Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Eleanor Dickinson, 2000 October 25

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Eleanor Dickinson on October 25, 2000. The interview took place in San Francisco, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Eleanor Dickinson at the artist's studio in her home in San Francisco at Broderick Street. The date is October 25, 2000. The interviewer for the Archives, Paul Karlstrom. And we want to do a short interview today which is really a prelude to a more substantial investigation of your career and of your art. This interview will be focused on a subject that's near and dear to you. You've been working on it as a practitioner, as an artist, who teaches figure drawing, life drawing, and also as sort of a documentation because you've done a series of interviews with artists; the topic "Artists and Models." This is a series that is ongoing through the West Coast Regional Center of the Archives of American Art. And so I'd like to talk with you specifically about this today. We'll save your life and bio and background for another time. So that's by way of introducing this tape, Tape 1, Side A, of Session 1 with Eleanor Dickinson. Well we've had an interesting time this morning going into your files and looking at all these photographs from all these sessions and looking at some of your videos with the models. And I guess I would like to know how you came to this subject. You are fundamentally a realist figurative artist. You've taught many years. You teach currently at California College of Arts and Crafts [CCAC] in Oakland and San Francisco now. I associate you with the human figure and I realize that's not all you're involved with.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: That's pretty accurate.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Why don't you tell me just how this came about, and perhaps in some specific way, what that means to you, the human figure and your interest then in the models as well as people. What does it mean?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well I've always been interested in ecstatic subjects and always the figure. I simply have never been particularly interested in landscape or abstracts or still life or anything like that, any of the usual things. And I'm particularly interested in ecstatic moments where there's some heightened emotion. Wittgenstein said that "The human body is the best image of the human soul" and that has always seemed very accurate to me, that what I am -- when I'm drawing, I become the person I'm drawing and I simply am not interested in the exact relationship of line to plane. I think you have to know your craft and then go beyond it. And I get very involved in the personality of whoever it is I'm drawing, not necessarily their entire life, but at least for the time that they're in the studio. It's sort of a performance on their part, and the interaction between the artist and the model I think is really quite critical. I think it's very important to all of us and it's under-recognized. People are quite used to thinking about the foundry men as an important part of the sculptor's work or the print-maker. The master printer is important for the print-maker, but they don't realize quite how important the model is to the artist. With many of these models, I've been drawing them 20, 25, 30 years, and that's an important relationship to me, and although in the tapes, the models sometimes say that the model is 80% of the creativity that goes into a work of art, I certainly don't think it's that high, but I do think it's collaborative. In many cases, I will write down what the model says and use that as titling for the work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which model said that? When we were watching the video, and I perked up and I --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Oh, that was Debbie Mandel, Debbie Lee Mandel.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Debbie Lee Mandel, okay.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Eighty percent, maybe that's proclaiming a little too much, but --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well a lot of models think that they are terribly important to a work of art. Now other people have observed that the final work of art often looks more like the artist than like the model --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- which I guess it's just self-serving to feel that you're the most important part of it, but I

