the goals.

ROLAND REISS: Things were very different that were going on in San Francisco. The orientation there was much more contemporary perhaps because of Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still being there. I know they were bringing visiting artists out from the east. I was becoming aware of Abstract Expressionism. Craig Kauffman was one of the few artists in L.A. who seemed to know anything about it. As a graduate student, Craig was the "enfant terrible" of the department. His first show had been at Felix Landau Gallery at age 17 or 18. He projected an air of superiority over students and faculty alike. He had a log of what we now call "attitude," but many years later I came to like him a lot. His father was a California State Supreme Court justice and it was very clear that he was much better off financially than the rest of us. He was very mobile and well acquainted with the art and artists in San Francisco. In a way, at first, Jim McGarrell , Les Kerr, Ray Brown, Idele Feinberg, Jack Hooper and I, we knew much less about what was happening, especially in New York. This was partly because our teachers were not very knowledgeable about contemporary developments. I began to read and hear about Motherwell, de Kooning, and this thing being called Abstract Expressionism. I did a paper for Fred Wight on Abstract Expressionism. Bill Brice heard about my paper and asked me to give a lecture about it to the art department. I remember being scared to death because all of the studio instructors came and Jan Stussy, for instance, had not caught up to Modigliani. So I did introduce Abstract Expressionism to the art department at UCLA. Also, the Dwan Gallery had opened in Westwood during that time and mounted some extraordinary shows. The Yves Klein show made a huge impact on me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that show? Do you remember?

ROLAND REISS: Well, I have to guess around 1955. I could be a year off, but it's right in there. There is a famous story about that show, but I only know it second hand. They flew Yves Klein in from Paris to give a gallery talk and during the lecture he said, "There's an inner eye and an outer eye." And John Altoon called out from the back of the audience, "There's an inner asshole and there's an outer asshole and you're all assholes." People who were there remember that and quoted that over and over again, that confrontation. I didn't know him, but I'm told this was a typical Altoon. So we were just getting the picture about Abstract Expressionism when a show of San Francisco artists, doing Abstract Expressionist paintings, appeared on the Santa Monica pier.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean the Merry-Go-Round . . .

ROLAND REISS: The Merry-Go-Round Show. That show illustrated the gap between Los Angeles and San Francisco. After all, Rothko and Hoffman had been up there and not in Los Angeles. Craig Kauffman knew most of the people in the Merry-Go-Round show. I think he was in it. I don't recall for sure, I do remember going with him to see the show. Those of us at UCLA were oriented to the Frank Perls, and Felix Landau Galleries. Also to the Paul Kantor Gallery, that showed people like Marino Marini, but later introduced Richard Diebenkorn to Los Angeles. Craig eventually hooked up with the Ferus Gallery, afresh and exciting place mainly showing people who had come out of Chouinard. Ferus represented the beginning of a whole new phase in Los Angeles art.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: A second session of an interview with Roland Reiss on September 8, 1997. This is Tape 2, Side A.

ROLAND REISS: So my own painting got more abstract as I picked up interest in Abstract Expressionism. As a graduate student, I began to enter competitive shows across the country and in the San Francisco area and had considerable luck winning prizes. Competitive shows were a bigger deal in those days than they are now. A little anecdote, fast forward 30 years so, while I was making the miniatures, I was on a panel at the Southwest College Art Conference and afterwards I was waiting to go to dinner with Jim Turrell who was serving on a different panel and one of the panelists was Mel Ramos. After his panel finished I introduced myself to Ramos and he said, "Oh, I know who you are." I said, "You do?" He said, "In the early days I used to work at Brueggers, an art shipping

company. And he said, "When they came up from L.A. you were one of the guys we were always waiting to see." It was a touching compliment about my early work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where would these juried shows be in San Francisco?

ROLAND REISS: Places like the California State Fair in Sacramento. I won first prize at the California State Fair one year. The year before, I won a prize in the College Student Category. It was considered to be an important show in those days and, like the shows at the L.A. County Fair, it was juried by major artists and critics.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did they have the jury or open competitive shows that you participated in at the [California] Legion of Honor?

ROLAND REISS: Yes, I think so. A lot of competitive shows, and sometimes I won prizes, but my work was abstract and it seemed to strike a chord in San Francisco. I have always felt that San Francisco was and is more responsive to my sensibility, perhaps because I have always been in what is happening there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said that there were opportunities to see this growing awareness of Abstract Expressionism. Was there a broad interest among the other younger artists in this area?

ROLAND REISS: No. I'd say for a while at UCLA Craig and I were the only ones and, for me, a little later than Craig. I didn't really know much about the Ferus group. Fred Wight had a show at UCLA that had Motherwell and some other things in it, so some of that work had been seen in town. I think it received a quiet reception and Abstract Expressionist work began to emerge slowly in Los Angeles after that. I made trips to San Francisco where I saw the Clyfford Stills at the museums. They were paying a lot of attention to his work up there. I remember standing in front of that work I was trying to understand, but I couldn't get it. I couldn't get it. Finally, one day I almost fell on the floor. I could see the scale of this thing; understand the vastness of the sensibility exposed by the work. I began to understand what abstraction was really about through Clyfford Stills' paintings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that confirmed the direction in your own work.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, although I always continued to draw figuratively. The two were separate because, if you did abstract painting and figurative drawing in those days, the figurative drawing would be a mark of bad faith that you didn't believe in abstraction. Arriving at an understanding of non-objective painting was a difficult achievement entering a rarefied atmosphere that artists needed courage and faith in order to sustain their belief and convictions in the face of misunderstanding and doubt on the part of other artists and the general public. People were not even able to grasp the analogy of music as another form of abstraction. Non-objective artists, therefore, adopted an exclusionist position somewhat defensively. Figurative work was seen as retrograde. So, while I was in Colorado, I almost never showed my figurative drawings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So for how long were you working with abstract painting?

ROLAND REISS: All through my 15 years there, but I was also drawing the figure continuously. Actually Joan Brown wound up with some of those drawings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why was that?

ROLAND REISS: During the time she was married to Manual Neri, I brought her in as a visiting artist to the University of Colorado. I was the professor in charge of visiting artists and running the graduate program there. We're digressing a little bit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I don't know. Why don't we talk about that, I mean, unless you feel that we've moved up to that?

ROLAND REISS: I don't know if we wanted to hit a few more of the instructors that showed up at UCLA or not. Well, let me do a few more of the people who probably should be mentioned if you're interested in that period. John Paul Jones showed up while I was a graduate student. He was fresh out of the University of Iowa, a printmaking teacher with the stamp of [Mauricio] Lasansky all over him, but he was a wonderful guy, quiet, warm, and very intuitive. I took printmaking from him as a graduate student. He used to send graduate prints off to the competitive print shows. I really wasn't that interested in prints, so I developed a quick technique to make them, which involved scratching into the plate varnish with a scraper, biting it deeply with acid and printing it. I won the prize at the Boston Print Annual and John said to me, "You could be a great printmaker, but I know all you want to paint." I think for a moment he thought he could sway me toward printmaking. In those days you made a commitment to one area or the other. Not surprisingly, years later, John left printmaking behind for painting and sculpture after that. Another important person I forgot to mention is Ray Brown, a graduate student at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh sure, Ray Brown. He ended up teaching at UCLA.

ROLAND REISS: He was the chair there in recent years. He was a very good painter, but his concentration really was in printmaking. David Glines was an undergraduate, who turned out to be a printmaker. Basically, John Paul Jones brought the Iowa intaglio printmaking aesthetic to UCLA. I also studied sculpture with Tony Rosenthal who was all embroiled right around that time in the controversy about the public sculpture he had done for City Hall in downtown Los Angeles. It was one of the first big commissions for contemporary art in the city. He did a generic family in bronze that looked like the Oscars and Emmys. Someone decided they were naked in spite of the absence of genitalia and it became a huge controversy. Rosenthal was very busy with international commissions and often did not come to school. He was hard-of-hearing and had difficulty teaching. Charlie Eames substituted for him when he could not be there. I had run into Eames a number of times earlier around town when I would be doing watercolors and he would show up to film the same unusual material. Rosenthal was replaced by Bob Cremean. I had him one year out of graduate school. I don't know that we had any communication. His work certainly met a certain UCLA criteria UCLA had maintained through all of this commitment to figurative drawing and Cremean fit that very nicely. Actually, this aesthetic developed nationwide and included people like Tovish and Baskin in other parts of the country. I was leaving that work behind for more abstract interests. Jim McGarrell and Les Kerr exemplified that point of view. Craig's work was already abstract.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was going to ask you to what extent art history was a part in the course of training?

ROLAND REISS: Art history was considered an essential basis for studio studies. UCLA had some excellent historians and we studied along side Ph.D. candidates in Art History. Karl Birkmeyer had originally come over with the Salt Mine collection on tour from Germany, and Berkeley hired him and then he wound up at UCLA. He was a very important professor for me, because he understood an artist and a historian. He respected contemporary artists, and that was not typical of most historians. And over and over again, he would have me critique historic works in front of the class, Neverlandish painting. It gave me a lot of confidence. I remember in one course as I was about to graduate, I had an interview for a job out of state coming up. I went to him and asked if I could take the final early or delay it till after my trip. He said to me, "This job is more important to you than any final. I'm going to give you an "A"; just forget the final." What I learned from that has stayed with me throughout my career as a teacher/administrator; students are human beings and your support of their life's journey is more important than enforcing academic rules if they have been serious about their studies.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting about Birkmeyer. I was intrigued, of course, by the stories that would add to his symbolism, and I thought he was a wonderful teacher, but I found him very difficult, and also very demanding like you would describe Clinton Adams on some very small points, not very forgiving.

ROLAND REISS: This is great then to be able to tell the positive side of the man. I thought he was a very intelligent, warm and caring person.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's an experience that I had that actually more than anything else shifted me into American art because I was unhappy.

ROLAND REISS: Of course, of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: My wife and I house-sat for him one time when he was off in Europe. I think it was our first year at UCLA. He had a dachshund called Roger van der Weyden. What I would like to raise is that with you he was dealing with an artist and with me he was dealing with a would-be art historian. I think probably there were very different academic standards relative to that. I can't imagine he would have given any of us an A without doing the paper and taking the exam.

ROLAND REISS: I was in the studio program and he knew the difference in category. I had received A's, however, in all of my work in art history. When he asked me as he did a number of times to critique historic paintings in front of art history graduates, I'm sure it was because he wanted them to hear an artist's point of view. By doing that he also made history live for me. He was very open to contemporary art as were a few other great historians like Panofsky and Shapiro, who were among his favorites. He probably thought that history students like you required a dose of the same Germanic discipline he had been subjected to.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I have to say I always admired him. I thought his courses were among the best.

