



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Roland C.  
Petersen, 2002 Sept. 17

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Roland Petersen on September 17, 2002. The interview was conducted at Roland Petersen's home in San Francisco, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

RP: ROLAND PETERSEN

PK: PAUL KARLSTROM

[TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PK: All right. It looks like we're recording. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Roland Petersen in one of his residences. And this is on California Street at Jones in San Francisco. This is a first interview for the Archives, and a first session. Perhaps there will be others. But at any rate we're going to do about an hour or so.

RP: Okay.

PK: And the date is September 17, 2002. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. So having said that, having introduced the interview here, Roland, I wanted to acknowledge that this is going to be focused and specific to a project that's upcoming, and that is an essay about you for your upcoming exhibition at Hackett Freedman Gallery in San Francisco. Therefore we have to keep that in mind as we talk. But at the same time, that doesn't mean that we can't wander a little bit over time.

RP: Okay.

PK: And the exhibition focuses on the sixties and we're certainly going to talk about that. But there's more to your story than just that. I don't know an awful lot about your biography. I've read some of the essays about you in earlier catalogs, Hartcourts Gallery publications and other places as well, but maybe we could start by you filling me in on your biography, on your story and on your background. Sort of a quick pass on that. Obviously moving pretty quickly to the subject at hand, which is your art. So what about your background?

RP: Well, I was born in Denmark on March 31, 1926. And my parents were married here in San Francisco. And they left on a honeymoon, so-called honeymoon. It tended to be longer than they expected, so it was during that period of time I was born. And they remained in Denmark for about two and a half years after I was born. At that time we returned to San Francisco. We lived on Bush Street for a short period of time until my parents lost the building during the Depression. And Bank of America foreclosed on them. And we moved from Bush Street to 14th Street, where my uncle had a building. And we resided there for several years. After a few years there we moved to the Twin Peaks area on Seward Street, and at that time I went to Douglas Grammar School. And after Douglas Grammar School I went to Everett Junior High School. And from Everett to Mission High School. At that time the war was on and I was 17. I had just turned 17 years of age. And I worked as a sign painter for the Army Medical Depot for about one year before I enlisted in the Navy. And this was one day before I was 18. I went to Farragut, Idaho for my boot camp training. And shortly after that I moved to San Francisco. I was stationed in San Francisco at Treasure Island until a ship was available. This was a destroyer.

[Recording Stops]

[Recording Begins Again.]

PK: Okay. Sorry, we had a little break there. You were quickly filling in your background, and as I just commented what we were really looking for are those experiences, times in your life, events and so forth that you feel may have eventually affected your career decisions or the work itself.

RP: Right.

PK: So was there something from that time?

RP: After Iwo Jima I applied to OCS, which is Officer Candidate School. I was accepted and went to Princeton for a short period of time. And from Princeton to the College of the Pacific in Stockton. During this period of time I was taking Navy courses as well as college requirements. While I was at the cadet school I also took art classes as an extracurricular activity. And after a summer session at COP, College of the Pacific, I was transferred to the University of California at Berkeley. And I continued my Navy training there, and continued taking art classes.

And when I was discharged I just continued in the art program. I graduated in art in 1949 and received my masters degree in 1950, at which time I was awarded a traveling fellowship, which allowed me to go to Europe for a year. During which time I married my wife. And we both studied at Stanley William Hayter's for about six months. This is an etching school, which is quite renowned.

PK: Yes.

RP: At that period of time I was working there, I came in contact with Mino, who was also working with etching at the school. And it was interesting to see how Mino would attack his metal plate in terms of what he was about to do through his symbolic concept. This intrigued me and I tried to think about the use of symbolism in my own work. After studying with Stanley William Hayter, my wife and I returned to San Francisco, at which time I enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute [then California School of Fine Art] and studied photography with Minor White.

PK: Let me say that . . . there's going to be certain things that we come across as we go along that for some reason I think will be important and useful. And if you don't agree you can make it [the answer] go short rather than long.

RP: Sure.

PK: But the whole issue, I read some of your earlier comments on symbolism. And then again you seem to, not necessarily emphasize, but certainly to point to the Hayter [experience] and then Mino. How did you - what term did you use? The symbolic concept. And I sense that some of it is critical or central to, or at least one of the things that's critical to the way your art developed. You say you were intrigued. But I haven't read anything that elaborates on that. It's just taken for granted in these other essays.

RP: Yes.