do think the relationship is a very important one and way under-recognized.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I agree. And I'm interested in what you said about the finished work of art looking in some way more like the artist than the model, and I take you're meaning that's not necessarily literally the case in terms of features and all the --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Sometimes it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It is --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: I hope not for me 'cause I'm so aware of it, but I'm sure you've seen works of art that they all look alike. If ever during your painting the person looks rather similar, then you start looking at the artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There's an interesting point then that has come out in these interviews that I've been conducting on artists and models, both talking with artists and with the models, and it has to do with really the subject, who is the subject, regardless of how it looks, you know, what is this all about. And it may be, in some ways, fairly obvious -- I guess, if you're familiar with the way people operate -- but very often in the course of the interviewing there comes a sort of epiphany that's recognition that yes, indeed, it's all about them. If you're talking with the model, the whole studio experience, it's about them, the model, and they have their own reasons for --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- being involved, all of which I'm sure you, in your interviews, have studied a lot. The artists bring often a different set of interests and goals to the studio situation.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well keep in mind that many of those models are performers in addition to being models. They are poets or actors or actresses or musicians or something like that and their ego is very important, too, so they would naturally think of the whole session as revolving around them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Talk to me a little bit, from your own observations, about motives. One of the things that interests me, as you know --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: The artist or the models?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No -- first of all, the models, because as we've been discussing, as you know, I've just almost completed writing something brief on -- an essay on artists and models, and one of my interests, one of the themes that emerged from this study -- was the whole issue of motivation and what we bring to the experience, why do we do it. It's not very interesting to hear that one gets paid is the reason for doing it and then we sort of set that aside.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: You can make so much money, but actually, for many, it's very convenient because it can be at odd hours. For example, if the person is in a theatrical event in the evening, they can model during the day. But I would say that a lot of the models when you ask them why they're modeling, they look on it as an art form in itself and sometimes they say that they get ideas while they're posing and they take them into their performances later on. You saw that on the tape that quite a few people were saying that. Now sometimes they say they want to become immortal, occasionally, and some just like to have their clothes off, but modeling is an awful lot more than just taking your clothes off.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: In my experience, the world is filled with people who are dying to take their clothes off. It's not hard
to --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- find that. There's so much more to modeling than that, and yet, that's the first thing everyone thinks about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well sure. Well I mean it's difficult to do. We know that, especially if it's a long pose, almost any long pose.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: I think it depends on whether it's cold in the room or not. I know you're interested in erotic aspects of it, but actually, it's kind of rare because it frequently is either cold or the model is frozen in one position for long periods of time. They get stiff; they get tired; they want to move around. It's not a particularly erotic situation.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. No, well I understand that.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Except in that the artist is also a voyeur. I mean that's almost a description of most artists, and not voyeur in a sexual sense particularly, but well maybe in a broader, sexual sense, that you live more fully through your sight and the things that you see are tremendously important to you. I know, for example, when I'm drawing, I don't hear. Over and over again, people will say the phone's rung 10 times or the record is stuck and has played 20 times. I won't know it, and I don't really care what music they want to play. I always try and keep them happy and play music, but I simply cut off from other senses when I'm drawing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Eros, of course, has a specific definition and then it tends to become more general, but I think that in the way we're thinking of it here, an eroticized studio is not necessarily a sexualized studio, but it moves into the area of desire and need. And what I would like to ask you about, and we understand we're not talking about this phenomenon [modeling] in its fullest way, it's a profession. And at this point, what I would like to talk about -- we can talk about the other stuff. Those art classes at CCAC, at this moment, don't interest me very much, and those professional models, if you want to know the truth right now, don't interest me a lot. The ones that I'm interested in are those who pose privately and very often who are friends [of the artist] who are asked to. In other words where it comes [from] -- not off the street exactly, but out of your life -- outside into the studio.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you distinguish -- do you see a difference in that? And maybe also in terms of motivation. Sometimes they're not even paid. What have you found in your experience? You've had models like that, I'm sure.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Sure, and I was trying to think. It's frequently a particular subject. For example, I was doing those huge crucifixions seven to 10 feet high and what I was working on was the idea of going beyond pain and suffering to a kind of ecstasy, and I call them crucifixions, but that's in a very general sense. It wasn't particularly illustrating Christian theology, but they're almost all fairly traumatic, psychological situations. And I sort of spread the word of what I was doing and then different people would talk about it and people would come forward and say they'd like to work with me on that. One woman came down from Sacramento. She was curator at the museum up at The Crocker and she heard what I was doing, so she came down, hung around the studio one day, and then about a week later, she called me back and said she couldn't get it out of her mind and she'd like to work with me on that. So there are those kind of volunteering situations. Frequently, it was someone who had some very major traumatic event that they wanted to re-experience. One guy --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Therapy.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well maybe --

PAUL KARLSTROM: In a way.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- from their point of view. This one guy had been one of the first people ever to get AIDS, and before he died, he wanted to make a statement about it, and, in fact, the last date I had to draw him, he was in a hospice over in Castro and that was the day he died.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow!