ROLAND REISS: He knew his stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: His courses really made me begin to understand what was involved in art history as a discipline. . This is the whole experience you clearly had at UCLA which was a thoroughly and intellectually stimulating experience.

ROLAND REISS: It was all an important part of what would happen later in my work. You also had to have a minor and mine was Anthropology. I specialized in pre-Columbian and what was called the American Indian before the phrase Native American came into use. In fact, UCLA required an outside member on your committee and I had a member of the Anthropology Department on my M.A. committee. I loved anthropology. I had taken courses in the history and art of Mexico. When I was on the trip to the Black Hills with my father, I got an autograph of an old Indian Chief at the trading post who drew a bear and signed it Standing Bear. I learned later that he had been one of the famous Sioux Chiefs at the Little Big Horn, and he was spending his last days at the Pine Ridge Reservation. As my art developed it reflected the nature of these academic studies, a special way of looking at information. An art critic once called me a social anthropologist in relation to my miniatures. I think that was perceptive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seems that at UCLA there really wasn't initially a much broader exposure that would provide information that could expand to ideas of what you could be. But along the lines that have very much to do with the knowledge of the world, not just the knowledge of self. The program at the [San Francisco] Art Institute, frankly, for how it's embodied, tended to be extremely self-referential and almost self-indulgent.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, the academic view was a broad one at places like UCLA, but almost to a fault. The fault was in not focusing on art as a profession. In the art schools there was a sense of commitment to a profession, even if there were few real opportunities out there. At that time, there were probably a handful of artists in New York supporting themselves on their work, but there was the notion that you could be an artist in the art schools. In academia it was training to be a teacher and to be an artist simultaneously. So that meant that the M.A. degree in academia -- there weren't many MFAs at the time, UCLA didn't have one - you had to cut the academic mustard to get the degree. You were challenged with art history questions in those exams even though you were earning a studio degree. That was also true when I went to teach at the University of Colorado, the same attitude. Actually, when I came to Claremont, I felt I was inventing the idea of what I called "transitional, professional education" in reaction to the notion at universities that people were being trained to be teachers. I felt that art students were often given a very heavy academic program at the expense of development in practice. So I guess we could leave UCLA now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, we've done UCLA pretty well. So how did you get to Colorado, when and how? We talked a little bit maybe last time.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, I went to Colorado immediately after graduate school. I had applied around for several jobs. Gibson Danes was the chair at UCLA and was a great help to me in looking for a teaching job. Back then a chair could be very influential in placing a student in a teaching position. It was a period that a lot of the jobs had been gobbled up by World War II veterans. They were many of my teachers at UCLA. I was at the tailend of job opportunity that had been created by the G.I. Bill. Many of the schools had grown large art faculties to deal with the influx of veterans. I was offered a job at the University of California, Riverside, by Jean Boggs. At that time they were planning to open a tiny experimental elite campus. I thought an art department faculty of three was too small to give the students a serious studio education. I was also offered a job at California State University, San Diego. There was no UCSD [University of California, San Diego] at that time. The chair down there said, "I'm offering you this job because Gib Danes says you would be great." He wanted me to teach color on a musical scale that would set up his advanced courses, so I turned the job down. My friend, Paul Lindgren, took the job and stayed there the rest of his life. So there I was without a job. And people began to think I was too choosey. Finally, one of the jobs that came available was at Colorado, so I flew out and interviewed for it. I had a wife and a child and I had to get to work. The University of Colorado had a large art department and I liked what I saw there. The department was large and very alive. I thought it would be good for me to get away from California and people who had influenced me in order to find myself as an artist and as a teacher. So I accepted the job there as a painting teacher. Believe it or not, I was the senior painting teacher, right out of graduate school. Don Weygandt, the painting teacher who I replaced, was still teaching there in a year of grace after he was fired. He was an excellent teacher and wound up teaching at the University of California, Santa Cruz after he left. Most of the students were still World War II veterans, and they were older students. The chair was a stuffy Anglophile who had been trained at Yale and Iowa named Alden McGrew. He had gone into conflict with the graduate students by maintaining that the MFA statements had to be written in the third person. The graduate student veterans maintained this rule was ridiculous and made Don Wegandt their faculty champion in their argument. McGrew was not just chair, he was Department Head, he was in a powerful position and so he just fired Don. As his replacement I found myself in a tough sport being resented by the students who were his supporters. Don and I became friends, a testimony to the kind of person he was. There was a wall separating our studios and we sometimes talked to each other through it.

[END TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing our interview with Roland Reiss. This is Session 2, Tape 2, Side B. Roland, we

have you in Colorado being resented a bit by the students.

ROLAND REISS: Well, he [Don Wegandt] called these students in and asked them to treat me fairly and from that moment on I had a wonderful time teaching there. There were about twenty graduate students at the time I arrived and that went up to about forty-five by the time I left, fifteen years later. Of course, larger programs like the University of Iowa and San Jose had from 100 to 150 graduate students at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You really helped to expand the program.

ROLAND REISS: It seems I have a compulsion to do that. The faculty was growing and I guess our best friends were George and Betty Woodman. She became probably the most celebrated ceramist in the country at this point in time. She shows at Max Protetch. We used to buy her things at weekend sales to keep her going as a faculty wife. Their daughter, Francesca Woodman, has become a major figure in photography. My other five children were born and we moved from a little tiny, rented house eventually to a Victorian house and with a big studio on Mapleton Hill.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How many years were you there?

ROLAND REISS: Fifteen years. It was a good stretch. In the fifties I had already begun to work in plastics. After Leo Amino in the forties, Bob Mallory in New York, my friend Jack Hooper in California, DeWain Valentine and I were among the very first artists to work with it. DeWain was one of my students at Colorado. We went on a trip together to Los Angeles and he moved there the next year. We all started out with acrylic polymer; it was marketed to artists. There actually was a point where De Wain had stayed in Boulder for a while after he graduated and got heavily involved in fiberglass work. Jack Hooper and I started out with polyurethane and epoxy. There was Roger Katowski., who was teaching at Denver University and also working with plastics, mainly polyester resin. Time magazine came out to write an article about us, about artists working in plastic in the Denver area, but they did not publish the article. About four or five years later we saw an article in Time magazine about the plastic movement in Southern California. By that time DeWain had moved out to California. I don't think he introduced plastics to California, I think it had begun to develop there on its own. I am still amazed that I opened the magazine one day in the sixties and saw Craig Kauffman blowing Plexiglas painting. By that time I had been blowing Plexiglas as well. I had no idea he had been working with a similar process. It's almost like it was in the air that this kind of art would materialize independently, in different parts of the country by artists of a similar background many of whom had worked as 2nd generation Abstract Expressionists and wanted to concretize form, to replace the gestural excesses of action painting. That meant making painting more dimensional, more of an object, more sculptural, and plastics were a key to that. The fact that plastics could also be used to produce transparent volumes led to castings by artists like DeWain Valentine, Peter Alexander, Annie McCoy, Fred Eversley, and myself. There is a direct connection between that work and Light and Space art which has not been fully explored from a critical or historical standpoint.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you start out working in plastics?

ROLAND REISS: First, I began a canvas bulging forward in relief created by various objects I put underneath, like large coffee cans that made volcanoe like shapes. I bought acrylic polymer from Rohm and Haas to use as a paint medium because it remained flexible over my volume trim and radically stretched surface. I found a plastic house in Denver so the next step was to freeze the three dimensional canvas into position with fiberglass and polyester resin. The interest in the volume led Jack Hooper and me to use polyurethane foam because it formed volume by itself as it expanded. He came to Colorado from California and worked with me one summer. We did a lot of experimentation with liquid foams and epoxy. I had a show in Denver a month later and they were selling large pieces of foam. I said, "What are these?" They said, "This is a new movement. There's an artist who has just done a show here with foam, we call them three-dimensional canvases." Of course, the artist had been me. The following year, I sent three of my polyurethane epoxy-coated, shiny plastic paintings to the Mid-America Exhibition at the Joslyn Museum in Omaha [Nebraska]. The paintings were rejected and the next year at Mid-West College Art Conference I was shown slides of foam paintings by painters at the University of Nebraska faculty. I said, "When did you start working with foam?" They said, "Well, we saw your work at the Mid-America Exhibition last year." I said, "I wasn't in the show." They said, "Oh, we saw it all in the store room before they were sent back."

PAUL KARLSTROM: So there wasn't anybody that you knew who was doing this at the time?

ROLAND REISS: Only Jack Hooper and me. Jack did not work with foam for very long. The person who received national attention for his work with polyurethane was Roger Bellamy from San Francisco. I remember I was at a national sculpture conference in Kansas many years later with my friend Fred Spratt from San Jose, who was also a pioneer in working with plastics. Roger Bellamy was the featured speaker and he was introduced as "the first man to have worked with polyurethane foam in painting and sculpture." He had the grace to say, "I'm not the first person who worked with polyurethane. It was some guy around Denver." The problem with Denver was

that there was "no there, there." The planes and critics did not stop there. They flew back and forth from coast to coast. I recall doing a performance with William T. Wiley in Boulder, and he said that it was so hard to do things out there and nobody would know what we had done. The sixties was a period of great ferment and creativity. I think a lot of interesting and important work was being done outside of New York and Los Angeles, but that work was ignored and seldom shown. Artists in the center often received attention for work similar to that being explored elsewhere. One of the more painful aspects of being out in places like Denver/Boulder was being ripped off by more successful artists who came out our way as visitors. This was particularly true in relation to new materials. We were caught up in Marshall McCluban's idea that "the medium is the message." Unique material and processes into new expressive territories presented the originator with a competitive edge. I remember Billy Al Bengston viewing my work in Boulder and saying, "You know, I have a reputation for stealing." I took that as a compliment and indeed he did not take from me, but some other out-of-state visitors did. I could continue to generate new possibilities indefinitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who else was working in plastics at about the time or shortly thereafter? After all, this is one important aspect of what came to be described as a Southern California esthetic.

ROLAND REISS: I don't think that what happened in Southern California had anything directly to do with Colorado, it was a parallel activity maybe starting slightly later in California. When De Wain came to California he joined others like Peter Alexander, Craig Kauffman, and Ron Davis, who had been working in plastics. Robert Mallory had pioneered polyesters in New York in the mid-fifties. My friend Jack Hooper was not really part of the later California developments and by the time I came back to California others like Terry O'Shea, David Elder, Fred Eversley, who had worked in Denver, and Ann McCoy, one of my former students, were all casting with polyester resin. Mowry Baden, Tom Holland, and Bill Geis, up north, were using polyester and fiberglass. Newton Harrison was using that combination in New Mexico. Bob Irwin here, and Bruce Beasley in San Francisco were working with cast acrylic. The "Last Plastics Show" at CalArts in the early 70s was a kind of round -up of all those involved including Ed Moses, Carol Caroompas and others. I'm sure there are many artists I'm not mentioning because the interest in plastics had grown exponentially. The whole development in plastics took place over a fifteen to twenty year span. After that it was just another medium.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, obviously it wasn't an invention constructing things with plastic because it was all around, but it does seem to be rather an imaginative leap.

