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Oral history interview with Dennis Pinette, 2005 Aug. 30-Sept. 1

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Dennis Pinette on August 30 and September 1, 2005. The interview took place in Belfast, ME, and was conducted by Susan C. Larsen for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Dennis Pinette and Susan C. Larsen have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DR. SUSAN LARSEN: We are in the home and studio of Mr. Dennis Pinette in Belfast, Maine. The date is August 30, 2005, and we are here to speak with Mr. Pinette about his life and his work. This is the first session. I'm the interviewer, Susan C. Larsen, with the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Good afternoon, Dennis.

DENNIS PINETTE: Good afternoon, Susan.

DR. LARSEN: Hi. Here we are in your studio, on a quiet street in Belfast, Maine. Where is Belfast in the state of Maine?

MR. PINETTE: Belfast is right on the coast. It's a 150 miles north of the Maine-New Hampshire border and it's right at the mouth of Belfast Bay which kind of expands into the Penobscot Bay which is the Gulf of Maine, and then the Atlantic Ocean beyond.

DR. LARSEN: So it's both sea and woods in a small town, or maybe a city by now, isn't it?

MR. PINETTE: It's a small city, but it feels like a town. I mean-well, that's Maine for you.

DR. LARSEN: I'm going to go over just some of the basic things about your life, some of the factual things, and we can start with those if that's all right. I have that you were born in 1951?

MR. PINETTE: That's right.

DR. LARSEN: And right here?

MR. PINETTE: Yes.

DR. LARSEN: And where in this town were you born?

MR. PINETTE: I was born in the old Waldo County Hospital, which burned to the ground in 1966, I think, and so the chimney is still remaining. You can walk right up there and-I like to look at it, actually, sometimes. Kind of some kind of provocation. I mean, I didn't grow up here. I didn't grow up in Belfast.

DR. LARSEN: How long was your family here?

MR. PINETTE: Two years; maybe two and a half years.

DR. LARSEN: And were you the first child or-

MR. PINETTE: Second. I have an older sister.

DR. LARSEN: And are there more children?

MR. PINETTE: I have two sisters, one older, one younger, and one younger brother.

DR. LARSEN: And are they near you too?

MR. PINETTE: My two sisters live in Vermont, and my brother lives in Loudonville, New York.

DR. LARSEN: And so you don't-do you have any early memory of this place?

MR. PINETTE: No, not at all. I was-I was maybe two years old when my parents moved from Belfast to Brookline, Mass.

DR. LARSEN: I have read in some of the accounts of your work and your life that your father was an industrial chemist.

MR. PINETTE: Yes.

DR. LARSEN: That's interesting. Now, what does that entail?

MR. PINETTE: Well, let's see, well, he was a research chemist-pretty complicated stuff. He did research in polymer plastic extrusion and later fiber optic cable. Basically, it's the world of rheology, which is the physics of flow, and so that was his main concern. I think I've got it right.

DR. LARSEN: The physics of flow, that sounds very poetic, almost-

MR. PINETTE: It is. The word rheology is a beautiful word.

DR. LARSEN: And did he work for a company or a university?

MR. PINETTE: He worked for several companies: General Cable [Highland Heights, KY], Belden [Richmond, IN], International Silver. And then he did some outside independent consulting work, industrial troubleshooting.

DR. LARSEN: And did that entail your family then moving around?

MR. PINETTE: We moved around considerably. We lived in New Jersey, which is where I graduated from high school. We lived in New Jersey, Vermont, Connecticut, a short stint in California, Massachusetts of course, and so now I'm here in Maine.

DR. LARSEN: That's a lot to get to the point where you come back to the first place where you were born, which is interesting. I have that you went to high school in Morristown, New Jersey.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: What kind of place is that?

MR. PINETTE: Morristown is-well-you can call it as almost a suburb of New York City. It's only 25 miles from New York City. It's a large city, at least compared to Belfast-pretty upscale.