ELEANOR DICKINSON: But he wanted to make that particular statement while he was still alive. Very often when someone is volunteering to pose, it's because they've got something like that in their minds. Of course, I don't always know what's in their minds.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean it's a way to participate in something that is certainly going to last longer than you are?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes. I think that's very important to many people, and they may not verbalize it, but it is a kind of immortality to them. Occasionally, if someone is young and beautiful, they want to be immortalized while they're young and beautiful. But, to me, all bodies are beautiful. I just love the human body, and I don't distinguish between young lovers and old lovers, for example.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. I noticed in looking through your photographs, in fact, you may have even written something about
that --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I saw you gave in a sheet where -- well, we have in some of the photographs even that I'm

taking away to look at today, older couples, and then there's some photographs of the actual models, and then some drawings and so forth. And this is an interesting point and it may lead somewhere else. It seems to me that you are interested, from what you've said, in the experience of, well, of life, but we're talking specifically about love here --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- between the two individuals, in these cases, a man and a woman.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not exclusively.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Not always, but usually.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, but in this case, and so it is this experience, this emotion, that that is the subject --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- rather than investigating or discovering that kind of a connection rather than the sexual implications [inaudible].

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah. How many different ways one can screw is not of great interest to me, but, for example, with the older lovers, one woman who modeled for me, Bobbette-Ann Teavin [phon. sp.], when her husband died, I guess she was in her 70s. It wasn't a week before she moved her lover in, and she said, "Honey, it ain't any different when you get older. It just takes a little longer," which I think is kind of comforting to those of us who are aging.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: But my dealer at the time, William Sawyer, did not want to show those drawings, and I think he had problems with his own mortality, and I wouldn't show the young lovers without showing the old lovers, so I just sent him off to other museum shows and they were up at the University of Washington, different ones. I just kept sending him comments from those museum directors and curators and so forth. And the directors would say that during the show, older people were searching them out and saying "Thank you for doing this show." It was very important, and so finally, Buzz Sawyer gave in and showed both of them, but I don't think he was happy about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well –

ELEANOR DICKINSON: But those older ones, I mean so many times when you're showing the love between them, it can be very erotic just a touch on a cheek or -- one very erotic time was when one woman wrapped her very long hair around the guy's genitals and just made this sort of --

PAUL KARLSTROM: The nest.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- nest for them. I mean there are all these very gentle touches that they have. And whether they're old or young doesn't make much difference. I just think they continue among lovers is what you're trying to show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There are those who might speculate that there's -- one has to be careful here -- but tends to be a difference in viewing love and the activity of love between [men and women] a gender-based difference. Do you find that to be true? Is this something that's interested you? I mean, you're a feminist and are interested in those sort of, sometimes bogus, distinctions between men and women. Do you have any thoughts about that? What you've described is actually a more subtle and I think more sensual avenue towards sexuality --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- and towards love than frequently you encounter in a more direct male view and, frankly, that I've encountered in talking with male artists.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah, but I'm not the best person to ask because I know it sounds weird, but I don't make that much distinction between men and women or races or ages or anything else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: It's the love between two beings --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- that interests me a great deal. And I've had male couples and female couples. I don't go hunting people out that much. Very often people will pose for me and they'll find it a very interesting experience and then they'll tell their friends and other people will want to model. There was one model, Cory Weldon, who is Isabelle -- she uses the word -- the title "Isabelle for Hers [sic]," and whenever she fell in love, the most important thing for her was to bring the guy over for them to model because until she saw drawings of them together, it wasn't real to her. I was an important part of that relationship.

PAUL KARLSTROM: With Cory?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Cory Weldon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Called "Isabelle."

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Her middle name was Isabelle. I guess she still is -- I've lost touch with her lately, but she was a schoolteacher and didn't want to get fired, so we called the series with her, "Isabelle in Love."

