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Oral history interview with Billy Al Bengston, 2002 August 7 and October 2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Billy Al Bengston on August 7 and October 2, 2002. The interview took place at Bengston's home and studio in Venice, CA, and was conducted by Susan Ford Morgan for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Susan Ford Morgan reviewed the sound recording and edited the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets. The sound quality for this interview is poor throughout leading to an abnormally high number of inaudible sections in the second session. The transcript has been heavily edited and will not match the recording. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[Note: This interview took place while the H.C. Westermann retrospective, organized by the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, was on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Bengston, a friend of Westermann (1922-1981) designed the show's installation in LA.]

SUSAN MORGAN: This is an interview [on August 7, 2002] for the Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art, with the artist Billy Al Bengston at his home and studio in Venice, California. The interviewer is Susan Morgan. We were just talking about H. C. Westermann

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Everything he's done was good. Beyond good—gooder than good. He's the best. He was the best. And, you know, when I was young, I thought he was just fantastic. He wasn't running in the same game as I was running in. I was a big fan then. The first money I got, I bought a Westermann.

SUSAN MORGAN: You did?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Yes. Absolutely. I would have bought all I could get if I'd had more money. I should have just bought all that I could get. That's all there is to it. Because the thing that he did is what artists are supposed to do: he did what he had to do. He didn't do what he was supposed to do. He did what he could do. He didn't attempt to do what he couldn't do. He sorted it really—It was probably because he was so insane, so driven, that he just knew that he couldn't do it. It's strange to find—not strange, it's absolutely phenomenal to find somebody who will just do what they can do Everybody tries to play in everybody else's field. He didn't go there. Brilliant. Brilliant guy.

SUSAN MORGAN: It's such a beautiful show and it's wonderfully installed in the Gehry space [Frank O. Gehry—designed Geffen Temporary Contemporary, Los Angeles].

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It was supposed to have been in the other place [Arata Isosaki

designed Museum of Contemporary Art, Grand Avenue, Los Angeles]. Oh, I had it all figured out. I knew how to do it in the other place better than in this place. Because of the lowering of the ceiling, I had a lot of ideas on how to deal with it. But now that you mention it, you're right. It was better that it was there because I didn't, at the time, foresee the problems that would have been incurred had I been in that space. I mean, Chris Knight complained about things being against the wall. Now, I'm a firm believer in sculpture not being against the wall: it's three-dimensional. But he should also mention the constraints of ADA which is something you can't even believe. For instance, if I am able to walk around a piece, somebody has to be able to go around it in a wheelchair. This is the rule. So you don't only have to have the width of the wheelchair, you have to have the turning circle of the wheelchair—which is five feet. Which also means, if that's the case, the chances of hitting it are much greater. So you have to figure that you have to have eight feet away from a wall—which is fine if you have one piece.

But if you have a while exhibition of things, with that constraint, it's a problem. I was especially concerned because of that. The boxes and things like that, I didn't really care. Most of them are front facing. The other pieces—I actually shouldn't have put *The Queen* out in the middle because the back is not finished. *The Jack of Diamonds* back is not finished. *The Swinging Red King*, the back is not finished. Okay, they should be up against the wall. I started reviewing a lot of pieces and many of them were to be seen as a relief actually.

Not so, the *Little Egypt*. I hit most of the pieces that had to be out, I got them out.

SUSAN MORGAN: The installation was very dramatic—with the pieces that were recessed into diorama—like boxes. If they had all been placed with eight feet around them—

BILLY AL BENGSTON: They would have looked like tombstones. It's always been my complaint when looking at art shows—and this is one of the wonderful thing about doing Westermann—it's sort of stupid to have one person's work, to have a one—person show. It doesn't make sense because you're looking at the same thing over and over again. So, it's sort of like going out and squeezing tomatoes and oranges. It's a fruit market rather than an art show. I think I stand—alone in that thinking that—okay, just put up one. You don't need the rest of them. You can look at the rest of them in a slide. I remember, twenty-five years ago. When was it? Twenty or thirty years ago? Thirty probably when the Bykert Gallery in New York was opened and Brice Marden became the cause of the time. The brilliant Brice. Anyway, when you looked at them, you thought "well, of course." It's brilliant: he painted for the gallery. Every picture was designed for the space. There were all these little two-foot squares that sort of looked like two-foot windows all the way around the gallery. And they were all chromatically set in such a way. And people were coming in and looking at them as some kind of revelation. It was, in fact, a shoe display. It was as simple as that. Only there weren't any wingtips. Display is really any interesting thing. It's fun to play with.

The Westermann was great because his are all different. Every one of them.

SUSAN MORGAN: I've been to see the show several times. The first time was for the press preview and I was with my teenage niece. The painted yellow floor was still sticky.

Anne's young, just out of boarding school in Massachusetts, and intimidated by art but the whole experience—including the color and smell of wet paint raised her awareness of how all the materials were being used. She was really looking and catching the puns. She was having a great, open experience. Then I saw it with a friend who is an artist, a photographer, who put together some money to buy a Westermann print. She's only kicking herself because she didn't get a print with polar bears in it. She had actually gone to boarding school with Claire Copley so she had seen some of the work when it had been in the Copley's apartment in New York—the great knot. Was in the front hall. With the information that she brought to the work, there was another kind of excitement. It was also great to see the packing crates. And I also thought of something that you had said once about how it was embarrassing to have people in a museum go up to look at the wall label. With Westermann, we thought it was great that he the wall label. With Westermann, we thought it was great that he named everything that was in the piece actually included it in the work itself.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: He'd write it all down.

SUSAN MORGAN: "Honduran mahogany."

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Everything. Time. Date. The whole thing.