DR. LARSEN: I'm jumping way ahead here, but one of the central things in your work that people notice is the interface of heavy industry and technology and nature, and did your father's occupation and the conversation in the family have anything to do with setting this up in your life?

MR. PINETTE: I've thought about that a lot, and I think the answer is yes, at least in the real early stages, definitely in a subliminal way. I mean I had a paper route when I was in the 4th grade. I could barely handle it because I wasn't that big, and I had 55 papers, and part of my paper route took me through the small industrial areas of Williamstown, Mass, and along the river-the back end of the General Cable plant. There was like little pathways that you could run through, and that just absolutely fascinated me, plus going into the plant and delivering papers there. I was just staring at the machinery, I was looking at the river flowing behind, these-you know, this weedy, peculiar, New England type of industrial, forgotten rivers, you know, with overgrown alders. I was just really attracted to it at a very early age.

DR. LARSEN: A lot of people find it kind of scary or repellent and something they don't want to see. It's like the backend of the town usually.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, well, I found it intriguing. It was mysterious. It was-it was maybe a little spooky, but I never thought of those places as being repellent. I thought they were attractive in a way just because they were-they embodied what seemed to me like secrets, but I couldn't articulate it then, it was just kind of like a sense that I had of these things.

DR. LARSEN: You didn't see them as dangerous or-I guess that a lot of us growing up were told not to go to such places, you know, just kind of get hurt or something bad might happen because people didn't know what happened there.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: They didn't know what went on there, and it could be something heavy or moving or chemical or you'd get in the way-you know, that type of thing.

MR. PINETTE: Well, all I can say about that is that I never put myself into a place where I shouldn't have been,

you know. I was always very careful. Yeah, I was never much of a daredevil.

DR. LARSEN: But that inquisitiveness and that interest in looking at all that, which is not a typical city scene.

MR. PINETTE: Right. No, it was-the nature of old world industry is just-to me, it's just fascinating. It just was from a real early age. It was the way it smelled, the way it looked-a certain nobleness about it even though it was already, you know, decrepit.

DR. LARSEN: Did it have to do with the people who had been there or the physicality of the scene itself or-

MR. PINETTE: I think more the physicality of the scene itself. Just the visual imagery of it-I mean, an abandoned railroad track or what you may think is an abandoned railroad track-it may still be an active line is, at least to me, a railroad track represents this-almost this other dimension of existence because of what it is. It's-you're not on a road. There's nobody around and it's a secret highway through the woods.

DR. LARSEN: Kids are often drawn to that sort of place. I think most of us, as kids, have walked along the railroad track and have wondered, it always leads from something to something.

MR. PINETTE: Right. And-

DR. LARSEN: But it sometimes seems that you'll never get there.

MR. PINETTE: Right. It's like-it suggests something endless and secret, and the other thing, too, is you're always looking over your shoulder-

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: -because of certain innocent kind of fear factor, if you will, because a train might be coming, you know, and you'd better not be on these tracks.

DR. LARSEN: And it could come quickly and overtake you before you even know.

MR. PINETTE: Exactly.

DR. LARSEN: And your mother told you that, you know, at least my mother did.

MR. PINETTE: Well, there was-there was a set of tracks that ran behind our house when we lived in Framingham, Mass. It passed through a field and then there were these tracks, and at the time it seemed like it was maybe a mile away, but in fact it was only about 400 feet away. And, well, we used to go through this field and go to these tracks and stand on the tracks and wait for the train to come. And the train was-at least in my memory-it was a really old type of locomotive with the wheel cams-the wheel arms like a steam train. They were just fantastic trains and I remember feeling very-just this incredible adrenalin rush when the train came, and being able to stay near the tracks for as long as possible and then jump away from it. Probably not too bright, but we still liked doing that stuff.

DR. LARSEN: Almost everybody you, you know, I've known has done-had that experience or similar experience as a kid, but most of us don't remember it or carry it in our head. Okay. So, you grew up in Williamstown, right?