PAUL KARLSTROM: So she would bring him to pose and --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: With affirmation.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, but with -- what you said was very interesting, that for her, that then confirmed a kind of reality --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- of this relationship.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, she then thought of herself as living more authentically perhaps within this art situation.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which is quite interesting. It becomes a stage, then a metaphor, for the broader life, I guess.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right. I've sometimes wondered -- I had an exhibitionist model for me one time. It was kind of happenstance, but I asked a friend who's a psycho analyst later what was going on inside these people's heads and he said, "They feel they don't exist unless they're being looked at." It's as if the sunlight were falling on their bodies and they were only real when that happened, and I think that may happen a lot more than people realize, that our looking at them is very important to them. Certainly, models are supposed to be exhibitionists and artist voyeurs and I guess it's a happy relationship that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Isn't that nice that we have one another.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The whole idea of exhibitionism comes out and I've dealt with this pretty directly in interviewing models.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Have you ever modeled?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. I offered to for Joyce Trieman once.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm actually very shy and I'm much more of a voyeur, but --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: But you should model. Then you can feel what it's like yourself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. I think there's no doubt about that. Trieman --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: You don't have to be nude.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know. Well I never posed for Trieman nude, but I offered to pose anyway she wanted me. We were good friends and she thought about it and then decided to do me the way I dress. I mean I guess she

wanted to think of me in this way. This was our relationship. It was very, very interesting. Besides, she was shy. Sometimes that adds another dimension to a friendship.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah, I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It depends. Anyway, she did some rather strange, interesting, quick oil sketches of me. She's very quick.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She's amazing with paint.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: I love her work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Me too. But the idea of exhibitionism, many of these models, a few of them at least, have no problem with self-identifying as exhibitionists.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just acknowledge this is -- and that they enjoy --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- the display.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And sometimes they use that term. It's like self-display. "I like to be looked at."

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So I think for what I've encountered in all of this [is] that looking is really at the heart of this kind of --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- exchange.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: And it's that whole thing that artists, [inaudible] and art critics get into the difference between looking and the gaze and all that stuff --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- and the eye and so on. I don't really get into it an awful lot, however one wants to label it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's talk about -- and we're going to end up going a little bit more than this half-hour, although I think we're being very efficient --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- but then we both have been thinking about this quite a bit.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right. Well it's something I work with all the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I know, I know you do.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: But by the way, I should just put in that the volunteer models or if they're commissioning something, they are the ones who might be somewhat shy about their bodies and it's not genitals, for example, but whether they need to lose 10 pounds or not. It's a vanity far more than anything else. And along those lines, I have had couples purchase a drawing of couples and they'll select carefully and then I'll find out that they're telling all their friends that it's them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: And they hang it over their bed or something and they'll say it's them. But I've had the opposite. I've had couples model and purchase one of the drawings and not tell their friends it's them. It's just their sort of private joke about it. So it goes a lot of different ways. Mostly, though, I'd say it's vanity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah. I found that, and I am also intrigued by this notion of ways to assert identity and a sense of self, and it does seem, from conversations I've had and these interviews I've done, that the artist studio and the activity involved is like ideal --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- for this process of acknowledging yourself, being looked at and acknowledged, and then actually ending up on something that's separate --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- you know, the drawing, an image.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: They'll end up in museums of galleries or important collections, and they love that, to go and find themselves there.

[OFF TAPE]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We've had a brief break here and we don't have too much further to go. What I would like to do now, I think, is -- and there's so much to talk about on this subject and it's so productive. One of the reasons I love it is that it leads into so many aspects of human experience.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's all about people.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Gee, we're humanists. What could be more interesting. And it does so within a kind of controlled situation. It's like a laboratory. It's a controlled situation. What I'd like to do now is take a look at -- talk a little bit about two events with which I'm familiar from your multi-faceted career and involvement with the artists and models, not all of which we can cover today. And so first of all, I would like to bring up the very interesting show -- I think this is when I first became familiar with you and your work because we had just -- my wife and I just moved to San Francisco to start this Archives job which took place in '73, and then you had a show in '75 at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. Could you tell us about that?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: The content of the show?