ROLAND REISS: To work with plastics?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, within the art context.

ROLAND REISS: Well, I don't know. At first it seemed to grow out of the use of plastic as paint and as a decorative material for architecture, too. To me, it met with an intense rejection on the part of the public and most artists I know. They said it put their teeth on edge, and it was a vulgar and abrasive aspect of low culture and that it exemplified bad taste. Pop Art came along and met with quick acceptance and eventually it became clear that plastics, too, was a part of popular culture and contemporary experience. Ultimately, for artists, plastic was a form of paint that could morph into volume and surface with structural integrity, it could be opaque or transparent. The discoveries by artists paralleled continuous developments in the commercial paint industry. Artist materials manufacturer quickly followed suit. I bought universal tinting color [dispersion] and mixed it with acrylic polymer [AC33] from Rohm and Haas to make acrylic paint as did a number of artists, shortly before Liquitex began to market acrylic polymer emulsion paint. The earliest acrylic paint for artists was a solvent-based imitation of oil paint called Magna made by Leonard Boccour. It was used by Roy Lichtenstein and Morris Louis, among others. Louis used it partly because plastic paint did not rot his raw canvas. Jackson Pollock imported Ripolin enamel, a plastic boat paint used by Picasso. It helped to preserve his work when it was on raw canvas. Plastics made possible many of the new staining and layering techniques seen in Abstract Expressionist work. With the addition of alkyds epoxies and polyurethanes, the technical potential of painting continued to expand. Plastics also expanded the vocabulary of sculpture. Many painters were led into sculpture by the potential of plastic for making castings and shell-like forms. In the West, people were pouring resin and doing fiberglass lay-up work. In the East polyester was used to harden canvas and clothing as in the work of Mallory and Lee Bontecou.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what did your works look like from that time? What would be an example?

ROLAND REISS: The last pieces I did before coming back to California were large swelling circular shapes about six feet in diameter. I would blow mold in Plexiglas a six-foot circular shape curving out six inches to its center. This became a mold for pieces in which I would lay-up barely tinted strips of fiberglass mat in a lattice structure. It appeared open and tremulous on the wall. Basically these pieces had a lot to do with dematerialization and appeared to be like exoskeletons of paintings. In retrospect these paintings paralleled Bob Irwin's discs that were being done around that time. In contrast, my pieces were less physical and more transparent, ethereal and reductionist. Before that I made panels with small negative relief hexagons covering the entire surface. I would

busy the polystyrene panes used for diffuser screens over fluorescent lights and make molds from them of rubber latex. You've seen those textured hexagons, I'm sure. I would do a gel coat first then a fiberglass lay-up on the rubber molds that I had distorted by stretching them over large tables. Then I would side spray them with different colors, but from the front they appeared to be gray. The surfaces almost produced a sense of vertigo because they would shift and vibrate optically. These pieces were very minimal and looked a little like Brice Marden's work, but were really about perception and grew out of my interest in Light and Space work. Before that I was blow molding Plexiglas shapes that would be used as molds for paintings. They were painted in the mold in polyester resin followed by a fiberglass lay-up, which became a shell after I popped it out of the mold. In effect, you would be looking at the reverse side of the painting that therefore had a non-tactile surface. A number of painters were using reverse paint qualities at the time. Jim de France was painting with acrylic that way by peeling it off a flat surface and gluing it backwards on the canvas. The blown molded Plexiglas shapes became paintings in their own right after a while, parallel to the kind of work Craig was doing. From the beginning of my work with plastics, I used pearlescent, interference, iridescent and fluorescent colors along with graphite and powdered metallic pigments. Many of us working with such materials believed we were breaking new ground and discovering our own individual authentic voices our own through the exploration of properties of qualities unavailable to previous generations of artists. Peter Frank saw a few pieces from the mid-sixties a couple of weeks ago and said, "You've got to have a show of this work. They look like they were done right now."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you have some here?

ROLAND REISS: I don't have any here at all. I have several out at Claremont. That's where you would have to see them. The rest of them are all still stored in Colorado. Before the work I just described, I made a large plaster positive for a disc-shaped mold I made in fiberglass. It was about six feet in diameter and I did a lot of shells painted and laid up in this mold. These pieces had changing lights in them that were intended to shift your interest to different areas of the paintings as they hung on the wall.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Lights? It sounds like some Fletcher Benton's sort of kinetic work.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, but they weren't kinetic and they didn't require that the lights be on. The lights were like a special feature that caused you to move your eyes around on the surface as they went on and off. Previous to that work, I was making paintings with volumetric surfaces by pushing the canvas forward with objects put underneath the canvas attracted to the stretchers and crossbars. At first they were painted with acrylic and later hardened the surface with polyester resin. Many of these were rubbed with graphite and other metallics. And, before all that, I did the pieces in foam, polyurethane at first, coated with resin and epoxy. Polystyrene slab foam [prefabricated], painted with acrylic was used, one-shaped canvases a little later. Vinyl and acrylic paint on canvas was where it all started for me. From the beginning my work has been about the relationship of material to perception and the relationship of light to object. These have been of primary interest for me in painting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As you describe these works and the works of others, it seems somehow more connected to color-field painting than an actualization of Abstract Expressionist work. .

ROLAND REISS: Oh yes, color-field painting and other developments began to mean much more because they were also related to perception. The concretization of gesture by replacing it with three-dimensional form was the starting point. It was the first break with Abstract Expressionism. But my work in plastics always derives meaning from materials in a way that these other developments did not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you thinking in those terms in a way? You said earlier that to a degree this was an effort to actualize the paintings.

ROLAND REISS: To slow it down. Volume and surface would replace the brush stroke, but while many of us in the sixties were interested in a unique idea about painting as perceptual object, we also tried to break new ground by exploring new understandings of the visual field in general. Color-field painting was a part of this visual discourse.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I find a very interesting account of a technical side of this art history that we're talking about and how materials played such an important role. I think you said a lot of what you were about at that time, in the sixties, was really exploring and experimenting. It was a virtue trying to find something new.

ROLAND REISS: Absolutely! Meaning out of materials and methods was a driving subconscious force in our thinking. I think the idea was that, in discovering the new, one discovered one's self. The challenge was in some way to do what others had not done. We saw materials as a key to do that; they provided visual and expressional opportunities that weren't available in any other way. We were interested in things that hadn't existed in art before. Everything was questioned. Categorical distinctions were broken down. All kinds of hybridized art and activities emerged. What we first called "living sculpture" became happenings and then branched into installation and performance art. We were shaping canvases. Painting became sculpture and sculpture, paintings. The sixties was a time of great ferment and excitement, an incredible creative time. We did

lots of cooperative art and group projects including guerilla art. We were able to put egos aside and explore wild and unusual ideas together. I think this was especially true then, outside of New York and Los Angeles. Of course, conceptual art had begun in a rudimentary way and it had a big effect on my thinking as time went on. We shouldn't forget that the influence of Marcel Duchamp was pervasive throughout that period. I was also instrumental in bringing major artists to Colorado for the summer sessions in the sixties. My interaction with some of them, Nancy Graves, William T. Wiley, Joan Brown, Richard Diebenkorn, Dore Ashton, and Hilton Kramer to name a few, certainly had an effect on my thinking. Clyfford Still made the greatest impact on me when he was there around 1960.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you accomplish that?

ROLAND REISS: I had been very interested in Still since my graduate school days. I was chair of the graduate program and in charge of the visiting artists program as well, I didn't think there was much chance of getting him because of his fearsome reputation, the fact that he hadn't taught in years, and he was known to be difficult. But he did agree to come for the summer session. Then we almost lost him because the department chair had set him up in a gorgeous house, but sent him a note detailing his responsibilities for care of the place. Still shot back a note canceling his contract saying, "I don't care to take care of lawns or anything else." I thought, "Oh, God, we've lost him," we were finally able to work it out. Over the summer he turned out to be quite friendly, even playing softball with faculty and students. He loved baseball. I met him at the faculty party we always gave to start the summer session. The next day I went in to pick up my mail and this incredible thing began to happen to me. I was teaching in the afternoon and he was teaching in the morning. He was sitting in a small office next to the main one so I stopped to chat with him and he told me that he had met his class and all the students had the Portfolio Magazine open to the center pages where his work was reproduced. He just threw up his hands and said, "I don't believe in imitation, and I'm not coming in here anymore. I'll be down the hall in my office where we can talk about important things if you are interested. I don't want to see anything like my work ever again.'" So the students had not come to see him and with my mail in hand I said, "Well, would you like to get a cup of coffee?" He said, "Fine." We went over to the Student Union and up to the fourth floor where you sit at an umbrella shaded table with a full view of the Rocky Mountains, got our coffee and began to talk. From then on I spent considerable time with him. It was an incredible experience for me. I realize now that I was the one who was ready to be his student. Having taught for a while in my early thirties, I knew the recent developments in New York, some of the dialogue and who all the major players were. I think he was in his seventies and appreciated the fact that I could understand what he was talking about and was someone he could trust. He had a huge impact on my understanding of contemporary art and on the formation of my ideas about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How would you characterize him and the nature of your discussions?

ROLAND REISS: Still was a brilliant person. He was a very strange man, tall and thin as a razor blade. He looked like he had stepped out of an El Greco painting, all attenuated and always dressed in a suit and tie. He was very formal, even when he talked to me in one-to-one conversation. We had a good relationship, because he knew I would not abuse the friendship by violating the conditions he imposed upon it. He could be quite bitter and was angry at a lot of people in the art world. His difficult and irritable ways were legendary and he explained himself by detailing the disrespectful and unfair treatment he had received early in his career.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He acknowledged this?

ROLAND REISS: Oh yes. He knew he was difficult, but he felt that that was necessary to be that way. He believed there was nobility in that stance and artists should never be compromised or lose their dignity. He did not tolerate the use of his name by other artists. He was severe about a lot of things. He said an artist should never accept a grant because in the very act of acceptance you had obligated yourself. I thought that was easy enough for him to say because I understood his wife was a corporate executive and money was never a problem for him. Strangely, he was not contentious or willing to sustain an argument for long with anyone. He would say, "When you've had enough, turn your back on him. Just turn your back on him. Walk away." However he never seemed to forget each incident and what was said.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE B]

[SESSION 2]

[BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is a second interview session with Roland Reiss. This is Tape 3, Side A. We were talking about Clyfford Still.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, some memories about some of those conversations. He constantly talked about originality. I remember, he said that it's the obligation of each artist to break out of his shell at a different place. That was a

very big issue for him. He somehow connected asymmetry with originality and symmetry with creative death. He had a very elaborate thesis about the connection of symmetry and hard edges with Fascism. He saw hard edge painting, any kind of hard edges of Fascist. He said it was absolutist. Of all people, he was thought to be absolutist. He was really down on the Bauhaus and down on French painting as well. He thought Bauhaus had been a disaster for art. He said that hard edge exemplified authoritarianism. He said his favorite architecture was the baseball park grandstand because it was asymmetrical.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Has anybody ever interviewed you specifically about those things?