SUSAN MORGAN: It's all there.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That's what I wanted to do for the labels. They wouldn't do that either. I said, let's just photograph this and we'll put it on the wall.

SUSAN MORGAN: That would have been terrific.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: They wouldn't let me do it because it didn't say who the collector was. The most important thing.

SUSAN MORGAN: The little code that says when the work was acquired.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That kind of thing. Deaccessioned and so on and so on—all the crap that people really like. I was very proud of that [designing the installation]. I liked doing it. I liked making the show a little more dynamic. I liked making the auditorium pink so people would feel friendlier in it. It's good. If I do Frank Gehry's [exhibition design], it will be different. And I'll get paid for it [laughs].

SUSAN MORGAN: I'd noticed that you'd given a talk at Frank Gehry's show at the Guggenheim. Didn't he design your show at LACMA in '68?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That was a funny deal. That was before I knew how the game was played. And knew what I wanted then.

SUSAN MORGAN: What did you want then?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Do you see where we're sitting right now? I wanted it to be like somebody's home. I wanted it friendly. And, to go into museum and stand in front of a picture and go—uhhh. That's not the way life is. Sit down, hang out for a couple of hours. Read the paper. Look when you feel like it. I specifically know when a painting is good when I don't want to look at it. "Oh, shit, there's something there that I missed—"I can sort of look at it out of the corner of my eye. And then if I'm around it long enough, I'll take a peek. And then, I'll sit down and I'll analyze it and figure out what it is. You can't really do that in a museum environment. You can—but they wouldn't let you. So this is what I wanted Frank to do.

Frank and I had commingled and been friendly for a long time. And he'd come over to my studio and I was always re-arranging it and doing this and that. And I thought that he got the picture. Well, he got the picture in terms of—he started building the rooms and got the shapes and things. And then he came in and he got it half done. He was putting up the plywood and I said, "Stop!" He says, "Well, I've got to paint it." And I said, "Nope." Because they were all these stupid museum colors, these plywood panels that they re-use. You know—what are they dusty rose and powder blue, gunk green and gray, the worst colors in the world. Now, quite by accident, the people put them up and at the bottom—where the baseboard is supposed to be—there was a ledger, a double ledger. I don't know why. It was great. There was an air flow underneath there. And I said, "Just leave it. It's just fine. We'll put the furniture and everything in and it will work fine." Next thing is—the furniture arrives. I guess we never really talked about it. But he went to Abbey Rents or someplace and got all this really bad, terrible rental furniture. Just the ugliest shit you ever saw. And I'm afraid I wasn't very kind. I had a hissy fit. And he took it [all the furniture] back and that hurt his feelings. And it should have because I was so rude. We didn't really communicate on it. I said, "get this crap out of here!"

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That's right. Well, that's what art consultants are for. Who then go the gallery dealer and try to make the best deal. So you get it cut all different directions. The business is business and it's a rotten business.

You know, I knew Newman and I liked Newman but I could never understand how he could be so blind. I understood the rap and I believed the rap. I think the rap is fine. But, inevitably, I would see a big Newman and the space was just hunky dory: clink, clank, clunk, he does them just fine. And then, inevitably, in the corner, is that rotten signature in black. And my eye just goes directly to it. What the hell is he thinking about!? I mean, it's an awful signature and it looks like a bug in the corner. You know, the rap is fine. The paintings are fine. But the signature is an afterthought. It's something that he was pre-conditioned to think that he had to put on after. If you're a creative thinker, why would you allow some pre-conditioned thing to come in there? And then using that, being an intellectual like he was,

why didn't he do like most artists did—who were significant—design a signature that was, at least, aesthetic? Another thing that I don't understand is that why people don't design signatures and just sign their names. It's so stupid. When all you have to do is look at Miro, look at Dali, look at Picasso. You can look at all three of those signatures and throw the painting away. Serious. Matisse—especially with the prints, with the M. Gorgeous! Toulouse Lautrec! I can go on and on and on. All these signatures were designed.

SUSAN MORGAN: That would be a nice catalogue, wouldn't it?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Yes. I mean, where did these intellectuals get lost?

What are they thinking? I mean, it doesn't make sense. I mean, now I'll take this a step—when you get to the Abstract Expressionist world and you see a de Kooning. You're never offended by the signature.

Beautiful brushwork— I mean, I'll take a de Kooning signature anytime. I'm serious. You just start critiquing those things and you get a beautiful—I mean, if you've got to sign something, for Christ's sake, don't ruin the surface by putting a bad signature on it. Again, we'll go back to Cliff. Tell me he didn't design his signature. He didn't miss a trick.

SUSAN MORGAN: How did you meet him [Westermann] originally?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I originally met him in '68 when I was installing my show at LACMA and he was installing his. But I was a fan of his way before that. And in the catalogue raisonne, it doesn't even mention that he had a show here at Rolf Nelson's Gallery. It doesn't mention it. I saw the show and I just came unhinged. I just thought it was the best looking thing I ever saw in my life. I just went nuts. And I just went around and town and I tried to talk everybody into buying them. I didn't have the money to buy them. You could have bought *The Swinging Red King* at a retail price of $1500. I mean, the question mark—the big question mark—that was $1100. I mean, that was a lot of dough. It was more money than I ever had. But still, at that, for collectors not to buy it. I talked to Marcia Weisman, I talked to Don Factor. Everybody, Betty Freeman. Betty Asher. I mean, everybody. I went around and tried to sell them. This was before I knew about art gallery business or anything like that. I said, we've got to keep these here. Because, you know, I would go to their houses for dinner and I could have something to look at. But, no—

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SUSAN MORGAN: And we were talking about Cliff Westermann.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: So I was installing the show and Maurice [Tuchman] or Jim [Monte]— I think it was Maurice said, "Do you want to meet Westermann?" And I said, "Oh, are you kidding? Of course." He was in there and I thought, 'I've got to do something to make an impression.' And, I'd done stunts before for the movies. I came up to him, I was walking up to him at a nice clip— And you know, Cliff looks just like those drawings with his hand out. His hand was out like that. I got about two feet from him and I put my hand out, walking at a rapid rate, and I just did a straight-face fall. Boom! [claps] Flat in front of him. Then I looked up and he started laughing and I started laughing. Because he knew what I was doing. And we got along fine from that moment on.