MR. PINETTE: Yes.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: For the most part, yeah.

DR. LARSEN: How long were you there?

MR. PINETTE: I guess maybe eight years, from the third grade until the eleventh grade.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: Most of my elementary and high school.

DR. LARSEN: That's a very pretty town.

MR. PINETTE: It's very beautiful.

DR. LARSEN: With the university, with the college, and-

MR. PINETTE: It's very sophisticated. There are two sides to Williamstown, obviously. There's the college side of things and then there's the working side of things, and my experience was mostly in the latter, even though we lived smack in the middle of college in an old fraternity house; which was actually a wonderful experience because my folks rented the top-most of the top two floors of the house and one of their tenants was Stacy Keach, the actor-

DR. LARSEN: Really?

MR. PINETTE: -who would occasionally join us for Sunday dinner.

DR. LARSEN: Was he in school or-

MR. PINETTE: No, he was acting at the Williamstown Summer Theater-Adams Memorial Theater, which is a really well-known summer stock theater in Williamstown. And so our seasonal neighbors were people like, let's see, one year, Natalie Wood was there. She lived across the street. And there was Agnes de Mille.

DR. LARSEN: Sure, sure. Another generation.

MR. PINETTE: It was really fun. I mean, even as kids, we recognized that this is very unusual town and it's full of really unusual people.

DR. LARSEN: And what was Stacy Keach like?

MR. PINETTE: He was very, very nice; pretty low-key, very well mannered. He was, I mean at the time he wasn't a hugely well-known actor or anything, but he was just-

DR. LARSEN: And he hit it with television, I think, with-

MR. PINETTE: Yeah. Mike Hammer.

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: He became Mike Hammer.

DR. LARSEN: Right, right.

MR. PINETTE: And I think he does a lot of narration.

DR. LARSEN: Fine, that's fine. Very interesting. Did you ever go into the museum at the college?

MR. PINETTE: All the time. This was before-the Williams College Museum has a new addition, which is very nice, but before they built that addition there was this kind of dark, damp, cavernous, underground, medieval room, which was just fascinating. It was just a-kind of a museum form from yesteryear, and unfortunately that's gone. They took that out.

DR. LARSEN: What did they have in there?

MR. PINETTE: They had old tapestries; 15th century paintings like icon-like paintings and altar pieces. It was very dark, and heavy drapes and you know, 16th century furniture, you know, which-the fact that it was just so just dark in there, it was just great. I loved it in there.

DR. LARSEN: And quiet probably, too.

MR. PINETTE: And it was always 45 degrees in there. Then, of course, up the street from where we lived was the Clark Art Institute where we spent many, many Sunday afternoons, you know. We were there all the time.

DR. LARSEN: By we, you mean the whole family?

MR. PINETTE: Either by myself or with my friend Pierre, or one of my other friends who were, you know, equally interested at the time in just wandering around this stupendous museum.

DR. LARSEN: Were you encouraged in your art interest by your dad or your mom, or was this something that kind of came up on your own?

MR. PINETTE: Well, it, I'd say first and foremost, came up on my own, and I was always encouraged-never discouraged-by my parents. My maternal grandmother was a painter as was my maternal grandfather.

DR. LARSEN: Oh, and what was-what were their names?

MR. PINETTE: My grandfather's name was Harold George McMennamin.

DR. LARSEN: Could you spell that?

MR. PINETTE: M-C-capital M-E-N-N-A-M-I-N, McMennamin.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: And he was a painter who worked in New York around the teens. He was friendly with quite a few well-known artists including George Bellows and Norman Rockwell. N.C. Wyeth was one of his pals, Howard Pyle-

DR. LARSEN: And where there paintings of his in your house?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, there were a few. He didn't-he was not really a prolific painter. I have three of his paintings. They're very moody paintings and-

DR. LARSEN: Surprise, surprise, huh?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, they're paintings about strange life situations. There's kind of a like a story to each one. So he worked as an illustrator as well.