ROLAND REISS: A German doctoral student did. I don't even know what happened to that material. He [Still] really looked down on Barnett Newman. He said he and Mark Rothko felt Barnett Newman was an interloper. It's the old story about Degas and another famous artist when young, climbing a ladder to look in the transom of Delacroix's studio. Still said, in effect, that Newman was trying to figure out what they were doing and wanted to catch on to their coat tails. So he said, "Barney" would be knocking on the door of his studio saying, "I know you guys are in there" and they would say, "Go away Barney, we don't want to talk to you." I think it was around the time Still was in Colorado that Newman did a major interview for an art magazine. In it he talked about his interactions with Still and Rothko. Still was absolutely livid and outraged about the interview. Still kept detailed notes of conversations he had had with a number of artists. I suppose these notes will surface when his papers become public. so he sent in a letter to the editor saying in effect that this was a classic example of revisionist history and not what had happened at all. Still pointed out that Newman had credited himself with many of the things. He seemed to be somewhat paranoid and quite obsessed with what revisionist history might do with his legacy. In my own experience later, I have observed history being altered and fictionalized by various cliques and groups in power so I have become more sympathetic with his point of view. The current official version of art in Los Angeles in the seventies for instance has been diminished to a focus on only a few personalities and groups.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you sense that he was pleased to have you as somebody with whom he could in a sense set the record straight?

ROLAND REISS: Yes. In the time we talked, I had the sense that he wanted to tell his side of things. I think that is a piece of writing I still want to do. Unfortunately, the urge to do it is always overcome by my desire to be in the studio. I think he was doing verbally with some people what other artists like, let's say, H.C. Westermann were doing by sending a lot of drawings to friends like my former student, Herk Van Tongerren. They were meant to be part of his legacy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Terry Allen has a collection of those, too.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, there are wonderful collections of those drawings he sent to a lot of people. I'm sure Still had conversations similar to those we had with a number of people. I was just lucky to have been around him at the right time. I understood his conditions in the same way that his daughters and wife understood the conditions about what was to be done with his work. Even now, I feel a little guilty talking about him in an interview about myself. He did not want other artists to use his reputation to build their own. He would be furious when artists mentioned his name in an article about themselves and would write them letters telling them to never use his name again. We're a long way from all that at this point in time. I guess it's more about contributing to what is known about him. He had conditions for everything. He told me that he would only show a collector one painting available for purchase. Some collectors appeared at his door one day to view their one painting and they had brought a young painter with them named, Sam Francis. They said, "We hope you don't mind, we brought Mr. Francis along" And Still said, "I don't mind. He can wait outside."

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so Sam Francis had to wait outside.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, Still drew very strict lines. The positive side of that was his great independent spirit. I believe he tried to protect that independence as much for others as for himself. Freedom to be an individual, to challenge established norms, to understand the grandeur and power of art on a vast scale, and to resist compromising forces. He symbolized individuality and independence and paid a lot of dues for that. Clearly, many critics attacked him and his work because they personally perceived him to be difficult and arrogant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, he operated on principles. You were describing the situation at that time where you were involved in a communal sense of art activity and that this was exciting and enriching, but it was an interaction and a sharing and Still certainly wouldn't be described as behaving or conducting his art life in that way at all. It was entirely on his terms.

ROLAND REISS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He vilified people, even people who were sympathetic. This is all certainly documented. He is beloved in the Bay Area as a San Francisco artist to build a whole reputation on his being there, to an extent. So,

there's a meanness of spirit.

ROLAND REISS: He was angry at a lot of people. Of course, he justified that anger. He said the need to totally control the sale and disposition of his work grew first out of an experience he had with Betty Parsons. She showed him in New York and took his work down after three days, but as his reputation grew, she claimed him as her discovery. She bought and sold his paintings on the secondary market and Still never wanted another of his paintings to fall into her hands. That's why if you bought a Still painting you were not supposed to sell it during your lifetime. Most artists would be upset about such abuse by a dealer, but Still never forgot it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, he came to represent this kind of integrity, a certainty of one's position and maintaining it. But it does seem in many ways so counter to what was developing in the sixties, just way off from that kind of rigidity.

ROLAND REISS: I think he was pretty extreme, but, in his defense, I would say that he perceived the growing power of the art establishment; museums, galleries, dealers, curators, critics, publications, and so forth. He felt the artist's stature was shrinking and that the artist was in danger of being overwhelmed by forces. Critics used to go to the bars in New York, for instance, to listen to what the artists had to say. All these years later criticism has largely become a self-contained system. Most of us in the sixties, who were younger, were very innocent. It was for many of us a period of rather selfless, cooperative and creative discovery. Serious professional careers seemed available to only a few. In a sense, Still's view was prophetic and many of the negatives he resisted have come to pass.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your overview of how the art world, the art market, has developed is not exactly sanguine in all respects.

ROLAND REISS: I think he saw what was coming. I'm not as hard-lined as he was, but I love the art world with all of its positives and negatives, its joys and corruption, it's my world. Artists are still doing wonderful things. But I do believe, like Still, that artists should be leaders and not followers, that they should not merely be the tools of a larger system.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds to me like a different kind of careerism that Still was standing for and he was taking a cautionary stance regarding careerism that became opportunism, trying to be sensitive to what direction that you should go to be successful. It just brings to mind perhaps a different kind of careerism that you cited once again in connection with Millard Sheets.

ROLAND REISS: Well, Still saw the future and wanted to maintain the position of the artist as a self-sustaining individual. Millard was the prototype for contemporary careerism. You have certainly brought up the extreme contrast in their positions. While I admired Still more than Sheets, I took a lot of his advice with a grain of salt. I have had N[ational] E[ndowment for the] A[rts] grants and Still would not have approved of that. I wanted to mention quickly some other people who were out at Colorado, like Richard Diebenkorn. I also got to know him quite well the summer he was there. He had just done those interior/exterior, figure, landscapes and we showed a lot of them in the University gallery. He was very interesting, very intuitive and soft spoken. He was totally committed to his painting. It was like he had become painting. We went to an old bookstore in Denver once and he immediately found a book with a signed Edvard Munch print in it. I couldn't believe it!

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was he at UCLA yet at that time?

ROLAND REISS: No. Actually it was later. But before he was hired on the faculty at UCLA, he taught a summer session and it just happened that they had invited me out to teach as well. The students applied for our classes and of course the cream of the crop was accepted into Dick's class. The others had to work with me. I remember Tony Berlant was one of the bright ones in my class. We were teaching in adjoining classrooms. We didn't spend much time together that summer, perhaps because my family had come out with me. We did have a small drawing group one day a week, with a model, that involved Dick, Sam Amato, Jack Hooper, Bill Brice, and me. A nice thing happened with my class. I had them painting abstracted human heads and had the paintings up around the room for a critique. Dick happened to see them and marched his entire class in to see the work saying, "I want you to see some really good painting." It made my class proud and it certainly was a gift to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that about 1970 maybe?

ROLAND REISS: No. It was earlier than that. Oh, at UCLA? I'm guessing but I think it was more like '65?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let me adjust now. He had just come to UCLA then because that's the year I think . . .

ROLAND REISS: No. He had not been hired at UCLA yet when we did this.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it's earlier.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, it was before that, because the summer job was a prelude to his full-time position later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So who else came to Colorado?

ROLAND REISS: Other people - Joan Brown came with Manuel Neri. They were married then and Joan was the one who was hired to teach. The Beatles were in vogue and Joan and I both loved to dance. When they first arrived I remember being impressed with the fact that Manuel baby-sat the first day while Joan went out and rented a studio. I thought that priority was a strong statement about her commitment as an artist. Joan was doing large paintings at the time with very thick oil paint, thicker than any painter I had ever seen. She left two of them for the collection at the University. Manuel was doing a whole group of painted figures in raw plaster. Joan was captivated with my small figurative drawings of nudes and animals done in craypas on colored paper. Manuel didn't want to ship all of his work back anyway, so we wound up trading three of his sculptures for a bunch of my drawings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What specifically?

ROLAND REISS: Well, my drawings involved male and female figures outlined in grease pencil with crazy color things going on inside the figure. They were relatively flat and involved partial silhouettes. I included images of my toy animals and real animals along with other accoutrements. Nancy Graves was also there a few years later. My drawings had changed a lot by that time and were similar in style to Nancy's work. I remember after seeing my drawings that she said, "We should draw together," but it didn't work out. We became friends and of course we had become acquainted years earlier when she and Richard Serra, who was her husband at the time, stopped by to see me in Boulder on their way from San Francisco, where they had stolen the slant steps, to New York where they both established outstanding careers. Two visitors who came up from New Mexico to see me were Helen and Newton Harrison. Newton was completely involved in the use of plastics then, which was early in its evolution. I remember a day-long conversation with him and at one point we were talking about the highly toxic nature of some of the materials we were using. I remember Newton saying, "I don't care as long as I get five years out of it." That was a clear demonstration of our innocence and incredible excitement we felt about what we were doing. All these years later I have fondly reminded Newton several times about that youthful remark. Since then they have developed an incredible sensitivity to life and the environment and they have become reigning figures in the field of environmental art. Bill Wiley was terrific. Bill, Jim Hockenhull, a young faculty member, and I got together with a group of graduate students to produce what we called a Space Opera.
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PAUL KARLSTROM: What's Space Opera?

ROLAND REISS: It was a performance that involved music costumes and objects and was done on a stage. It was composed of about twenty-five skits, almost like blackouts used to be. Bill wrote a lot of songs and Jim acted as the master of ceremonies. We went from one funky to another, each one humorous and deeply enigmatic. We made space ships out of cardboard and had a space war on stage. "Hand-held Fruit," was like a water ballet without the water. "Banana Karate," involved the breaking of banana barehanded by a Karate master. And of course the "Naked Light Bulb" was dragged to oblivion. The University refused us a venue on campus fearing it might be pornographic. We rented the local High School auditorium that we packed with families and children. What I learned from Bill is that you could do a large production like that without a director. Bill refused to be a leader and that created a democratic space in which we got the best out of everyone. Even timing the individual events themselves was feat. It was probably the best group creative experience of my life and it was done in the face of considerable resistance. I also brought David Hockney over from England. David had taught the year before at [University of] Iowa [Iowa City]. David is a fabulous teacher. He announced to his first summer session class that he was a practicing homosexual. A lot of the students left and didn't come back.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A lot?