PK: So I think it's important to know specifically what did that mean to you. How did you understand this? Could you tell me a little bit about that?

RP: Yes. During the period of time that I worked with Minor White, studying photography, he made me more aware of seeing what's in nature that would have other meanings than the literal objectivity of the object. The examination of form whereby one can see other images entering into the literal form that one reads was very exciting for me. And I still today continue with this kind of reasoning in my work. So in looking at an arrangement of objects I'm dealing with figures that represent kinds of landscape forms and landscapes that seem to appear like still-lives. So the idea of connecting the three together seemed to be a very fascinating approach to the way I work. And I continue to examine that kind of relationship. Besides looking at this kind of equivalence or symbolism in my work, I deal with color relationships, which I try to think of as a sequence of colors that have a kind of rhythm going, as in music. And I try to deal with changing that rhythm upside down, inside out and in any way that I can vary that. The kind of feeling that I am trying to achieve in my work is pretty much a kind of isolation of a person being alone in his own thoughts so to speak. And this kind of approach seemed to be a natural way of working. I have always admired the work of Seurat. And this kind of almost Egyptian-like stiffness or silence, which I like to see in art, is what I try to achieve. So this timeless kind of essence, I guess one might say, is what I'm trying to capture.

PK: I thought that was a very, very clear statement, more so than I've encountered in the few things that I've read about you. And it helps me understand quite a bit. I'd be interested to pursue though a little bit the idea of symbolism in terms of late nineteenth century, early twentieth, but international symbolism, which was in effect a movement. And I've marked in here, this is the catalog on Roland Petersen that Hartcourts Modern and Contemporary Art Gallery [published]. It [the show] was in April 1991. You are quoted in the introductory essay by Bruce Nixon pretty frequently. And I'm wondering actually if that was from an interview with him or was that from the still earlier interview that was published in '89?

RP: We had an interview, yes.

PK: Okay. So this is not a first-time experience. But one of the things that I just picked up on right away, let me see if I can find it. Well, okay, you say, "One of the features of Minor's [Minor White] approach was equivalence."

RP: Correct.

PK: "The effort to make a form have meaning other than our literal recognition of the object. It gets back to symbolism, although I don't consider myself a symbolist." Can you clarify that? Because what you've described with correspondences, equivalencies -- emotional equivalence -- sounds very much like some of the symbolists program. But you don't consider yourself a symbolist?

RP: No, I don't consider myself a symbolist, although I utilize the idea of symbolic meaning in much of my work. So an object that seems to contain a message other than what it reveals in terms of photographic identity is what I would like to capture in my work. The symbolism is not the most important element in my work. I would say color and feeling of quiet loneliness is what I'm trying to capture through using recognizable objects. And in just looking at the realism of the work I do, I think the viewer would miss a lot of the actual meaning, the interpretation of what I'm really attempting to do. So it's not photographic identity as such. It's a combination of dealing with many facets. I like contradiction. I like the element of contradiction. So I'm always basically working with the Hofmann idea of the opposites, what he called the push and the pull. But in terms of the Hofmann approach, which I feel was more a formal element, I'm trying to push not only the formal aspects but also the textures, the atmosphere, the form, the color. There are so many different elements that enter into the play of what I do that it's not a simple kind of solution to say, "It's the push and pull of the Hofmann school." So with color I'm dealing with warm colors as opposed to cool colors. Atmospheric form in conjunction with very solid forms. So with the elements that are always contradictory to one another, or opposite from one another is what I'm attempting to play with. And it's difficult to put everything into words with just describing what's going on, because feeling enters into it too. And one day I feel more dynamic than another day. So the element of each day building on top of one another, one day will be an exciting kind of experience. Another day will be maybe not so exciting and I can't find a way of working. And then I just keep working so that very often I'll have as many as 30 paintings, one on top of the other. And each one seems to have potential. But to make a definite decision that this is the final painting, that becomes very difficult sometimes.

PK: So how does that work in practice? This, obviously, if you don't do a painting in a single day, and besides even during a single day your mood may change.

RP: Will change.

PK: And, you know, sometimes that, for all of us, can actually make a temporary worldview. And yet you have, for somebody, an artist, who is apparently so interested in finding equivalence with your tools, with the medium, to feelings, to emotional states, and I gather that this is one of your goals, how do you -- it must be strange to -- how do you resolve this as you work on a painting and you bring to it each day each approach, each creation or addition? You bring perhaps a different perspective, point of view. How does that get resolved?