SUSAN MORGAN: That's perfect.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: And then we'd kick handstands together across the gallery and all that stuff. *The Last Ray of Hope*—I just love that piece—was in the show. This is the strangest thing. I block it out of my mind. '68, I don't think I had any gallery affiliation. But somebody had a gallery affiliation who was working with Cliff and I said, "I want to buy that piece." And I knew what the price was because I saw the price in the loan agreement form. It was something like $1500. "No, you can't buy, it is already committed." I said, "I want that piece. I've got the money, I'll pay for it right now." Couldn't buy it. It turns out that it wasn't sold. It was just one of those dealer deals. I've always hated dealers because of that crap. It's going to a 'significant' collector. A significant collector? Which means that they are going to deaccession the son of a bitch later. That' all it means. It doesn't mean that they love it, they can't live without it. I mean, I have some gripes about people, collectors in collusion with dealers, the same thing. I just, I can get off on a multitude of raps about that.

SUSAN MORGAN: Do you know what has happened with Westermann's studio?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It was sold to the neighbors. That's another thing that I couldn't convince anybody to buy.

SUSAN MORGAN: We have a friend in New York who was calling people trying to—

BILLY AL BENGSTON: If I had money, at this particular time in my life—although I don't like Brookfield Center, I don't like anything about it. I don't like the climate. I don't like the landscape. I don't like anything about it. I only like the studio. It sold for $150,000. And I said, "just go out and buy it." I said that to any of my rich friends. "Just go out and buy it." "But it sold." "You've got money, go buy it." If they bought it for $150,000, just offer them $2 million for it. If you've got money, spend it. If I had enough money to buy it today—I would buy it. I'd saw it in half and bring it to California. No big deal. Because—what is money for? But everybody thinks that money is something. And this goes into what art is. What is art? In effect, it is money. It has no other value. Like money has no value. "I promise to give you this amount of value for your money." That's what it says on it. It's worthless. Who is this person who is going to give us the money?

Everybody takes it for granted that it's them. Well, a work of art is nothing more than an aesthetic value.

And, unfortunately this is the case almost categorically—there are more counterfeiters than there are moneymakers.

SUSAN MORGAN: With the Westermann neighbors, are they going to keep it as—

BILLY AL BENGSTON: They have conditionally said they'll keep it. But it's sadness. It's sad. But you know Cliff made it for Joanna. Unfortunately, he never lived in it.

SUSAN MORGAN: He built her studio first, didn't he?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Yes, he certainly did. And, I mean, that was a wonderful labor of love. I talked to him about that. It was just fantastic. Fond stories. Him pulling out the nails because they nailed it instead of using screws.

He pulled out the nails and put screws in. And this was before screw guns. Brass screws. He bought all the screws in the state. All the brass screws in the state [laughs].

SUSAN MORGAN: That is so great.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: There is one piece in there—I forget which one it is—where he couldn't get the right brass fitting screw.

Nut and bolt. He made it. He made the whole thing.

SUSAN MORGAN: The piece with the dustpans—where it said that each one had been made by hand. No molds were used.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I mean, I just think that if somebody in the writing business of the observation business said—"Go to MOCA and look at the shows." You couldn't see three more different exhibitions. You have Cliff: decidedly fixed in making a product that is him. You have Arte Povera which is "well, what are we doing guys? Let's have some fun and do this shit." And then you have Andy who is in the business of making dough. That's all—making dough and becoming a celebrity. The most successful is Andy the Second is this Arte Povera crap. And then you get to Cliff. Just the opposite of what it should be. I think it's really fascinating. I'm fond of Andy. I was always fond of Andy. I was good friends with Andy. I don't know the Povera people. But I see where it is.

It's not original, meaning it was in California before it was there. It's cute. More dynamic. Obviously funded by someone. Not original because it was a fungilated deal.

SUSAN MORGAN: Fungilated?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: [Laughs.]

SUSAN MORGAN: I'm not familiar with that word but I know what you mean.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I thought it was a cute word. And, then—there's Cliff.

SUSAN MORGAN: I was telling Don Dudley about the show and—you know Don was an artist and a curator who has an art crating business—and I said, "They even had the crates."

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Some of them.

SUSAN MORGAN: And I said, "seeing the crates—"

BILLY AL BENGSTON: The crates are fantastic.

SUSAN MORGAN: And he said, "Well, getting a letter from him—"

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It was the high point of your life. There's nothing better than a letter from Westermann. That's all I live for. I wouldn't write letters except to him. That's all I cared about.

SUSAN MORGAN: I think Vija Celmins has letters from him.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Maybe. He would write to anyone. He was a fantastic communicator. He might have liked Vija's spirit. I don't know where I stand in the ballpark but I know I ain't him.

At one time, I thought I could be but that's youthful fantasy.