ROLAND REISS: The class got a lot smaller.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He didn't have to teach a class.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, he did, but he was disappointed. At that time some people were put off by that kind of information. He seemed to have a great time living at a dorm where the students all really liked him. The second half of the summer his class was full and he was a huge success. Patrick Proctor came out to visit him and I had them both to dinner with my family. After they had left one of my little boys asked, "Daddy, were they talking Spanish?" I managed to buy a complete set of The Rake's Progress from him for the University collection for about six hundred dollars. I would hate to think of what it's worth now. These visitors were as important for the faculty as they were for the students. They were very important to me. Even though I had regional reputation, it was reaffirming to know that I functioned at their level of discourse. I was measuring myself against them and testing my awareness of contemporary issues on an international level. And, indeed, when Christo came to do his piece in Colorado, he came to enlist my support because the local environmentalists were working to prevent

his installation from happening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Rifle Gap, was that it?

ROLAND REISS: Rifle Gap, yes. Jan Vander Marck came with him from Chicago. Those of us who were doing really contemporary work were sprinkled across the central and southwest. We all knew about each other as exceptional figures in the region, like Newton and Helen Harrison in Albuquerque, Herman Cherry in Colorado Springs, Bob Wade in Texas, and so forth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you keep up with them at all, Newton and Helen?

ROLAND REISS: I see them now and then. It just happened we ran into them in Paris the last time we were there. We were sitting in a cafe and I said, "There's Helen and Newt." They were standing right in front of us, facing the street waiting for a cab. So we had a great evening together. They have such an amazing overview of issues related to the planet and to our survival.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Although you were removed from the L.A. scene, you were able to create a very special opportunity because you could get these interesting people to come teach at Colorado. Also there weren't a lot of distractions or diversions and they had to operate within your community and in relationship to you.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, because they were there it was possible to form warm friendships and to literally transplant their version of the art world to Colorado. I think many of them were able to focus more clearly in the Rocky Mountains. Certainly it was about creative stimulation and energy exchange for all of us. the friendships came out of spending time together. Many artist friends I have now in California I actually have spent far less time with and I know them less well, even though I have known them for thirty years. Michael McMillen comes to mind as a friend I have not spent enough time with.

[END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 3, SIDE A]

[SESSION 3, JUNE 11, 1999]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A third session with Roland Reiss. The last one we determined was back in September of 1997, which is almost two years ago. Today is June 11, 1999. Session Three is being conducted by Paul Karlstrom at Mr. Reiss's home/studio at The Brewery in Los Angeles. We've determined that in our last session almost two years ago you were talking a lot about your experience in Colorado and the people who came through and I can't remember exactly how long you were there, but it sounds like it was a particularly rich experience for you.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're now going to get you back to California to the Claremont Schools, which is the main theme of our session today. I'm interested in your perspective about the role art schools and art departments of universities and colleges have played in California. There are those who feel that California is unusual in the importance the schools played in contributing to the development of the art world more so than commercial galleries and museums. I don't want to prejudice you in terms of your own observations. Why don't we just proceed with getting you back to California?

ROLAND REISS: I actually took the job as the chair of the Art Department at what was then called Claremont Graduate School, it's now Claremont Graduate University, in 1971. There were at that time only about ten graduate students, a very small program. It's since grown to sixty-five in 1999. It was small for several reasons. It actually grew out of the Scripps College Art Department, although all of the colleges who had art departments, notably Pomona College and then Pitzer College, along with Scripps, contributed to graduate studies at the time, but the job was interesting because it was exclusively focused on graduate students with no undergraduates involved whatsoever. It had separated from Scripps to do that job. It's still an absolutely unique program, a free-standing graduate school without an attachment to undergraduate colleges. All those colleges have separate structures; deans, provosts, presidents and they have their own trustees. It was a unique kind of situation. Of course, it was private and I was coming from experiences at UCLA and at Colorado, which were large state institutions. Before I arrived, there had been a chair hired for one year, but the program had barely gone into motion. Doug McClellan who had been the chair at Scripps when the Graduate School separated, became the chair of the graduate program. He left at the end of the first year, largely due to the political difficulties involved in the separation, stemming from the proprietary interests of the different departments. So I walked into a pretty tense situation trying to make a program out of virtually nothing; in fact, we didn't even have a location.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What were you using?

ROLAND REISS: The students were still in some little rooms at Scripps. A few were up in Bridge's Auditorium near Pomona, and I had to walk around and find them. I had an office where the main offices of the Graduate School were, and the students were coming in to see me with their dogs in tow. The School of Religion complained because my students had to pass through their offices. I went to the President and said, "You know, there's a little cottage next to Huntley Bookstore." They used to have some little old cottages there, but they're all gone now. I said, "Could I have that cottage?" I knew very little was happening there. He said, "Sure." So my secretary and I dry-walled this little cottage, and we had a center. Students could bring their dogs and we got things started. [Paul] Soldner was there in ceramics at Scripps.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now was he there as part of the Scripps program or did he work for you in the Graduate Program?

ROLAND REISS: Well, the arrangement was that they taught their own students at the undergraduate colleges and they also taught for the Graduate School. And actually Soldner used his graduate students to help him run his program. They were his mainstay in operating the ceramics facility. I had known Paul from Colorado days, so we were old friends. He had studied at the University of Colorado before he went to Otis. So we had been friends before I had come to Claremont. The graduates were taught in locations at the other colleges the first year, and we had leased a section of Harvey Mudd College. We were fixing these facilities for the Graduate Program during my first year there. We had moved to the little cottage to start things off. I was completely dependent on faculty from the undergraduate colleges to teach in the Graduate Program, which they did as an overage on a voluntary basis. So you see there were certain difficulties. People were teaching graduate students mostly for free.. The Graduate University was created because the undergraduate colleges wanted a graduate school to be in Claremont. So, in the happy, beginning cooperative days, they would all teach for free in order to have a graduate university. I had a faculty, but I didn't pay, which was very weird. That's not quite true. A small subvention had been arranged with Scripps College before I arrived, but it was not enough to buy allegiance to my program. It was awkward because Pomona and Pitzer Colleges received nothing for their services. .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, did they get time off? Did their schedule lighten a bit?

ROLAND REISS: There were only a small number of graduate students. Schedules were so light at all the colleges in those days that it wasn't really a big deal. And, of course, it grew and grew and grew which ultimately led to a very serious breach with Scripps College because they wanted to be paid more for their services and we could not do it. We started out with a small group of graduate students and moved at the end of my first year to the Harvey Mudd facility.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was after you were based in a cottage?

ROLAND REISS: Yes. Apparently Cathy Crosby was going to locate a Mount St. Mary's College as a part of Harvey Mudd to help them pay for their building and it didn't work out. We were able to lease some of this space for the Graduate Program, and actually have a space that could become a gallery. I began to build the program by trying to attract more students and started to change the program's whole operational structure. One of the things I did was involve students as full participants in their own program, including teaching themselves in a variety of ways. We have developed into a place where the students have more to say about the program than in any other program in the College. For instance, they vote on who comes in the program, which, of course, shocked the faculty when it first started because they had often been choosing little acolytes, like who will stretch my canvas? Who will tape my paintings for me? That sort of thing. They wanted potential assistants. So I said, "This isn't going to work. We're going to have a really serious professional program." I sold the idea of transitional professional education; that the program would not be about training people to be teachers, but it would be training them for professional life. Actually in 1971 we were just beginning to grasp the possibility of a real professional life for a larger number of artists. In my earlier years at UCLA and at Colorado, you either had to teach or forget it. It seemed like only a handful of artists in New York were really making a living or having success. It was said that you had to live in New York for seven years, "pay your dues," before you could hope for a glimmer of recognition.

PAUL KARLSTROM: By that you mean making a living from their art without having to resort to teaching.

ROLAND REISS: Without having to teach.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Typically the situation in California has been viewed, since there was not much of an art market, less opportunity to sell your work, that the schools in effect supported the art world.

ROLAND REISS: This explains why the schools to this day, and especially now, are so prominent and so powerful in the West Coast art world. One, because there was no market, so artists on the West Coast had to live mainly off of teaching. Secondly, with the exception of that brief period when ArtForum was being published on the West Coast by John Coplans, there were virtually no publications of any national or international importance, so the schools became a power base for artists out of which they could operate with exhibitions using artists and

local gallery affiliations. There were small publications coming out of these institutions, and I think progressively the schools have become a dominant force in the California scene alongside the major museums and local critics who write for international publications.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What you are describing about the program at Claremont is that you apparently were among the first to recognize that there were more possibilities for professional life rather than having a teachers college, you could aim their sites.

ROLAND REISS: I think the commitment to teaching was a powerful subtext there, and part of Claremont's success under Sheets, as an art center, was that it did not appear to emphasize teacher, but was rather a kind of semi-professional school with a quasi-commercial orientation. Under Sheets and the Mexican influence, there was this strong interest in architectural decoration, ceramics, weaving, architectural sculpture, mosaics, and so forth. The craft orientation at Scripps offered artists another route through which fine art could be made into a profession. Nevertheless, some really excellent fine artists did come out of Claremont. I am really trying to distinguish between two different ideas of professionalism. It was increasingly fine arts oriented, but the crafts were quite important. Scripps still had that strong commitment to crafts long after Millard had left, and Pomona College was thought of a being exclusively devoted to the fine arts. Actually there was not a lot of work going on in the studio, but Pomona had fielded outstanding exhibitions and had a reputation as a more intellectual place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now was Peter Selz at Scripps?

ROLAND REISS: He was at Pomona. And Seymour Slive and Nick Cikovsky were the last of the breed, and David Scott seemed to have been at both places. I believe he was at Pomona in the years before he left. The Pomona department was largely what attracted me to the job at Claremont. I had wanted to come back to California because Denver had such a small art scene. There was a limit there and I wanted more of a professional life that it could offer. California was my home and Pomona was my hometown, which is really strange because I knew a lot about Claremont's history. I'd been able to observe it even though I didn't go to school there and wound up going to UCLA. Part of what attracted me later was the gallery program at Pomona College. The gallery program had been great all along, and at that point for a brief period, from about 1968 to '71, the galleries were run first by Hal Glicksman and then by Helene Weiner, who later went on to curate the Rockefeller collection and then Metro Pictures in New York. She was a great replacement for Hall Glicksman, but she didn't last very long. It's sort of an interesting story, actually.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is the Scripps gallery?