RP: Well, first I have to say that I always work from reality. I make sketches, many, many sketches. And these can be done just almost instantaneously, sometimes I'll work on a sketch for a day. Sometimes for a week. Sometimes for a year.

PK: You mean an oil sketch or . . . ?

RP: No, this would primarily be casein or water color or gouache. Some medium that is a rather quick medium. I sometimes work with colored pencils. I work with tea bags as a stain. There are many options that I deal with. But the actual idea of the beginning of a painting may come from just a quick sketch and then I elaborate on that quick sketch and develop it further and further. So it may be a combination of say ten sketches that combine into one all over painting. And these are not only in terms of sections but in terms of layers. One layer upon another. So it's a kind of stratification of information that comes one on top of the other. Sometimes it's transparently done. Other times opaquely. And one idea may sift through another overlay or a drip or a run in the painting that's fluidly applied, may change the whole direction of the painting, so that what I had originally intended disappears and I pick up on the drip or the run or the splotch or a scratch, whatever it might be that enters into it that reminds me of something that is say more interesting than I had originally intended. And then I continue in that direction.

PK: That's pretty interesting to me, because as a practice, as a method it seems somewhat related to abstract expressionism.

RP: Oh, yes. I'm very much interested in the abstraction. Without the abstraction there's no painting for me. So the first idea is to get the architectural layout going. And if the abstraction isn't working then as far as I'm concerned the painting will never be, the idea has to be, the abstract correlated with the realistic.

PK: But what about specifically, you know, that whole gestural painterly A.E. [abstract expressionism] movement, as at the California School of Fine Arts, of course, and then the New York School. I know you've talked about this in other interviews, and it's been written about. But, again, the way you describe your method would put you at least close to the approach of the abstract expressionists. Is that fair enough?

RP: Yes, that's very fair.

PK: Was this in part the influence of the time you spent at the Art Institute, then the California School of Fine Arts?

RP: I'm sure it has some influence.

PK: And Hassel Smith . . . ?

RP: Yeah, I'm sure it has some bearing on my approach. But I still believe the New York approach, Hofmann's so-called European approach, I guess one might say, is quite evident in my work. But certainly abstract expressionism is involved in the approach I'm using. So the gestural motions of the paint, not only would it come from abstract expressionism, but it would come from Oriental painting. At Berkeley I studied with Chiura Obata.

PK: Obata. Yeah, I noticed that.

RP: I was very intrigued by the quick sumi brush marks that he made. And is still present in my work.

PK: Tell me a little bit about that. Obata, by the way, we're happy to see is being sort of rediscovered.

RP: Right, exactly.

PK: Which is wonderful. He's a wonderful artist. And I picked up on that, again, in reading some of the essays about you, you mentioned Obata. I hadn't realized that you studied with him.

RP: His approach to quick brush strokes and sumi painting, that was very fascinating. And even today I like to deal with the swiftness of movement of the brush or the palette knife in my work to give a freshness to the surface so that the surface is not something that goes completely dead unless it's to relate back to the opposition of texture versus non-texture. The real mentor, my guiding light so to speak, was Glen Wessels at the University of California.

PK: Oh, sure.

RP: And he suggested that I work with Hofmann. And he was really the person that sort of sent me on my way I would say. I mean, in terms of the Hofmann approach.

PK: I appreciate this opportunity to have clarified, let's say, some of the things, first of all that seem evident in the work, but beyond that things that you have said before and others have written about, which, making the connections for you. One of the things that we're going to do, I think, and it is important, is to try and place you in terms of how you see it within a particular environment. Which is the Bay Area. And the influences that were in the Bay Area. Now I know that you've talked about this before and we're touching on some of it now already, the sort of Berkeley School . . . the two sides of the Bay and the different art cultures, if you will, stylistic infinities that were involved. Would it be fair to say that you sort of drew from both?

RP: Absolutely.

PK: Because the work seems to . . .

RP: Sure.

PK: You didn't feel that you had to be a part of one school or the other?

RP: No.

PK: You didn't have to be a Clyfford Still mimic or for that matter even a Hans Hofmann.