PAUL KARLSTROM: The whole thing, yeah.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did that come about, you know? What happened?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Fenton Kastner was the curator in charge, I think the title goes, of the Legion and he wanted to do a show and I had this idea for a show a long time before and I was originally going to do it at the Corconan Gallery (Washington, D.C.) and I ended up doing a revival there instead with Walter Hopps. So I talked to Fenton about it and what I wanted to do was make the process of doing the show, be the show, and my concept was to move my studio into the museum and the models would come there to pose. My students would also -- my rabbit was there, my video was there, and so what we planned was to put 30 pictures around the walls and then I would do more pictures and I might look at them for a while or correct them or tear them up, or if I liked them, then put them into frames instead so that the show is changing all the time. And we planned this for about three years and got, you know, the exhibition committee approval and all that kind of thing. You go through a great deal. Tom Garver was head of things at the time and Ian White was the director of the museum. So we were all set up and, actually, everything moved into the museum which was quite a lot of work and things were being hung and so forth. And as I understand it, the director of the museum got quite nervous because some of the ladies auxiliary, whatever it's called, started coming up to him saying provocative things like, "I understand there are going to be nudes in our museum," and he got really quite worried about this show. So he told the guy who was coming in, Robert Johnson, who was just being brought there -- Fenton was retiring and Robert was being brought in as the new curator in charge of the Achenbach.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Eleanor, please excuse me. Let's --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Sure.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]
[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing this first-session interview with Eleanor Dickinson. This is Session 1, Tape 1, Side B. Sorry for the interruption. You were talking about the ‘75 show at the Legion, about Ian White becoming nervous because he had possible problems with certain supporters, women's groups, concern about the nudes. This was the same moment that Robert Flynn Johnson, who was [the new] head of the Achenbach there came along. What happened next?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well Robert was new to the community and not too aware of the various political things that were going on and so he was told to change the whole concept of the show, and so I basically went in to meet him and say "Welcome to the Bay area" and "It's great that you're going to be here for the show" and so forth. I was the first show that greeted him and he tried to change it to just be 30 works on the wall and that was it which would have been a total change in the whole concept. So I tried to persuade them that this was in no way an erotic situation. The models were always going to wear bathing suits or leotards or drapery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now was that your initial plan or --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, so you weren't using this opportunity to maybe make a bolder statement or --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: No, I didn't have that in mind. It wouldn't have mattered to me one way or another ---

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, of course not.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- but I've had an awful lot of shows at museums and I know museums just don't do that very often --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- so no, it was fine with me, although I had done a video documentary of two of the models who were so used to modeling nude and I told everybody they had to be covered in some way. So I have this very funny videotape of this elderly couple going to the Hardon leather shop, purchasing jock straps, G-strings, pasties, and so forth, and it's really quite funny. But anyway, they were going to wear I think a bathing suit or something like that. So in order to save the show, I agreed to have them covered from neck to wrist to ankle and I had to sew muu muus for everybody to wear for the show which was really pretty freaky. And, of course, the models explained in detail to the entire public, anyone who came by during the whole course of the show, was informed that they were draped in this ridiculous way because of the museum's nervousness. I put out a comment book and it got very well [inaudible] because I think the curators and directors and so forth came by and looked at the comments. Well since I tripled the museum's attendance within about a week and it stayed high for the entire show, and most of the comments were that they loved seeing the whole process of developing of the art, they realized that no one was going to be too bothered by it. So about halfway through, they went back to the original plan and the models after that wore bathing suits, leotards, or whatever. And I drew them during the whole show and people could come and draw, too. They would often show up with pad and pencil and I didn't give lessons or anything, but it was like they were perfectly welcome to come in the studio and draw.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interactive.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Oh, it was great, but it was to -- you see, so often people see the final product and, actually, drawing is a verb not a noun. I'm not trying to make an object. I'm having an experience when I'm drawing and I wanted to see if that could be put on display, and I thought that everybody joining in on that was great, so that whatever they developed, they were having the same kind of experience. I don't think the museum ever really understood the whole concept of this because at the end of two months, if you called up the museum to ask about it, they said I occasionally did demonstrations, but I was there seven days a week for nine weeks, from the time it opened 'til the time it closed, so just the whole process became the show. The models got very mad about this. They thought that there was nothing they were ashamed of or that the museum exhibited all sorts of drawings and paintings, particularly women all through the museum, and then to not be able to accept them even with a bathing suit or something was quite hypocritical and they got very angry. So their last day of this show, they spread the word. It happened to be a Sunday which was possibly fortunate because none of the museum personnel ever come to the museum on Sundays, and all the models who had been posing for two months showed up the last day of the show and stripped and the whole room was filled with nudes all day long. The public loved it. Everybody loved it. It became just a big party all day long. Incidentally --