ROLAND REISS: No, this is the Pomona College Gallery. Hal Glicksman had done a series of shows involving Light and Space art. He really is the person who put Light and Space art on the map. He made Pomona College a center for showing Light and Space art. He left just before I arrived, but I had known the gallery's reputation. When I got to Claremont, Helene Weiner was there and she had similar very contemporary interests and showed a lot of performance art. In fact, she lost her job over a particular set of performances. It's a sad story, actually. These were the days in performance art when artists expected curators to provide the gallery on faith without prior knowledge of what they were going to do. It was kind of a test of professional integrity on the part of the artist. On this particular day, she had performances by Chris Burden, who had graduated from to Pomona College and was in a sense returning home, and Wolfgang Stoerchle. I wasn't at the performance, but I certainly know the story by many accounts. First you have to picture the Rembrandt Club, a staid support group for the Pomona College Art Gallery, assembled for the performance. Chris Burden's performance involved flipping lighted matches at Nancy, who was then his wife and she was in the nude. After that Wolfgang came on, and walked out in the nude, facing the entire audience. These were two separate performances, one after the other. Wolfgang came out in the nude, facing this entire audience and he proceeded to urinate in squirts on the floor for a protracted period of time! It went on and on. I got the remainder of the story from Barnaby Keeney who was president of the Claremont Graduate School at the time. He told me that the next morning there happened to be a meeting of the college presidents and President [David]Alexander of Pomona College said that he had fired Helene Weiner. He said, "I woke up this morning and my phone was ringing off the hook! And I said, 'I don't even want to hear any more about it. She goes.'" She was fired on the spot. She had been fired that morning, the day after the performance.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was this?

ROLAND REISS: Well, it was either '71 or '72. I was there, but not at that performance. Well, we had a number of interesting performance stories then. The year I arrived, [Jim] Turrell was teaching a summer session at Pomona College. He had graduated from Pomona College, then was on the faculty, which meant he taught for us as well. He got his MA from us at the same time. The summer I arrived we were both teaching at Claremont. He had arranged to do outdoor installations with a whole group of students. First, they went over to the quarry adjoining the school and lit up a tunnel with railroad flares, a very beautiful piece. Then we came back to campus and everyone sat in rows on the lawn in front of Bridge Auditorium, which was a beautiful gleaming white color. It

was late in the evening and as it got dark, suddenly, the whole auditorium lit up a brilliant red. Flares had been lit all around the auditorium, and when it lit up, we instantly heard, "Whrrrr," the fire department from downtown. And within thirty seconds it seemed like there were ten fire trucks there. I will never forget it because I was new on the job and very excited about Turrell and sponsoring his work. The two of us were in it together. We walked between the rows of students to meet with the fire department. It was like walking a gantlet to face the music. It turned out the fire department was great. At first they said, "What is this? What are you doing here?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was outside.

ROLAND REISS: All outside. The whole auditorium had just been lit up. They had flares all around it. It was timed so they lit simultaneously and whoosh! The sky was full of light! The firemen actually listened to us and we said, "Well, it's an art piece." Of course, in those days, who knew about anything like that. So for the fire department to be understanding was really amazing. They said, "Oh yeah. Okay. It's an art piece. Why didn't you guys tell us you were going to do this?" Of course, they didn't know that things were often approached that way because you would usually be refused permission. It was pretty exciting energy with Turrell around. One of Turrell's students at Pomona was Peter Shelton. After Peter graduated from Pomona College, he went off to study welding. He apprenticed as a welder in the east somewhere, and then he came back and he spent a year with us at the Graduate University, using our facilities. I recall doing critiques with him at that time, but he went on to UCLA for his MFA, so we can't count him as a Claremont graduate.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you said he was studying with Turrell in that summer, that very same summer?

ROLAND REISS: Well, no. Turrell was hired to teach by Pomona College after that summer. In fact, there was a strong effort to hire him permanently, but, unfortunately, he appeared for his interview wearing a big hat. He had a habit of wearing that hat like it was glued to his head. The president of Pomona College, again President David Alexander, refused to hire him because he didn't take his hat off during the interview, so much for the graces of academia. Jim and I decided it was the best thing that ever happened to him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think it's interesting what you suggest is this kind of tension between traditional ideas of academia and then what the art world accomplished, the very counter to that. I mean Alexander now I guess is still head of the Fulbright.

ROLAND REISS: Well, at the time there were all sorts of growing pains. At Scripps College, I remember the president of Scripps saying to me that he just hated having the ceramic show each year. These were great ceramic shows curated by Paul Soldner. By way of explanation, he said, "Well, I get all these letters of complaint that I have to answer about women doing ceramics of vaginas with teeth in them and things like that!" The art world was becoming more professional, much more outrageous, taking more risky positions that required academia to accommodate it. Obviously, as long as art was simply involved with beautiful mosaics, murals and pottery, it was not a problem.

PAUL KARLSTROM: If you look back, the programs were extremely conservative and traditional. What happened in the sixties and the seventies was that it just exploded and opened up under the influence of people like Marcel Duchamp and ideas of what's possible. I've always thought of Pomona College as very Ivy League and very traditional among California schools.

ROLAND REISS: No, a little different. Its intellectual posture meant that it would embrace more vital contemporary developments as opposed to Scripps that was more craft-oriented. Because it was more conceptual, the Pomona faculty was caught in the spell of Duchamp and open to installation art, performance, Light and Space art and more recent ideas in painting. UCLA, at the time, continued its heavy commitment to figurative art with an increasing sense of professionalism. This had an effect on its choice of young faculty. The new instructors were far more international in outlook like Charles Ray, Chris Burden, Lari Pittman, Roger Herman, and so forth. But this development comes well after CalArts [California Institute of Arts] had had its great years. The move of [John] Baldesarri to UCLA from CalArts probably signified the new dominance of UCLA. I must say that in earlier years the faculty at UCLA saw themselves as major artists, and many of them were. All of us who graduated from the place left with a great sense of confidence and large aspirations.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The program at Claremont describes a particular role that your department and all these schools played in Southern California. The Bay Area had two big pulls, Cal [University of California, Berkeley], and the San Francisco Art Institute and there's a real big difference. I think part of that is in the university. The potential of conflict is built-in when art begins to expand ideas of what art actually can be.

ROLAND REISS: Right. But that's history that conflict is now gone. It has certainly disappeared in the premier art programs in Southern California and things have changed up North, too. Of course, now we have all these colleges and universities with trustees who have become enormously sophisticated. I don't worry about having to justify things that are difficult or challenging or seem to be pornographic anymore. The international success

of art has made it much easier to maintain a professional standard in institutions of higher learning.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is the third session with Roland Reiss. This is Tape 1, Side B. And the little point that I was making in response to your observation that this former conflict, which I would characterize your early years at Claremont, between perhaps a traditional academia, and this really radically changing professional art world that your program was trying to address which makes it inevitable that conflict with [President] Alexander of Pomona College and his interests in music, didn't translate to activities in the art department. Would you say what was then and now is quite different?

ROLAND REISS: Very different. There's an interesting aspect to this changing outlook in the schools. Originally, most university art departments throughout the country were chaired and by art historians. That's what gave the art departments an academic credibility, whether it was Gibson Danes at UCLA or Gerald Ackerman at Pomona. There always were a few departments whose chairs were drawn from the studio faculty. It was certainly one of those. Leadership of departments by historians almost always resulted in conflict between studio and history, usually centered on students, who had great talent, who would do great work but could not write well. The historians would try to drum those students out of these programs and favor those who were intellectually and academically inclined. We now have a similar attitude coming from the critical theorists, who have been rapidly enlarging their domain in art departments. Expanding the history and theory fiefdoms has meant increasing academic requirements for degrees in practice. Hence, the enormous pressure to reduce the importance of the MFA degree by offering Doctor of Fine Arts degrees across the country. Obviously, the additional year or two of study required will be filled by more work in history, cultural studies, and theory, not by more work in the studio. Art schools, of course, as opposed to academic institutions, have always had a greater sense of freedom and professionalism. They were expected to be stranger, less accountable and more rebellious that other institutions. In a way, they had greater license to do whatever they wanted to do. But surprisingly what happened, and CalArts is a classic example, is that they chose to become more intellectual and conceptual, privileging theory over practice. So while many university programs that had a complete academic support system moved in the direction of practice as an aspect of professionalism, the art schools with rudimentary academic programs began developing a more intellectual approach. That was in response to contemporary developments like conceptual art including the later neo and post-versions. This is not to say that universities, too, have not expanded work in critical theory, but, in some strange role reversal, it had been the art schools that have been emphasizing critical studies as a basis for art making.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that's how you would characterize Art Center now?

ROLAND REISS: Yes, I would. What they've done is create a two-track program for graduate work, one for those who want some work in studio and the other for those who want theory exclusively. I understand that the studio track has a lot of theory attached to it. I think that both CalArts and Art Center advance the idea of art as an intellectually driven strategic activity, with understanding context as the centerpiece of student development.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you consider this really a strategic development in creating a distinct identity or role for the art, for the program and then for the artists operating in the world?

ROLAND REISS: Yes. Well, we're all engaged in it now -- a level of self-consciousness, a level of awareness about how art works socially. Of course, this begins to pull away from the late modernist idea of exclusivity. I want to make it clear that I support the teachings of critical theory and acknowledge the conceptual basis of my work in the miniatures and in my painting since then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what occurs to me is that you could end up having art school or art department, where one would expect there's always going to be some practice involved, but in the extreme, there's a legacy of conceptualism in these very departments. Art Center being one school that historically has been directed to sort of a pragmatic, practical training like designing cars and so forth.

ROLAND REISS: This change at Art Center is relatively recent.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It is?

ROLAND REISS: It started at CalArts with John Baldessari, Michael Asher and others on the faculty there. They moved the educational philosophy from art about practice to art about idea or concept. CalArts was the original and most successful model for this change in the country. It was also happening in Nova Scotia and other places. A little later, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe and Michael Kelly brought it to Art Center. I'm not sure of the dates, I'd say maybe fifteen years ago. They could be viewed as an offshoot of the CalArts program, but they have established their own - even more theory based -- program. I remember Michael Kelly saying to me one day at an opening,

just after he had started to work at Art Center, "We're going to shoot CalArts out of the water."

PAUL KARLSTROM: And now, I can see all the more reason that Richard Koshalek is going to head Art Center. I had never thought about that. I now can see another possible match, shall we say, Museum of Contemporary Art, MOCA? I gather you see this though really as strategic, very self-conscious moving in these directions?

ROLAND REISS: Oh yes. I would say however that this change has been reflected to some degree in all of the major programs around the country in recent years. This has been the result of conceptual art and the rise of critical theory as an important area of study. Generally speaking, I think theory is quite valuable. We've begun to offer theory at Claremont, while continuing to emphasize studio practice. In some programs like UC Santa Barbara, we have seen the elimination of basic undergraduate classes in drawing and painting. The argument is that practice is no longer relevant to the needs of a new century, that art will be more about critique and the use of new media.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And perhaps socially engaged.