RP: No. That's good. The idea of following only in Hofmann's direction seemed a little too formalistic for me. Not that I've ruled out the element of formalism, it's that I'd like to utilize that as part of the kind of structured element of my work. And then to continue on into other areas so that certainly the Bay Area figurative movement was influential in my work. But I would not consider myself one of the figurative figures, as such, in that. I think I'm working with a different kind of conceptual approach. Not that I could speak for them. But there is a different, more calculated approach, I think, in my work. This, of course, I think can be seen in my stylistic development. What I should say, after Berkeley, after returning from Europe and studying with Minor White, then I taught at the Washington State College in Pullman Washington for four years. At that time I taught primarily art history. So this . . .

PK: Oh. I'll have to be careful what I say. How I ask my questions.

[laughs]

RP: Not that I'm much of an art historian. But anyway, I was teaching art history, ancient art, Renaissance art and modern art, the three sort of elements. And then I accepted a position at the University of California at Davis

in 1956.

PK: And when did you teach at Pullman?

RP: From 1952 to 1956.

PK: Okay. And in '56 . . .

RP: I started at Davis. Richard Nelson, who was the chairman at that time, hired me as the first painter after himself, after him. So we . . .

PK: What was his name?

RP: Richard Nelson.

PK: Okay. Maybe it still is his name . . .

RP: No, no. He passed away in 1970. At that point the art department was just beginning. And Dick Nelson and I were pretty much the foundation of the art department. Joseph Baird was also there. He was teaching art history. But this is the real beginning of the art department at Davis.

PK: Which, as we know, became very, very prominent.

RP: But those were exciting years for me to work with a faculty that was so exciting and so well-known in terms of their work.

PK: Our tape is just about over. I don't want to cut you off in the middle of something.

Tape 1, Side B

PK: Okay. Continuing this interview session with Roland Petersen. This is tape one, side B. And, once again, the date of the interview is 17 September 2002. We left off, you had arrived at UC Davis.

RP: Yes.

PK: And you had no doubt an interesting experience of being involved, in really establishing that department, which as everybody who knows about the California art and art schools and teaching, became really one of the leading departments in the state and probably in the country. You said those were exciting times. How so? I mean, specifically what were some of the things that you would think of?

RP: Well, at this time I had my first one-man show in Los Angeles at the Esther Robles Gallery.

PK: Oh.

RP: And I would suspect that this was sort of the beginning of my painting career. I was fortunate enough to have a color reproduction in Art Forum.

PK: Do you remember the year of that?

RP: Oh, probably about 1961, I would say. And George Staempfli of the Staempfli Gallery in New York became interested in my work, possibly because he saw the reproduction. And he came out and looked at my work in my studio, and decided to have a one-person show in New York.

PK: Right.

RP: And at this point the work was going quite well. I was working with heavy impasto oil paints. I seemed to be full of energy because I was discovering many new ideas that seemed to be working for me. So I painted very hard and furiously. Fortunately enough the show in New York went well. I had a sellout there.

PK: Wow.

RP: And at the time that the show was on I was in Paris on a Guggenheim fellowship. So there were write-ups in the international papers. I imagine it was the Tribune, The New York Times, and this sort of helped expose my work to many collectors. At this time also the art department was developing. So it was kind of two things going at once. Wayne Thieband was hired. Bill Wiley was hired to teach art. It was Tio Giambruni teaching sculpture. The decorative art department was absorbed into the art department, which brought into play Ruth Horsting, Bob Arneson.

PK: Yeah, Arneson, right.

RP: Right. So things were just happening one on top of the other. And each new faculty member brought in new ideas. And the so-called well balanced art department was soon to form, not in one direction but in many different diversified directions. So as the department became larger and more people became involved in terms of the faculty . . . Roy De Forest came onto the faculty, Manuel Neri and so forth. Many, many new energetic people were entering into the scene. So all of this was energizing, not only the art department, but it was energizing the rest of the faculty as well.

PK: The rest of the faculty? You mean, beyond the . . .

RP: I think we were all sort of, not only influenced by one another but watching one another work out the styles that were developing at that time. So it was an exciting time.

PK: So you feel that to some degree and in some way you also were influenced by the new ideas and new interests that were happening?

RP: Absolutely.

PK: How, can you say in some specific way how that may have been the case?

RP: Well, it would be difficult to actually nail it down to what influencing factors were involved. But I'm certainly, I was certainly watching and thinking about what the other faculty members were doing in terms of their work. Manuel Neri's figures were very exciting to me. Roy De Forest's playful compositions and color. [William] Wiley's very funk-like elements were involved, and that brought also a playfulness and a different approach into the teaching that was going on there. The students were absorbing all of this. Wayne Thiebaud was into his pies and cakes and lollipops, so he also would be influential in terms of the general atmosphere that was on campus.