PAUL KARLSTROM: How many were there?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Oh, there must have been 20 or 30 of them. I don't know exactly. You've got some of the photographs. But, you know, during the show, one of the things that they had been worried about was the

security of having all my art spread out there. Well, we were the best-guarded show in the museum because all the guards quickly realized that the most activity in the whole museum was down there in that gallery. It was the whole hallway and the gallery. It's basically two big galleries. And they could go down there and see a belly dancer dancing or any of a lot of things going on, so we always had at least one and sometimes three or four guards. I don't know what happened to the old masters, but we got well guarded. So the last day of the show, the guards thought it was just great and they supported it and had no problems with it. And what I thought was particularly funny was on Monday, this one patron of arts complained to the director of the museum that there were nudes in the museum and so he sent for the head guard and asked him and the head guard just lied his head off. He said, "Nonsense, no such thing. The man must have been drunk," and that was the end of that. But I did photograph it. You've got the photos of what it was like that day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think that's a fabulous story, and the idea of really sharing this experience, this process, from your studio, for your classes, in fact, with this museum audience is good because then it isn't just a product, these flat things that go on the wall.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well it's a question where does the art reside.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: You look at a painting and it's sort of like looking at a battlefield the next day. You can see a dead body or where a cannonball has grazed a tree limb or something like that, but only in your imagination can the charge and the fighting --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- and everything go on. You look at a painting and you see what it was like when the artist chose to stop working --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- but you don't have any concept of what the real activity of art is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And all the choices --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- that are made which is an analogue for life because it's just one choice after another.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: And also the risk-taking, you know. If I would do a drawing, I have a great, big sheet of paper, so I would draw like the model's feet and then you take one line of pen/ink line and you go from the ankle six feet up to an elbow and stop, and you go to the other ankle and you go six feet up to the other elbow and stop. You do the genitals and one line down to the inside of the feet. You've got three lines and they all have to be perfect or you tear it up. You know, it's right or it's wrong the first time. And this concept of risk-taking, problem-solving which is what we deal with all the time, you can only really understand when you see it happening. You don't see it from a final painting or a final drawing unless you actually do the drawing and then you're just sort of imagining. You're not really seeing it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. Let's, for a last little part of this before we get a bite, talk about a session that took place, I'm not sure when, I'm not sure where, but it was videotaped, and this is the time when two models, for one reason or another, got into one another --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes, literally.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- literally. And why don't you just, without me asking questions, you know, they're setting the stage, sort of tweaking your memory, how did this come about? And I am interested in knowing, not the names of the people necessarily, that isn't the point, what they were coming from, what they were bringing to the studio, and then how the session came about, who was involved, and just what happened. How did it unfold?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well, these were two artist friends of mine, Janet and Jim, and one was a photographer and one was a painter, and they were very much in love with each other, and they knew I drew lovers. So I can't even remember if I suggested it or they suggested it, but they were modeling and I had gotten a number of drawings and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Excuse me, they were models, professional models?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: No, they were professional artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, and so this was -
ELEANOR DICKINSON: But they also wanted to model, and so I had been drawing them --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- and they began to make love, not staying still and just suggesting it, but actually making love. And my video -- it was right here, my model -- well there's the model stand --

[PHONE RINGING -- OFF TAPE]