ROLAND REISS: You know, in art we have always had one movement following another and there has always been a tendency to put down immediately preceding developments, but this is the first time we've ever seen an effort to cut off visual art at the root, and actually eliminate programs. I have always believed visual art could engage new territory because its practice is infinitely flexible and adaptable.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see this more from the standpoint of an art historian and especially those of us who we were in graduate school in the sixties, that a strangle hold of theory and deconstruction came and I pretty much missed out, so I have had to back-pedal to try to figure out what this is. In my view, it didn't come so much within the universities, it came out of English departments much like Yale.

ROLAND REISS: Well, in the art world, critical theory and art criticism have been conjoined. Today many art writers quote critical theory and many of them teach it. In fact, CalArts had a panel just a month ago called "Resistance". I didn't attend, but presumably it was about resistance to theory. It is a common tactic today to use topics for panels or titles for articles that are subterfuges for continued assertions of the opposing point of view. In the case of this panel, I was told, that there was only a self-congratulatory discussion about the importance of critical theory by the participants. I really don't have a quarrel with critical theory, only with some of the excesses committed in its name. It certainly has had a radical effect upon the teaching of art over the past thirty years, but theory continues to change and evolve. Deconstruction has found its place as a helpful method and is no longer cente-stage. Critical theory in support of practice can be extremely valuable. I expect it to be with us for a long time to come. Let's go back to where Claremont is in the context of other schools. Until recently, CalArts has been the dominant program on the West Coast. They were able to put together a new high-powered faculty, without tenure, who were basically oriented to New York. They did not interact much with artists and other art programs in the area. They promoted an aggressive and single-minded professionalism and focused their students on New York. They had excellent financial resources, with some envy. I call it the materialist approach to art education. This means they could afford to do extraordinary things like bringing major professional artists each semester as part-time faculty and mounting a speaker resource program that brought in artists and critics from around the world. UC Irvine [University of California, Irvine] had similar financial resources for a short time while they were under the direction of John Coplans. He was able to hire a new faculty composed of outstanding professional artists and to conduct an impressive visiting artist program bringing in important New York artists like Robert Morris.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Derrada and other grand names of critical theory and deconstruction were also included.

ROLAND REISS: Yes. When UC Irvine had the money, it also could do very professional education by bringing in major figures. It was extremely important for students to be able to work with someone like Robert Morris for three weeks. It could be a life-changing experience. These artists provided students with professional contacts and helped them establish their careers and global view of contemporary art. Los Angeles was still evolving as an art scene. Significant faculties and visitors brought reputation to the programs and attracted outstanding students. Such programs launched a series of highly successful Students. That was especially true of CalArts in its heyday. In fact, I think we can trace a decline in the dominance of CalArts to their increasing difficulties. Paul Brach recommended they consider me for his job when he left. I did go over there and look at it. At that point, they were turning the lights on and off as you entered and left all the rooms. For a number of reasons, it was pretty clear that they were in financial crisis.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is not about CalArts, but isn't that in part tied to Disney and their views of what was happening at CalArts?

ROLAND REISS: Part of what happened at CalArts is that the faculty and students had a lot of "attitude" and wound up disaffecting the entire Disney family. I don't think it was so much an issue about the content of

instruction on the part of the Disneys as it was their perception that the faculty was embarrassed about their sponsorship. There is an amusing story about an event that took place at graduation years later involving the Disneys. . You know, Millard Sheets was close to the Disney family and a trustee.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of CalArts?

ROLAND REISS: Yes, Millard wanted to be the president of CalArts and they wouldn't have it. I'm told he said, "Well, then I'll take the Disney family with me." A lot of forces involved in the Disney issue. There was a kind of New York-oriented elitism amongst faculty and students. They didn't like being part of Walt's legacy. The school was financed by the Disneys, but Disney was the butt of many jokes. After the family had retreated from CalArts, a new effort was made to bring the Disneys back on board, and they returned to the graduation ceremony that year. There were speeches and, as the President began welcoming the Disneys, a giant inflated plastic penis descends on the crowd.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was a graduation stunt?

ROLAND REISS: Yes, as far as I know that was the last example of the provocateur attitude. The Disneys continued with generous support and those issues are now in the past. It is important to remember that provocation was a part of CalArts style and teaching philosophy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you really think that CalArts was, more than any other place, a vanguard in introducing this kind of shift in perspective and activity?

ROLAND REISS: No question about that or about their success.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your program responded, to a certain extent over time.

ROLAND REISS: Well, we came from a different starting point. Obviously, we had a more traditional faculty. CalArts had a relatively young and more professionally successful faculty. They were, however, some exciting elements in place to work with when I arrived, the gallery program at Pomona, and Jim Turrell being there. Mowry Baden had been at Pomona as a teacher, so he had some residual effect. I saw Light and Space art as a base from which to develop a more contemporary program. It came out of a profound interest in the perceptual nature of experience and an investigation of phenomena reflecting new developments in contemporary physics and biology. With it came Zen over-lay which was meditating in character.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You saw this as an opportunity for your program to create a specific identity?

ROLAND REISS: Well, it was a place to start. It was something I was excited about, but I was also personally still very interested in painting. It was a good base to support fresh exploration in any area of activity. As things began to unfold, I decided we would maintain a commitment to practice. We were known for years, sometimes derogatorily as "a painting place." Some of our competitors called us dinosaurs, but students would leave their programs, if they wanted to paint, and come to Claremont. We wanted our niche to be about new possibilities in painting and installation art. We did not teach conservative painting like, say, Cal State Universities at Long Beach or Fullerton. Our history in Light and Space work supported our work in installation. After some struggle with the undergraduate faculty, I was able to hire Michael Brewster, who studied it at Pomona before I had arrived and whom I saw as a younger member of the Light and Space tradition. Turrell left shortly before I managed a position for Brewster, who was a pioneer in sound-space sculpture. His interests provided us with a nice range between installation sculpture and painting. My own work with miniature tableaux was full-scale installation pre-figured some of the subject-oriented installation that was to develop in art a few years later. At first I also taught performance because I thought it was an essential ingredient of a contemporary program. Then we brought in Barbara Smith, John White and Rachel Rosenthal and others to support interest in performance while the other schools were not paying much attention to it. John and Rachel were major artists and freeway flyers, but they gave us a lot to time and great teaching. Claremont Graduate University was an early center for installation after hiring Michael Brewster. We were able to add Connie Zehr as a core faculty member. So you had three people on the faculty that did installation work. The difficult thing in developing a program at universities is that tenure tends to freeze a faculty generation in place. Art schools have what is called, "implied tenure," so they are freer to change faculty. UCLA had an extraordinary opportunity, because of retirements, to put in place a new faculty in a short time -- Charles Ray, Chris Burden and Lari Pittman and so on. They were able to acquire some of the most celebrated international art "stars" based on the West Coast..

PAUL KARLSTROM: They had to be smart enough so they could do that.

ROLAND REISS: They were.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And how did that happen at UCLA, because in the past, that wasn't so likely to happen?

ROLAND REISS: I really don't know who accomplished that. My guess is that Henry Hopkins and Chris Burden share some of the responsibility. Burden had the clout and the associations; Henry had the necessary overview. There was a period in which Ray Brown was chair. I think that was before Henry. They talked to me about being chair, before Ray. The older faculty was still ensconced and knowing the politics there, I really didn't think much change was possible. It would have meant being a caretaker. That was before the possibility of building a new faculty emerged. Of course Chris Burden was already there and people like Gene Sturman, among others, were in temporary slots teaching new media as a way of injecting contemporary ideas into the program. They were cycling a lot of people in and out on one and two year bases. I think Chris was one of those at first before they hired him permanently. It was the same thing with Art Center. Their graduate program that had been solid and relatively distinguished jumped into prominence with Jeremy and Michael Kelly and Steve Prina. Again, internationally important artists take over the faculty. The difficulty for the other programs, even including CalArts at this later date, is that their faculties are composed of an earlier generation who were successful in an earlier period. For instance, Connie Zehr was a celebrated artist shown at the Whitney before she was hired. Michael Brewster, too, was receiving a lot of attention for his work. I was also doing pretty well, professionally. Many good schools like USC, for example, became locked in to a faculty for a long time and change had to come about slowly. Since we were building and didn't have many full-time positions at Claremont, we set about contracting a program with adjunct professors, who had important reputations and were known to be excellent teachers. We remain committed to practice while increasing our offerings in critical theory and emphasizing recent developments in contemporary art. We viewed ourselves as functioning in an international context. Cal Art's model also was not to think local. All of the programs we have been talking about currently view themselves as part of the national and international art world. It is a critical element separating them from all of the others.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it sounds like what you tried to do with the program from the beginning is prepare the students in as many ways possible to engage, including thinking. You're committed to practice and probably even insist upon Life Drawing. Do you have Life Drawing?

ROLAND REISS: We provide it for students if they want it. It's a very democratic approach. You see, most of these other departments have a philosophical outlook driving their programs. A particular view about what art should be is reflected in their education approach. I think their view of the future is often driven by their own work and interests. I personally have always believed that the future of art is already in the students, even if they have difficulty articulating and that is reasonable for them to participate in the design of their program.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[SESSION 3]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: An interview with Roland Reiss. This is Tape 2, Side A.

ROLAND REISS: Most of what I am saying about the other programs comes from an outsider's perspective and most of the information is second-hand. According to a former student, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe has said about Claremont, "Well, the trouble is they don't have a philosophy out there." Obviously he meant this to be a negative criticism of our approach. I think he had discovered the fact that there was no single dominating idea that students would be asked to conform to, like strategy or theory-driven art or whatever it might be. The success of our program has come from a very democratic approach to curricula. The average age of graduate students at Claremont is around twenty-seven, twenty-eight. They're adults. Many of them have had careers in art. They are mature and responsible people. We don't get applicants out of undergraduate schools very often. I believe their own views about their education are important and that the individual choices about their art must be supported and developed. At Claremont trust in the student begins with their vote on new applicants, along with the faculty. This is where full participation begins. Ultimately the value of this process is seen in the wide variety of work produced. Developing a deep understanding of art on personal and professional levels may or may not lead to immediate success, but it will help to create art of great depth and quality in the long term.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said in the beginning that your program at Claremont is really distinguished by involving the students in these kinds of decisions. Can you think of any other school that has that same sort of philosophy?

ROLAND REISS: No. I don't know of any. I have heard that there are now one or two places where students get to vote on who comes into the program, but it would be long after we started it. I find it sort of amusing that in the recent interviews with UCLA and Art Center, that the word "Black Mountain" is being suddenly mentioned a lot. And of course, that was always my model from the beginning. I'm amazed! I don't understand that their students have anything to say about the direction of the program or curricula. Our students help hire our adjunct professors. They propose names to us and vote on them. Our students award fellowships and scholarships. They have keys to every part of the building and have day and night access. They help direct the program through a

variety of committees. Other graduate programs have faculties with responsibility often to large undergraduate programs as well as to graduates. The Claremont graduate University faculty is focused exclusively on graduates. It is, therefore, possible to treat them like adults.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's like an apprentice program, much more like in the Renaissance, [where] you would perhaps have your younger ones coming up learning by doing rather than being told what to do.