SUSAN MORGAN: It's interesting that where you started talking about him [Westermann]. Recently, a writer I know here, Jim Krusoe, published a novel. He's in his 50s. He said that people have been saying to him—"What took you so long?" He also teaches and yet he says that he doesn't follow any of the rules of writing fiction. And still, his book really succeeds. And, it's like what you were saying about Westermann, he [Krusoe] says that he wrote the only book that he was capable of writing. He had to write this book, this way. There wasn't any other way for him to do it. He also said a very funny thing: you have an idea that a learning curve is supposed to go steadily uphill. He felt that his was a long flat line with a little bump. He said that he might have had an advantage in being really patient or maybe he was just stupid about things. This [the way he works] is just the way it happened. It didn't happen—barn! He would write a book.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It doesn't happen. It doesn't. Probably my biggest influence in life, outside the art world but that directly relates to the art world, is when I used to race motorcycles. And my sponsor. A fabulous guy.

Brilliant guy. A real person. And I've used things that he's said to me to get through life all the way along. You'd ask him how to do things and he'd say—"Steady by jerks." It's sort of like that 'uh... uh— uh." The first time I went out and rode flat track, I came back in and said —"Bob, what am I supposed to do?" It's an oval track. I know how to ride, I'm a good rider. He said, "Billy. Go to the corner and turn left." [Laughs.] Everything—I mean, I know now how I could have gone a lot faster. But I then didn't know. I came in one time— I mean I've gone hell—bent for election and people were passing me. I couldn't understand it because I knew I was a better rider than them. I knew had adequate equipment. I came in and said, "Bob, what the hell is going on here? I should be beating these guys. There's no reason for them to be beating me." He said, "Hey Billy, if somebody passes you—they're either a better rider or they're going to fall down." [Laughs.] It's simple, isn't it? You know you go through life thinking those simple ways, it becomes very easy to get through life.

SUSAN MORGAN: When did you do that [motorcycle racing]?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It's really funny how that osmosed. In Europe in 1958 with a Lambretta motor I managed to buy. That's a really funny story.

SUSAN MORGAN: You shipped it back? La Dolce Vita?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I went to Europe in 1958. I left Los Angeles with $200.

I arrived in Europe, after spending a month in New York, with $12. I spent six months in Europe.

SUSAN MORGAN: On the same $12?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That's sort of the story. I did all kinds of tricky things in Europe and I

managed to get a Lambretta scooter in the period. I generated, while I was there, another $800. And then, I came back on the Queen Mary by the way. Because I could put my motor scooter in for free. And then I left it in New York and had it shipped out and somehow, in the shipping, it fell off and bent up the front end. And I couldn't find anyone to work on it here. So I finally located this motorcycle dealer, BSA dealer, and took it to him. I said, "Can you fix this thing?" I was totally brain dead when it came to those mechanical things like that. And they figured that they could fix anything because they're men.

They're men. They thought: If it's made, I can fix it. So I left it there and they always called it "goddamned eye-talian," "that eye-talian motor scooter." And they sort of fixed it. But in the interim, I became—

SUSAN MORGAN: And this is pre-Dentos?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Oh, yeah. I became fascinated with the mechanics of the whole thing. And I didn't have any money. I still, I never had any money. But somehow they managed to fix this thing. And I had some insurance money to fix it.

And they fixed it for well under that and then I sold it and I managed to get a BSA motorcycle. And then, he managed to hire me.

SUSAN MORGAN: Was he your sponsor?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Originally. We just—he was a great racer in his day. A great racer. I struck a chord with him. It was just one of those things: here was this crazy kid—and I was one of those crazy kids. Then, I would work for him. I was the gunk brush—is what they referred to me as—which means that I cleaned motorcycles and polished them. And then he became the first Honda motorcycle dealer in California and I assembled little Hondas for him. I did things like that. And then, I progressed into a racing position because he had another racer that he was sponsoring. I was mad about that guy as a fireman. Amazing guy. He's still racing, as a matter of fact. He's seven years older than I am and he's still doing fine. He's strong as an ox. Brilliant guy—in terms of the way 'men' are. And that's how that happened. I started late. But I got good enough that I picked up factory money.

SUSAN MORGAN: What do you mean you started late?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I was old.

SUSAN MORGAN: Is it like being a dancer?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I was old. I should have started—according by today's schedule, I started 15 years late, maybe 20 years late. Today, I would say racers start around 8 or 9 years old. I would think 16 is the right age to start. I was 26 or 27, something like that. I would be considered an old man in that situation. I still did good.

SUSAN MORGAN: Pat O' Neill, the filmmaker, in an interview said that he was influenced by or had worked for—now, what's the guy's name—Von Dutch?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Von Dutch Holland.

SUSAN MORGAN: That was an aesthetic that influenced him.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Everybody went for Von Dutch. I could never figure that out.

SUSAN MORGAN: It's also the Big Daddy Roth thing.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Big Daddy Roth is in there too. Another thing that I don't get.

were painted with lacquer by hand. There would be 80 or 100 coats hand lacquered paint. They would paint it on, rub it out, paint it on, rub it out, until it became this finish that was something special.

SUSAN MORGAN: But that's real lacquer technique.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That's real special. You could get down and actually see the brush strokes. If you got back a little ways, you couldn't really see them. The surfaces were sensual. And that has to do with the hand. That was not a machine thing, it was a hand

thing. Flash or flash itself—It isn't the brush that makes the painting.

SUSAN MORGAN: It's the person.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Yes, but so many people get captivated by the tool and tricked by the tool Spray paint for me was just a tool. Who cares? It was just a tool. You can do 30 things with it: you can paint it fast, you can do a blend easier. You can do a big blend. There are progressions today, the technologies today, that are just mind boggling. If I went back, painting the paintings that I did 50 or 40 years ago, I could do them so much better. But, you know something? There are kids today who are capable of doing them better. Why don't they do them?

I'm not interested anymore. If I came into this, as a growing artist with the materials they have today, I'd be way out there in the technical terms.