PK: How would you describe it? Playful is a good word. But beyond that, in terms of something that the students might really take away or that perhaps even changed a little bit the direction of the faculty's thinking. Could you describe that? Put that in to words? I mean, I have my ideas about what that might have been. I've interviewed Bill Wiley and others of these artists about Davis.

RP: Yes.

PK: Is there anything that, in a more lasting way, let's say, than just playfulness?

RP: Oh, I think it's beyond playfulness. It was very thought provoking what was happening. But the idea of the social comments that say Wayne Thiebaud was dealing with, the Andy Warhol kind of takeoff. But his getting involved in pop art there. So certainly that was entering into how the students were thinking about art. And I'm sure how the faculty was sort of analyzing what was going on in the, at the time that this was all developing. So it's hard to actually say how one style would influence another style. I think it just sort of absorbed gradually into one another's thinking process.

PK: One of the things in my interview with Wiley, it's quite interesting to hear him talk about having, when Bruce Nauman . . .

RP: Oh, yes, Bruce Nauman.

PK: . . . and what Bill said was that he's sure that he learned at least as much from Nauman the student as Nauman learned from him or anybody else in the department. Did you have any contact with Nauman and some of these interesting students?

RP: Well, Nauman was probably one of the more intellectual grad students that we had. He certainly brought ideas into the graduate program that made the other students sort of reconsider how they were thinking. I remember one time that Bruce Nauman brought in a fan, and he turned the fan on before the whole group, and he was describing how aesthetically pleasing this fan was in terms of form and sound. And another time . . .

PK: Electric fan?

RP: Electric fan. Right. And another time he was dealing with negative space. He was casting the space under chairs and against baseboards. So, again, this was a way of approaching art that was quite unique to many of the people there.

PK: Nauman, of course, is one of the most famous products of that program or any program. And he, obviously, he's associated with conceptual art, performance, a lot of crossover.

RP: Oh, yes.

PK: Which, then Wiley was involved with as well. So Davis certainly went beyond any traditional notions of these painting, sculpture, graphics. Do you remember . . . how did you feel about that? What was your own response to what some people would call the breaking down of these traditional divisions?

RP: I think it was a new way of thinking. Certainly a new way of thinking. It opened one's eyes to possibilities that one hadn't considered before.

PK: New possibilities?

RP: Hm-hmm.

PK: Were there any ways that you -- again, of course, bringing it back to you, you had the benefit of being there from the beginning and watching this -- was there anything that you feel you really drew upon in some specific way in your work? Do you feel, can you describe anything, if indeed there was such, that made a difference?

RP: Well, in Bruce Nauman's approach, certainly one would have to go back to Marcel Duchamp and seeing what he was investigating that meant one had to reexamine what Duchamp was doing. So this certainly was influential in terms of how one sees the idea of finding substance of importance in ordinary objects. Certainly it was fascinating for me. So when one could look at a fan or examine say a urinal for its formalistic characteristics, it seemed to be an approach that one could further examine. And utilize in one's work certainly. It's one of many directions.

PK: Yeah. Again, though, is there anything of the work of that period that in your own practice might have been, reflect that kind of thinking? These new ideas? This sort of open way of thinking? Can you make that connection? I don't want to do it artificially.

RP: No, I can make that connection of it. It just meant for me to look at ordinary objects in a way that, again, had less formalistic elements. So the idea of a fan becoming important or negative space becoming important, I think is something where in my own work I use negative space all the time. So it wasn't that new an idea, it just sort of reemphasized what I was already doing.

PK: So it was like a reinforcement?

RP: A reinforcement.

PK: Not a validation from a graduate student. I know that.

RP: No, no, no. No, it was a reinforcement of examining negative space more thoroughly. And certainly the idea of negative space is being as important as positive space is a valid way of thinking. I see no problem there.

PK: It's pretty amazing the way he [Nauman] did that though.

RP: Oh, yes.

PK: I mean, because that, I don't know if that was entirely original. I don't know . . .

RP: I don't think it was entirely original but he did put emphasis on that.

PK: To make that entirely the subject.

RP: Right.

PK: As a content of a piece is pretty remarkable.

RP: Right. That was pretty much his thesis for the graduate school.

PK: Oh, is that right?

RP: Negative space in plaster of paris.