PAUL KARLSTROM: A brief interruption.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As you were saying.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well, I had my video equipment here and I think I had actually been taping something or other, so anyway, everything was all set up, and so I asked them if they would mind if I taped, and they said fine and so I did. It's actually quite rare for models to have sex when modeling. Even if you have couples model, they don't usually -- as I said, it's frequently not that comfortable. And they were very comfortable, very much in love.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some people also think it's private. Now that's a big difference how you feel about --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah. Some people don't, however.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Apparently.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yes. So I taped the whole thing. And then it was interesting when I edited it. I wasn't really interested in -- I've seen a lot of erotic tapes and/or films and so forth, and most of them are very mechanistic, close-ins and, you know, lots of drops of fluid and so forth, and mine is different because although there is that, certainly there's all the mechanics of sexual activity. But a lot of what I was focusing on was the gentleness, the hands touching, and their faces close together, and the way their hands and arms moved over each other's body. It's a very loving tape and I think really quite different from most of the porno tapes that you see.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did they like it?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: They loved it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How long did it take?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well I was just looking at it. It was about an hour 'cause I've got two half-hour reels that are filled, but they probably -- it probably went on longer because there's some starting and stopping on the tape, certainly to change reels.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting. That's a lot longer than it takes most of the rest of us to make love.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah. They weren't in any hurry. They were just very comfortable.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A lot of foreplay and --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah, a lot. And, you know, it was warm; it was comfortable. The room's dark, spotlights. They were beautiful. It was very loving.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you this, again, you know, one only speculates so much. It's a bit unusual, even in the -- was this in the '70s?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: The date's on the tape. I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Even then in the '70s, early '70s, turns out to be the, in some ways, most liberated or most self-consciously liberated --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- time, but that's fairly unusual activity and one can't help but wonder if this public -- it's not public exactly. There were other people there or just you?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: No, just me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just you, okay. The sharing --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: It was at night and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, the sharing is an interesting phenomenon and I'm just curious. Did you get the sense that this acting for another person and being taped was sort of an enhancement, a turn-on?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: It might have been. I don't think they had done it publicly before like that. I think they just felt very comfortable. It seemed quite natural to them. And since in drawing people, whether a single person or couples or whatever, my whole job is to become the person I'm drawing, and so in the process of doing the drawings before that, I had become part of their relationship, so it wasn't like they were performing for an otherness out there. I might have been like a mirror to them, something of that sort. And the artist is frequently a mirror for society, you know. We reflect a world back to itself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a great observation and a perfect quote to end up this interview. That's great.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Shall I put in a comment about the Yellow Emperor?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure, if you want to add something.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Well, I was always very interested. This guy was, I forget his name exactly, but he was called, I believe, the Yellow Emperor, and he unified China. As a historian, you probably are up on the dates and so forth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not that much.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: But as these people do after he conquered everybody in sight and established his rule and so forth, he decided that nothing of any importance had happened before he came to throne of China, so he destroyed all the previous records, you know, all the scrolls, all the documentation, anything that happened before his reign. And all we know about China before his time is through the art, so --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: -- you know, in a way, it's not only contemporary people -- I mean I think a lot of people put up with us because they think we, the artists, proves that they walk this way, but we also have this long range, documentation, I guess, of what has happened in human history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That seems to be part of it; that seems to be part of it.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One last question which I hope you'll forgive me for asking, but I can't help it --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- especially in light of Judy Dater's similar story. Were you aroused by this at all?

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Probably because I am visual, yeah. No, I can be aroused visually, not other ways. I mean I -- but then there's so many things that would be a turn-on to me visually. I'm just so extremely visual. As I think I said earlier, I hardly hear when I'm working.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, of course, in a way, as you said now several times, when you work, you become --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- part of your subject and then, of course, there's an empathy --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- that would be involved which is a participation in what is going on.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Realize that's not always comfortable 'cause it depends on what's going on. When the people were doing these gigantic images and dealing with very painful things, you experience their pain and suffering, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, I understand.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: So it's not just pleasurable activities.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But, of course, there's no reason why it wouldn't apply across the range --

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Yeah, sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- and you don't turn off a switch in this process.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It doesn't allow you to say, "Well now this wouldn't be appropriate; this wouldn't be seemly."

ELEANOR DICKINSON: I've never thought that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I'm sure you didn't.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: It simply wouldn't occur to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I believe you, and thank you very much. This is a great start for an interview.

ELEANOR DICKINSON: Sure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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