SUSAN MORGAN: Did you see the Liz Larner show at MOCA?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Yeah, I did.

SUSAN MORGAN: Didn't that owe something—

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Yeah, it's a shitty paint job. It was shitty paint job.

It was a production paint job. It had no guts. It had no guts. It was perfect.

SUSAN MORGAN: Soulless?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It was computer-generated. Computer-generated. Computer generation doesn't cut it—

SUSAN MORGAN: In that room at MOCA, that skylit—

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I appreciate she did it, to see it done. I don't know who funded it, who was the fundilator on that.

SUSAN MORGAN: I don't know.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: But if she did it on her own, God bless her. That's beaucoup balls because it costs a lot of money. But it was an idea, it wasn't a desire. It was an idea and that's the problem with most of the stuff that is made—"I've got a great idea. I've got to make this idea." Well, in the process of making the idea, they don't look at it. What they do is they make the idea. It's always a problem that I had with almost all conceptual art. All the so—called finish fetish art. Well, gee, I've got an idea instead of 'I did it myself.'

SUSAN MORGAN: Is it that the idea starts from the outside rather than generating out from —

BILLY AL BENGSTON: [Sigh] I mean, Cliff wrote about it with the dustpans. That's what it is all about. Deep. And, if people want to buy the Warhols, more power to them. But that's shit. I love the fact that people buy that shit—but it's shit. When you get right down to it. And I think that Andy would have said that it's shit too. I mean, the last time that I saw him, I walked in on him at his place. And I said, "Where's Andy?" And they said, "Back behind that wall." I walked back behind and he was painting. And I said, "What the hell are you doing?" He got so embarrassed. He said, "Oh, I'm sorry—" He took off his rubber gloves [laughs]. He said, "I don't want to be caught doing this—" [Laughs.] Dead serious.

SUSAN MORGAN: That's very product-generated. In all the books [about Warhol], they always emphasize that it was the business.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Business. You read his books; you know what the hell he was doing. And he would tell everybody what he was doing but nobody— everybody wanted to pay more for it. They still want to pay more for it. I don't get it. I mean, I would gladly hang a Warhol in here. And I've got Warhols and I'll hang them. But I'd rather sell them than hang them.

SUSAN MORGAN: I thought that you raised a good point about having the three shows [at Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles] up at the same time.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: You couldn't get three further apart exhibitions.

I want to tell you something that we saw. We were in Honolulu two weeks ago. I don't know if you've ever been there. This is something that hasn't happened to me since I've met Wendy actually. I had a genuine museum experience. The Honolulu Academy of Art is worth going to. It is brilliant. It's all the things that museums should be and aren't. You walk into this place. There's no hydro-gynometers or light tables or anything. You go in and you look. I mean, I sat and looked at crappy pictures that I never would never look at in a museum because the environment was so good.

Incredible environment! Little knickknack tchotchkes oriental things and stuff like that. Fascinated, I sat there and looked at them! I've seen that crap all my life! But it was fascinating to look at because it was done so nicely. And it just knocked me out.

And it came from Westermann where I would go around and—"Can I hang this here?" "Okay, how much light can I put on it?" "How do I get the lights so I can use that amount of light?" Which is the equivalent of hanging it in your closet and having someone turn the light on a crack on it.

You walked in [in Honolulu] and okay—here's this Gauguin. The door is open. Natural light is pouring in. There's a stream outside. You know, Matisse—fountain outside, natural light. You go to the gallery next to it, it's full of 15th, 16th century crap—Italian allegorical shit—full light bouncing in there. Glorious! The work just looks spectacular!

SUSAN MORGAN: That's funny because I just had a similar experience.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Where?

SUSAN MORGAN: I went to a house called HillStead in Farmington, Connecticut. It's a house that was designed—at the turn of the [20th century], around 1901—by a sort of self-taught woman architect named Theodate Pope Riddle. It was built for her parents. Her father had made a fortune in Ohio—he produced railroad couplings.

Theodate Pope Riddle had gone to Miss Porter's School in Farmington, fell in love with Farmington, Connecticut. She stayed on and lived in an 18th century house in Farmington. She wanted to design a house for her parents. She bought 300 acres.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: What did that cost then—$1,000?

SUSAN MORGAN: Probably. So she designed this house and—in the same way now that if you have some artist-slash-electrician do the wiring in your house, you still need to get a licensed electrician to sign off on the job, her family hired the architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White as the official architects.

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[October 2, 2002]

[Note: This interview took place after the opening a group show, featuring the work of artists who had shown at LA's Ferus Gallery (1957-1967) at Gagosian Gallery in New York. The Gagosian Ferus gallery show was accompanied by a catalogue, with an essay by Kirk Varnedoe and an interview with Irving Blum, Ferus Gallery director, conducted by Roberta Bernstein. Exhibition dates: September 12–October 19, 2002.]

BILLY AL BENGSTON: This is the thing that is interesting [looking at Ferus Gallery exhibition catalogue]—I never knew that painting [by BAB] was in the front window of the gallery and I threw the fucking painting away. [Laughs.]

SUSAN MORGAN: I've seen that painting reproduced in another catalogue; I think it's in the catalogue that Jane Livingston did.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Maybe. But I junked that painting. Never thought about it. That would have been in '58—my first one man show at Ferus. That was December of '58.

SUSAN MORGAN: In the catalogue for the show that Jane Livingston and Linda Cathcart did [*Billy Al Bengston: Paintings of Three Decades*, 1988. Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, Texas.] There's a photograph of that painting in with the essay.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I threw it [the painting] away. It might be folded up somewhere. I found a couple of other paintings folded up.