PK: It must have been exciting. No question about it. Let me, before we get maybe onto specifically talking about some works, some examples from the sixties, I was very interested in the fact that you were teaching art history. Because you seem [inaudible] pretty well versed in art history. Not all, even very good artists are. You know, it's a specialty type of thing. When you teach, as you know, then you have to really get up to speed. You have to really do some studying yourself.



RP: Right.

PK: And I was interested that you taught, is this right? Ancient Renaissance and modern?

RP: And modern. Yes.

PK: I would like to know if in any way you feel that began to focus your own thinking and direction – and I mean aesthetically in terms of style, in terms of . . . You have three quite important areas there you're dealing with.

RP: Yes. Hm-hmm.

PK: Did the intellectual, for you, come together in any way in the painting?

RP: Well, the ghost of the past enters into my work all the time. So when I mentioned earlier that the Egyptian kind of stiffness was present in Seurat's work, certainly that kind of carryover is important. So in studying Egyptian art and talking about it, it reinforced my idea in my own work about this, the power of a simple stance. It doesn't mean that one doesn't have to deal with all sorts of difficult figure positions to make the figure important. And carrying art history into present day art, it's always really there. One sees art history in every mark that's made. And to make a mark is going to bring to mind something from the past, whether it go back to the Altamira cave paintings or the Renaissance or modern. There's always a mark that seems to distinguish time. Say in De Koonings case, the mark of a quick motion of say swinging from an arabesque into a loop, down to a straight form can be followed in a figure, which certainly he departed from. And one can find this swoop, loop and straight form in bison on the Altamira cave walls. So any mark that one makes, I believe, it can be traced to, right through time.

PK: So these are ways of depicting? I mean, basically it's a matter of image making or depiction?

RP: Correct. So in Miro's case, when he made a mark and then continued to force this information back into his memory, he would then make another mark. The two marks would come together and bring up a third idea that he would play with. And it was very fascinating to watch him develop an image out of just making marks on a surface.

PK: Fortuitous chance. Accident.

RP: Oh, yes. Fortuitous. Yes. And . . .

PK: And recognition of the implications.

RP: Exactly. Exactly. And I'm using that all the time in my work. So if I spill the paint onto my canvas at first glance I'll say, "Oh, no." And then I'll say, "Hey, wait a minute. This looks, this is more interesting than what I intended." Or my pallete looks better than my painting very often. So I have to take the idea from my pallete and transfer it over to my painting.

PK: Yeah, that, it is interesting. And that's helpful in understanding your practice and its connection to an awareness of older tradition as well. I wouldn't necessarily describe you as overly traditional, but there seems to be an awareness of, well, in the work . . . in your talking about it, of occupying a place within something. A kind of continual, something that is timeless.

RP: Yes. Exactly.

PK: And is the timelessness strictly about the history of art and images being made, work being made at different times, but nonetheless connected, is it simply then an aesthetic art concern? Or are you interested in timelessness in a bigger way?

RP: I would like to think . . .

PK: The human condition or our shared experiences?

RP: I would like to think of it in a larger, on a larger scope. So when I'm working with say a figure in space and it doesn't quite seem to have this aura of loneliness that I'd like or the figure exists in his or her own space, then I very often try to introduce a second figure into play. And in putting the two figures together it seems to create a tension that is something that I hadn't planned on. But in doing that I discover something happening that I wasn't aware of in the beginning. And in following this idea of the tension of one to the other, then I try to play with that idea in the still life, or the landscape, or in a cloud formation, or in a tree trunk, whatever it might be.

PK: So this tension you're describing is a metaphor?

RP: Yes.

PK: For life?

RP: Correct.

PK: And it's analogous? Analogy, of course, is another tenant of symbolism as we were discussing before. More and more, even though you denied being a symbolist, that's the best hook I've found so far in terms of your intentions, you know, what you're trying to achieve. Not that you want to, you know, group yourself. Obviously that was past history. But nonetheless there was some legitimate sort of . . .

RP: Oh, absolutely. There's a very legitimate tie up there. But, again, I don't consider myself a symbolist.

PK: Right.

RP: Though I do utilize symbolism in the construction of my work. It just seeps in automatically. And I'm not sure where it's coming from. From my past experiences or what I've seen or read or heard. I'm not sure where it's coming from, but once it exists on the surface of the painting then it seems to exist for me as a unique element.

PK: Well, I'm not going to call you, we won't call you a symbolist.

RP: No.