ROLAND REISS: Somewhat I guess I would say learning what they think they need to learn as opposed to being force-fed. You know, I started with a tiny core faculty and I realized that some of the students were as good as the general faculty. Like Hap Tivey, who was one of Turrell's acolytes and a brilliant guy. We set up discussion groups with student leaders. It was a method of having the best students teach their peers, expanding the educational dialogue and their part in the program.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Discussion groups?

ROLAND REISS: Yes, called "disco's", discussion groups, led by student leaders. No faculty involved. They discuss various topics. One semester, discussions in specific areas of painting, installation, or whatever not covered in seminars. The second semester they invent imaginative topics. I recall one, called "Origins" that examined the beginnings of art and art making. They spent a lot of time talking in the desert and then finding and making art there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds as if some of these discussions are pretty philosophical, then.

ROLAND REISS: Absolutely! When I'm talking about practice, it's really in the context of other schools not having as much studio work. We are, after all, a university department and all of our students are grounded in the history and critical theory. Many choose to do studies in other scholarly disciplines we have available. We're trying to do it all by maintaining a catholic outlook, but this means our students are more likely to disperse themselves in the art world, sometimes in areas with less visibility. In a study we did last year it turned out that forty percent of our graduates are teaching in colleges, universities, and art schools. .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So actually things haven't changed all that much.

ROLAND REISS: Well, in a sense, they haven't because the schools are now producing an enormous amount of young artists. While most may be directed toward a professional career instead of teaching, opportunities available are proportionately limited. Teaching becomes a means of survival although increasingly, art graduates are going into design for the web. I have thought perhaps the community set-up at Claremont is a socializing factor better qualifying our students to teach. Certainly there is no interest in preparing teachers in the program.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you again about Life Drawing. Up until perhaps the sixties, it remained a mainstay of art training. What are your observations on Life drawing, perhaps almost as a symbol of tradition and something basic that provides a connection to the whole part of being a professional artist?

ROLAND REISS: It certainly used to represent that. I taught Life Drawing and Anatomy at UCLA and Colorado for years, in that area and have thought a lot about it. It provides experience in terms of training the eye and the hand that is critical if you're going to really produce descriptive objects and images, but I don't' believe it is the only way to achieve visual activity. It is useful and relevant to artists interested in figurative work. But artists may use figurative images based on style and not on observation. I think the use of the nude model symbolized the kind of license or freedom necessary to creative people. I actually thought it was a health initiation rite for young men and women. We now have so much nudity available through the media that this thought seems quaint.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what you're suggesting is a connection then to that which stands a bit out of polite society, in other words, bohemianism.

ROLAND REISS: That's part of it. But polite society has become somewhat more comfortable with nudity and even sex. It is only extreme images or nudity out of context that shock us at this point in time. We have both been to Zorthian's Bacchanals. Whole families would come there and be completely accepting of nudity in the performances. My problem with the teaching of Life Drawing and Anatomy is that it usually provided very limited ideas about the human figure that often prevented students from developing further. It often inhibited the students' progress with color and painting. The original academy in Florence taught only drawing, not painting. I think that's because drawing was simpler, clearer, and straight forward as a graphic instrument. Its study allowed for a simultaneous inculcation of ideology. The use of painting and color was put off until later. Drawing was the ready servant of concept and propagandistic aims. As an aside, It occurs to me that critical theory as ideology can stunt the artist also. So many clichés have grown up around Life Drawing that it is really necessary to discover what is relevant about it today. There are large philosophical questions about the human image that

could lead to more meaningful approaches. In the sixties I began to notice that graduate students doing the most interesting figurative work had stopped coming to draw the model and were using magazine images and other sources that distanced themselves from direct contact with the model. This also meant their work was becoming more conceptual in character. There has been a resurgence of work, which takes the figure as subject in painting. Artists like Lucien Freud, John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage have opened the door for new, direct approaches to the figure. We are also beginning to see a new interest in landscape and I think that will also involve the figure as it continues to develop.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I actually like your ideas on this. This other generation came in and now it appears from what you think that it's actually going to come back to this.

ROLAND REISS: Yes, I do. I think most people using the figure today are using it for some social message or political purpose. For young students it has become a new way to confront reality. They're bringing intellectual ideas to it and an interest in perception. They want to use their eyes. They are also demanding that the more conceptually oriented programs make more painting courses available. I have always believed it was a ludicrous category mistake in the visual arts to dismiss visual experience. Every generation will want to draw and paint as time goes on and it will never disappear. Are you writing about Davis also? I can tell you a few things I've heard. You know they had the great faculty up there. And, years later, Davis is still rated as one of the top programs in the country in U.S. News and World Report. Rumor has it that after that a faculty left, they hired a group of conceptualists. That didn't work so they restored their commitment to practice with new hires. So while their reputation may be sustained for a while on the basis of history, it will be years before the quality of the new program is proven.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think when I write about this I'm not going to say it quite that way. One of my points will be that when Wiley was there, in the mid-sixties, people were talking about Davis as this incredibly hot place. It was the place to be. It had [Wayne] Thiebaud, [Robert] Arneson, and [William T.] Wiley. I can't remember who else was there right at the moment.

ROLAND REISS: Roy de Forest was one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was really interesting talking with William Wiley about the fact that his student was Bruce Nauman and acknowledging that it was like collaboration. It wasn't a teacher/student. He was learning at least as much from Nauman, already at that stage, as he was, but it was pretty exciting. He was talking about this very change over time and how there were these moments when you have a faculty and it's really exciting energy.

ROLAND REISS: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You point out some very good reasons why that's so.

ROLAND REISS: Some schools like ours are trying to keep that alive with adjuncts. They bring a fierce commitment to professionalism, outstanding reputations and an enormous amount of energy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's ironic in a sense, but not surprising. If we are talking about changing, then in a short period of time the world moves beyond and in some ways the people that you bring into the place as "cutting edge" and then the same thing is going to happen at UCLA.

ROLAND REISS: Well, it's happened at CalArts and it will happen to every program that doesn't have the funds to replace carefully at the highest level. It may happen a little less at Claremont because we have a rather thorough educational program in place. Financially, a small university like ours could never buy number one, but we have remained way up there in national ratings.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How is the recent one?

ROLAND REISS: Excellent. You know it's hard to believe that the Art Institute of Chicago is at the top. It's the number one school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How can that be? What happens there?

ROLAND REISS: The eastern schools have always rated at the top. I think the scale has ossified at this point. All of the changes in recent years have not seemed to register in the ratings. The Art Institute of Chicago is at the top and Yale is second. It probably should be number one. Davis was number four or five and farther down the scale you have UCLA, Art Center and Claremont tied.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I thought you just said everybody talks as if the exciting program at the moment is UCLA.

ROLAND REISS: Yes. That's true, all three programs should be moved way up. If the ratings are to be fair, I think UCLA should become number two, after Yale, because of their internationally important faculty.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who do they have at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago? Who are the great people?

ROLAND REISS: You know, I can't tell you that. These schools are being rated by people from all over the country.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They don't really know what's going on.

ROLAND REISS: Only raters who have been around a long while really know what's happening all over the country. I don't think most of them know what's going on. Maybe they're less impressed. Maybe they're at odds with the contemporary thrust of programs in the West. I think Claremont's position is improving, but it will not move up as rapidly as UCLA and Art Center. We can't compete with UCLA's resources and [Richard] Koshalek is bringing money and leadership to Art Center. Both are expanding their physical facilities. The rating process is questionable. Art administrators across the country received rating sheets. You are asked to rate about 600 Art Departments in the country. Recently I have thought that because of my years in teaching. I probably know more about these programs than almost any and I only know about fifty percent of the programs. Other raters who come along after me would know even less and some would only know the region they were in. They might hear things from a few friends, but I don't understand how they would know specific detail, like which schools are best in painting or performance. There's been a lot of complaining about the ratings, but we continue to mention it at Claremont because we're doing well. Hopefully, the western art programs will get a fairer shake in the future.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How can they deny Lari Pittman, for instance?

ROLAND REISS: I don't ever expect them to eclipse Yale, though, and they might deserve it. UCLA's leadership continues to change reflecting a certain amount of uneasiness amongst its faculty. Actually, their graduate program is small for an institution of that scale. They get an enormous amount of applications partly because they now have a great reputation and partly because they are so inexpensive. They are able to choose a small select group of highly accomplished students. These students say they expect the faculty to get them into galleries, but many of the faculties are not available. If true, this certainly fits the model of advanced art education in Europe. At Claremont we work with many outstanding students and we believe we can also develop bright applicants whose undergraduate experience has never been ideal. We have an educational system in place that produces intellectual growth and growth in practice.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But if you are going to maintain such programs within the context of graduate studies and within the humanities, university and colleges have to be connected to intellectual activity. I happen to believe that art is an intellectual activity, but it has certain built-in challenges. You would know this from teaching all these years. It's very hard to measure. It's terribly subjective.

ROLAND REISS: Very subjective.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And yet you want to feel that there is something really solid that is happening within there, otherwise why bother? If you're not going to operate within the realm of ideas, and that means taking art history; that means reading; that means knowing some literature; and so forth, I can't think of any reason to go to an art school except contacts. Do you agree with that?

ROLAND REISS: You have to remember that at the graduate level art schools are a little bit different. They do not have the same range of academic electives available. The undergraduates are given rudimentary academic studies, whereas undergraduates at colleges and universities get a more extensive education in the Liberal Arts. In Claremont at the graduate level we thread history, cognitive areas of study into our program. It is easy because we have a rich field of offerings available to us at the graduate level. I'm not sure that larger universities would allow their art graduates such access to related but separate disciplines. We shouldn't forget that the art schools have carved out intellectual territory for themselves, centered around critical theory. Art school education is still very good and offers a lot beyond contacts. I would just say we do something different from what they do. The other thing I wanted to mention is that some of these schools use a mentor system. For instance, at CalArts you would sign up with one instructor like John Baldessari. John would then be your mentor and almost exclusive instructor for your graduate work. We choose to do exactly the opposite at Claremont. We want our students to interact with as many instructors as possible. We have great faith in the students' ability to entertain choices and take responsibility for their own art and their own education.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it looks like this is about winding down. I have gotten a terrific amount from this. I can see that you're probably the best person to talk to about this subject.

ROLAND REISS: I really hope it will be of value to you and to others.

[END OF SESSION 3, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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