SUSAN MORGAN: Maybe someone is rummaging in your garbage.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Oh, yeah—and that was interesting. There were two beautiful Frank Stellas. And then, see that's 1959—Irwin didn't start showing with Ferus until '61, I believe. April, May, solo show, in '61. Irwin and I went to Europe in 1960. He didn't get his studio in Ocean Park until '61. The paintings were painted in that studio. And before they were painted, there were those sort of abstract expressionist ones which were in his first show at Ferus.

SUSAN MORGAN: And you had been to Europe together?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: We went together. I shared a studio with Bob in 1959. In '58, I had a deal that I had hooked up with Dave Dixon who was a bartender-slash-artist at Barneys Beanery. In '58 or early '59, he found a space which was a lot of office space on the corner of Clark and Santa Monica Boulevard—which is now very trendy, swish office area. It was a drugstore, then it became a bank. There were five places up there. I got one of the places. I brought got Irwin one of the places. Irwin, at that time, before that he was making pictures of hydrocephalic people with water heads. Very sort of surrealistic. Really.

SUSAN MORGAN: Do they ever surface anywhere?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I hope so.

SUSAN MORGAN: Have they been edited out of history?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I hope they surface. But it's interesting how history is re-written. Who else was there? There was Dave. I think [inaudible] Brown had an office there. Joe Henderson was there. That lasted two months. Then, we moved over to a place on Hayvenhurst, Hookers' Row. No, then we moved—God, I can't remember. Before we went to Hookers Row—that was after I had the Valentines show and I made a lot of money. I think I made $800. Or something like that.

SUSAN MORGAN: So you could go to Europe—since the last time you went with $200.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That's right. I pissed it all away in a month. But at the time, Irwin was still making little paintings. They were sort of variations on this picture [points to a photograph of abstract painting of his own, c. 1959]: it was linear, back and forth, it sort of zigzagged. His were much better because his were real tight-assed. They were very worried and mine were just sort of blocked out.

SUSAN MORGAN: Were you having too good of a time?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I don't know. At that time, I switched over to *The Valentines*. And actually before that, I was doing *The Draculas*—in '59.

SUSAN MORGAN: When were they first called *Draculas*?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Right away. Kenny Price walked in and said, "It looks like Count Dracula coming through a window." And I said, "That's a hell of a lot better than an iris." [laughs] That's how that happened. It was sort of an interesting time. Very interesting time.

SUSAN MORGAN: Were you interviewed for the Ferus show catalogue?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: [Imitating Dracula] I vas not.

SUSAN MORGAN: And Larry Gagosian?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Fabulous. Isn't it great? I mean it is wonderful, I feel. He did a good job. He spared hardly an expense. I was tickled pink. Aside, from the fact—that the lighting was like a museum [inaudible]. The Craig Kauffman—was brilliant, beautiful painting but it wasn't shown at Ferus Gallery. But it was gorgeous. Absolutely phenomenal. It was not in his shows. It was made in '68.

SUSAN MORGAN: How long was Ferus open?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Not very long.

SUSAN MORGAN: Does that Gagosian [Chelsea] space re-configure?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It sort of does. They built walls. You know, what's sort of strange? I thought it was so strange. It looked like New York's [inaudible] Bergamot Station. [Pointing at Frank Stella paintings in catalogue] This is really great. They're fabulous. But 1970. And, on top of that, they wouldn't fit through the door [at Ferus]. 120" by 221"? You couldn't get the stretcher bars through. None of it. [Laughs.]

SUSAN MORGAN: Comparing the picture on the cover of the catalogue [an image of Ferus Gallery, a storefront] to Gagosian's gallery. In the article about the show that was in the [*Los Angeles Times*] Calendar, I wondered if Gagosian had changed the dates in his own life. He talked about being in college in the '70s.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Well, I think he graduated from college in 1970. So that would be right—if he's around 55. [Looking at catalogue] Now, this one—"Gargoyle"—was shown at the first Ferus Gallery before Irving [Blum] came in.

SUSAN MORGAN: It's a painting by Hassel Smith? Who was it who said that if he hadn't lived in Sebastapol [California], he would have been really famous?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: [Roy] Lichtenstein, I don't know if this shown at Ferus.

SUSAN MORGAN: Irving Blum said that everything [archival material] from Ferus Gallery was lost [in a flood].

BILLY AL BENGSTON: There are archives. It was completely documented by [Ed] Kienholz. And then Kienholz's documentation has gone to the Getty via Walter Hopps. They've documented it. 1955, this [Richard Diebenkorn]. That was before [the gallery].

SUSAN MORGAN: So was the premise of the show the artist, and not the artworks, that were shown at Ferus?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I don't know. I just don't know. Wally Berman, that's so far beyond [the operating dates, 1957-1967 of Ferus Gallery], it's ridiculous. Bruce Conner, I don't remember that. I love Bruce Conner. The thing that is missing that is interesting is—there's no [Giorgio] Morandi [GM show at Ferus, 1963].

SUSAN MORGAN: I just sent an email to a friend, a painter who loves Morandi. He's going to the Rome Academy and was hedging about going to the Morandi Museum in Bologna. When I looked it up in one of my Italy guidebooks. Have you been there? It's Morandi's studio—his paintings plus the art he collected.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I've heard all about it.

SUSAN MORGAN: When I read about the museum, I sent my friend an email and said, "Pack a panini and get on the train."

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Absolutely.

SUSAN MORGAN: So there was a Morandi show at Ferus?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Yes. I remember we were driving around all the time. We'd all sort of carpool. One time we were car-pooling up to San Francisco—with Walter driving and me in the center and Ken Price on the far, outside. We were driving, talking about artists—[Inaudible.]