PK: But it seems that if you had been working in the late nineteenth century you would have been quite comfortable, you know, in your art, in examining some of the things they were, and trying to use, again, correspondences, equivalences. I was struck by the idea of color, establishing a rhythm. That is a parallel to music.

RP: Oh, yes.

PK: I mean, that's like a basic, absolutely basic symbolist tenet. That doesn't mean they're the only ones that do it.

RP: Right.

PK: So we're not entirely wrong in making some of these connections?

RP: No, no. Absolutely not.

PK: Good.

RP: I would certainly say that in setting up the sequence of colors, and sequence of forms, that I'm consciously dealing with how to deal with that in another way that I haven't already dealt with it. So if the color starts off just hypothetically as a blue mark, or a green mark, and then I start putting colors adjacent to the green mark, one side might be pink, the other side yellow, and then I keep adding to that. To the pink I might possibly try a violet. To the yellow, a green. And then when I deal with that rhythm again, instead of using home base as say the green, I would start with the home base as yellow, and then I would start inverting and working with the green and yellow, violet and whatever other colors would go in to sequence of that rhythm or that order of color. But that's apart from the message. That's just in terms of this structural idea of what's going on.

PK: Right.

RP: The message itself is totally different. So that's just part of the vocabulary of putting the painting together just as say a plumber might use plumber's putty to connect two pipes together. The whole purpose would be to get the water to the source. And that's much more important than the plumber's putty.

PK: All right. So let's look at that then. The message, you said the message is different.

RP: Yes.

PK: What might the message be? Certainly not just one thing. Or is it?

RP: No, it's primarily this aura of timelessness is what I'm trying to establish. And I see it in the work of Seurat and the work of Puvis de Chavannes. I see it in the work of Titian and many, many artists. It's not unique to what I'm doing.

PK: Puvis, that's, so would that be the kind of classical connection in a sense?

RP: I would say so, yes.

PK: So what about, this is real art historical.

RP: Yes. Yes, yes.

PK: We don't have to spend a lot of time doing this. But, you know, the great, not confrontation, but the two poles, certainly of the nineteenth century are with the classic and romanticism. And then, you know, echoing work of other periods where we see these two tendencies. Obviously, you're somebody who knows art history. Does that have any meaning or interest for you?

RP: Oh, yes.

PK: These different ways of image making?

RP: Absolutely. So in the work of Ingres, as opposed to Delacroix, I see this kind of bouncing off, a rebellion from the classical approach to a new completely invigorating approach that Delacroix was dealing with. That certainly enters into a stream of thought that goes into say the post-impressionists and continues on to this day. So you have the more or less classicism of the thinking of Cézanne and the kind of more emotional element of obviously Van Gogh. And there are many other transitions so that you, it's not that this was discovered at that time, but it's going to continue. I see no problem with a continuation of these two basic approaches to thinking. One is as good as the other. I have no problem.

PK: You know, I was thinking before we got together, looking at your work, thinking about it a little bit, simply what was reproduced in these catalogs, and then the little bit that I read, the mention of Cézanne, you know, in trying to, we are all art historians trying to do this naturally. Because this is how we understand it.

RP: Right.

PK: Even though, I suppose we invented it in a way. It's a bit of a construct. But the, in thinking about you, looking at the work, from the examples I've seen, I think in terms of geometry and nature, in the very simplest way, if I had to explain you in just a few words I would set that up. And then if I had a few more words I would try to clarify it. And so cubism, of course, comes into the picture. But in a way it would seem to go back, definitely to Cézanne.

RP: Hm-hmm.

PK: And would you cite him as one of the artists, great modernists, certainly pioneers with whom you feel a special affinity?

RP: Oh, sure. Yes. I would definitely say the geometric approach to my work is coming right out of, definitely out of Cézanne's ideas. But then the emotional kind of life dynamic element is certainly there too. So I have probably both feet in each school.

PK: So would you . . .

RP: That's the element of contradiction again. The idea of the emotional to the more studied. And I like that idea of having the geometric as opposed to the free flowing Hassel Smith kind of rhythm.

PK: [Inaudible] contradiction, just an apparent contradiction. Because there's no reason why these two forces can't coexist, creating a kind of tension.

RP: Right. I'm certainly continuing that way of thinking. So I think in my work I try to have that contradiction of the solid to the amorphous. And I like that.

PK: That's a great point. It looks like our light is flashing here. We're going to take . . .

END OF INTERVIEW

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