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Kenny had this show right before mine—

SUSAN MORGAN: Kenny Price. What's the card for his show?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It's a picture of him surfing—doing a Royal Hawaiian. We—at this particular time, '61—we were as disgusted with the surfing world as we were with the art world. It had become all about doing fancy ass tricks. We decided to create our own style. It was Ken and I and then later Tube Steak; it was called the Royal Hawaiian.

SUSAN MORGAN: Did you say "and later Tube Steak?"

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Yes, he was just a surfer. We wrote a whole list of things you could do if you became a member of the Royal Hawaiian Club. And things you couldn't do. The only things you couldn't do was anything that entailed aesthetics. So—we had to lock our legs, put our arms straight out, look straight forward, never do anything but tack.

SUSAN MORGAN: So this is surfing as the basic T-shape?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Yes. This is a variation on the Royal Hawaiian. He has one leg behind the other. You had to declare if you were going to do a variation. You would have to yell it out. Most of the time, we would wait for the best wave and do our level best to ruin it for anybody else to take off. [Laughs.] By becoming statues and sliding across it. It was a lot of fun. At any rate, we were sharing studios. I painted a lot of Kenny's pieces. I did the spray work on a lot of his work. And they were all bugging me, everybody was bugging me. They wanted me to show the sergeant stripes. I just didn't feel like I'd taken them far enough. And now I looked at March '60 and November '61 and it's only a year and a half [inaudible]. I said, "No, I can't do that." And Irving [Blum] said, "You've got to have a show." And I said, "Okay. You buy me a dozen stretcher bars or something like that and whatever." And I said, "Get the canvases and I'll paint Kenny's show." And I said to Ken," 'Cause I love the way your show looks, I'm just going to be just be making portraits of the gallery with your pieces in it." And I had all the canvases and colors and getting ready to paint and I get in the studio and Ken said—"I don't want you to do it." And I said, "But you already agreed. C'mon! I don't know what to do!" And he said, "I'm sorry. I don't want you to do it." Now if that was today, it would be "Fuck you." It's a different art world. But then, it was such a different game. You would never go against anybody else's wants. So, I thought—"What am I going to do?" So, at this period, I had three weeks left. I thought—the only thing I know anything about is my motorcycle. In fact, I spent half of my life spraying, painting, and the other half cleaning and working on motorcycles. So I just painted my motorcycle. I did that. And everybody was really pissed that I did that. That's what made them mad.

[Wendy Al walks in]

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Hi, honey!

SUSAN MORGAN: She's wearing an identification tag.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: We have to know who she is. So there you go, that's how that [making paintings of his motorcycle] happened.

SUSAN MORGAN: Where did you surf then?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Primarily Malibu. But I met Kenny down at Doheny where I was the beach attendant.

SUSAN MORGAN: What's the show announcement next to that one?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Ed Moses. And this one is [Robert] Irwin. That's the one [1964], I can't remember if it was that one or earlier. It might have been the later one—when they stopped doing the regular Monday night openings [at the galleries on La Cienega]. And Kienholz and I hired a klieg light and red carpet for Irwin's opening.

SUSAN MORGAN: Did Gagosian get klieg lights and a red carpet for the Ferus opening?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: No, all very very conservative. It was not stupid. We had a beautiful dinner afterwards. It was really swell. I can't say enough about it—very laid back, very nice. Not like I remembered him.

SUSAN MORGAN: Do you think that 25 years ago, you could have imagined Larry Gagosian doing all this?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I knew Larry 25 years ago when he first had the poster gallery.

SUSAN MORGAN: Who was the other guy [who had a poster gallery]—Karl Bornstein?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Karl Bornstein. Completely vanished, living in a trailer in Malibu.

SUSAN MORGAN: Were they [the galleries] in Westwood?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That's where the poster gallery was. You know it's really fascinating, this whole thing.

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BILLY AL BENGSTON: Look at this [a photograph of a recent Frank Stella wall relief]. That is really interesting. I don't know if it's art. If it is, it's not the kind of art I'd hang on the wall. Or even have around. Here's a guy that was Mr. Tasty-Wasty. He knows how do tasty, all that stuff.

SUSAN MORGAN: I remember, after having seen the Black Paintings and the Protractor series, when he had that first show—was it called "Wild Birds?" Big, aluminum reliefs with the glitter and—

BILLY AL BENGSTON: "What happened to Frank?"

SUSAN MORGAN: I didn't know at first what to think of them.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: I see where they lead to. I think there's a problem. This is something that happens when you spend too much time in the studio. You lose a sense of proportion. You lose a sense of what is correct. These pieces, I feel, if they weren't that size [inaudible]. He's fallen into the [Richard] Serra hole [making work on an enormous scale]. I'm the only one who thinks Serra is a phony.

SUSAN MORGAN: There was a funny article in the paper the other week about [interior designer] Thierry Despont. He made these big circle paintings. And, because he [Despont] is a big important guy, he went to Gagosian to say that he was ready to have a show there. And Gagosian responded [I thought this was a brilliant rejection], "Serra owns the circle."

BILLY AL BENGSTON: [Laughs.]

SUSAN MORGAN: It was a great answer, sort of "Can't help you out, pal."

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Great.

SUSAN MORGAN: How can you argue with that? So I guess Thierry Despont is having a show at Pace. I think they're also on display in the windows of Lord & Taylor.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: They look very surface-y. Did you notice this painting [points to wall], this Craig Kaufman?

SUSAN MORGAN: What year is that from?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It's 1958.

SUSAN MORGAN: It's a really nice painting.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It's marvelous.

SUSAN MORGAN: It's surprising—also since we were talking earlier about people and their regrettable juvenilia. That's a keeper.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Isn't it interesting how French it looks? The dabs and lines.

SUSAN MORGAN: And the colors. I had written something down that I wanted to ask you. I was reading an article recently about Mary Heilmann. She started off in ceramics, working with Peter Voulkos. She was born in 1940. I was wondering, studying at that time, if working in ceramics provided a liberating influence for a painter.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Working with Pete?

SUSAN MORGAN: In her paintings, she uses color fearlessly and as form. She also has a very light touch. Did working in ceramics allow for a different relationship with color? I think of a lot of the paintings from that period—the late-50s, early '60s, as being those brown paintings. And looking at this Craig Kauffmann painting, the touch is much lighter, the color

is fresh.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: The ground is exposed.

SUSAN MORGAN: It's not what I think of as being representative of that period.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Macho, grunt and grind stuff. That was a big change.

SUSAN MORGAN: When I read that Mary Heilmann started out in ceramics, I wondered if that was a different way in to thinking about painting.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: The only thing that I know that mattered to me really and I think I learned this much earlier in life is: if it gets off-center, it falls over. So, thinking that way, you always try to balance stuff. In looking at old work, in retrospect, I always find that t they're balanced—no matter how the hell they are.

SUSAN MORGAN: Is that instinctual?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: You know I started in ceramics. That was my thing from 1949 on.

SUSAN MORGAN: And you had a real facility for ceramics.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Oh, yes. I could whip out those things. I'm ready to whip out some more. I have to get an assistant who knows the new materials. Because there are a lot of changes. But I still know how to do it. [Inaudible.] I was always more interested in the form, not the function. And I was always—"oh, you've got some gray. I'll take some gray. That will be fine."

SUSAN MORGAN: I read an interview with an artist [Jerome Caja] who used nail polish in his work and the interviewer made a case about his use of nail polish. And the artist said, "No, I started using it because I worked on ceramics." He said that, at a certain point, he couldn't put any more color on a piece and re-fire again, so he started using nail polish.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: It's the same consistency. But, of course, he's lying. You can keep firing. Lower temperatures, you can keep re-firing.

SUSAN MORGAN: Are you going to do ceramics again?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That's what I've been thinking.

SUSAN MORGAN: I was glad to learn [in speaking to you] that I wasn't the only person who didn't know why Ferus gallery was called "Ferus."

BILLY AL BENGSTON: If you did know, you would be the only person who knows.

SUSAN MORGAN: I wanted to ask you about the Doumani house.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: What about it?

SUSAN MORGAN: How did that come together? How did a number of artists work on the design of a house?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Because Roy Doumani, for want of a better word, is Bob Graham's patron. When Roy got married, Bob said he would design his house.

SUSAN MORGAN: When was that?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: A long time ago.

SUSAN MORGAN: 1978?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: At least. Something like that. Very funny, the first time I saw it. Bob said, "C'mon over. I'll show you some of the designs." He'd built them out of wax. [Laughs.] Wax was his material; that's what he was using. He had no idea what he was doing. It was really great. He was a complete naïf. He had an idea of how he wanted it to look. And I would ask him, "Well which way does it face?" He would have sort of a lost expression on his face. He just knew how he wanted it to look. And I said, "Do you know where the lot is?" It was that kind of thing. Bob, at that time [and probably still is to this day], is one of the least

crafty people I've ever known. He didn't know materials. He had no capability to understand the construction jargon. I'd go down to help him, for lack of a better word, not with the design element, but how to phrase it. He wanted all of his friends to do it. He said, "It's got to be art." I said, "But Bob, it isn't art. It's commercial art. That's all there is to it" He said, "It can't be. You're an artist." "Well, okay but it's a job." I designed the swimming pool—a red snake going through a black pool. I designed the banisters.

SUSAN MORGAN: What did you do with the banisters?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: They were polished glass, sand-blasted. They picked up colors from the light coming in. The colors would bounce. I did the woodwork, the cabinets. I did the floors. Beautiful. [Inaudible.] Marble and granite. And Bob said, "How am I going to put this in? It doesn't fit." And I said, "Bob, put it at a 45-degree angle. Most floors are put in at 45-degree angle. And then there was this left over marble and granite [Bengston also designed the hardscape around the swimming pool]. But then they tore it all up and put in a Michael Heizer. Then after that, I wasn't really into it.

SUSAN MORGAN: Whose decision had that been?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Doumani. If mine was so rotten—I think that they took it [BAB's design] as an off-the-cuff-thing.

SUSAN MORGAN: What's interesting is that when you were describing the banister and the light, you were describing materials and how they operate on a perceptual level. These objects are not flat on the wall art—They take in experiential concerns.

SUSAN MORGAN: Did Michael Heizer bulldoze the floor?

BILLY AL BENGSTON: He dug a hole. It's a nice piece. But it's the same problem I have with Richard Serra. It's always big. I was watching TV last night [inaudible] That stuff is big. That's a lot of impact. They were showing these pieces and saying—"Oh, this one ways 40 tons or 500 tons." So?

SUSAN MORGAN: I've been out to [Heizer's earthwork] *Double Negative* and—

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Double Negative is a trip but that's in real space.

SUSAN MORGAN: You're in this vast landscape.

BILLY AL BENGSTON: That's the real thing. But the rest of it—

SUSAN MORGAN: In one of your catalogues [*Billy Al Bengston; Paintings of Three Decades*] I liked when you talked about running and the way the visual information floods in from the sides—

BILLY AL BENGSTON: Well, it seems pretty obvious that if you don't steal from nature—I mean it's boundless—[Inaudible.] As Bob [BAB's motorcycle racing mentor] always said, "Pay more attention, Billy."

[More construction noise from outside in the street. An alarm goes off. The tape becomes even less audible and is turned off]

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[END OF INTERVIEW]