DR. LARSEN: Did you know him?

MR. PINETTE: No. I have one living memory of him, and that is-he died when I was three years old, and my living memory of him is sitting on his lap listening to his watch while he described the man inside the watch chopping wood. I thoroughly and completely believed it.

DR. LARSEN: Cool.

MR. PINETTE: And I had the image in my head of a man chopping wood, and he is in the watch.

DR. LARSEN: That's great. And your grandmother? You said she painted as well?

MR. PINETTE: Yes. She was a photographer actually, and a painter.

DR. LARSEN: Her name was?

MR. PINETTE: Frances McMennamin. In fact, she had a photography studio in Rumford-Rumford, Maine, and did a lot of commercial work. And she died in 1964.

DR. LARSEN: Oh. So, did you-and you knew her longer than-

MR. PINETTE: Yes, great memories of her.

DR. LARSEN: And was she influential or an advocate for your interest in your interest in art?

MR. PINETTE: Very much so. In fact, when she died is-I was-was when I actually got my first set of really good paints. They had been hers, and so I just came into them and it was, at the time, I think I was-I would have been 13. It felt like the most astonishing gift I had ever been given, even though, in fact, what it was was grandma's paints. Okay, grandma has died and, well, maybe Dennis would like these. Well, of course, it was like, whoa, I have paint now. And so it's when-that was really when I first learned about the power of paint; what it felt like to have these paints in front of me and then I started using them.

DR. LARSEN: Was this in tandem with things going on in school or was it sort of independent of that or-

MR. PINETTE: Oh, it was independent of that. When I got these paints, I felt like some door had been opened. I felt completely empowered somehow, like I had discovered something so huge and so immense. I decided to set up a little studio in the basement. I did the best I could. I had a little table-a tilting table and another little-I think I set up some sawhorses and I put out my paints and everything, and decided this is what I am going to do.

DR. LARSEN: Goodness.

MR. PINETTE: This feels exactly perfectly right to me. I have to do this. There's no turning back, as though it was eureka at an early age.

DR. LARSEN: That's quite fortunate. A lot of people don't have that and they grope around for a long time. And what did the people around you-did you say anything about this or did you just proceed on quietly or what?

MR. PINETTE: They didn't say too much about it. I mean, my parents and my brother and my sister certainly were aware and they thought it was a very cool thing. You know, occasionally I would get this from my father, you know, "Dennis, you can't be down there all the time just doing that," you know.

DR. LARSEN: You should be out playing ball or something like that?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I wasn't a recluse or hermit at the age of 13 or anything like that but I was completely, totally absorbed in this discovery.

DR. LARSEN: And what did you start off doing?

MR. PINETTE: I started off painting pictures of pears and fruit. I don't know why. It was just the most immediate thing that was in front of me.

DR. LARSEN: That's kind of a classical thing to do. If you'd gone to school, they probably would have told you to do that.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, probably. But I mean, I was doing other typical childish pursuits at the same time, I mean, my friends and I were totally into making model cars from plastic kits, and we were very good at it, but it really didn't take long before we started making Frankenstein cars. In other words, we'd take the model kits, and the desire was no longer to put together the model as it was supposed to be; it was to make these hideous hybrids, and we were spending huge amounts of time doing this. I thought that was just as creative as painting. In fact, it probably was more of a release, you know, it was more of a normal thing to do.

DR. LARSEN: And you were doing it with your buddies and that's-

MR. PINETTE: Yes.

DR. LARSEN: -that's normal, too, at that age.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah absolutely, and in the end the logical conclusion, of course, in our minds with these models was to blow them up with cherry bombs and firecrackers in these very elaborately staged scenes.

DR. LARSEN: And did you do this before an audience?

MR. PINETTE: No, we did it for our own glee. It was very elaborate, some of them, you know.

DR. LARSEN: Pre-internet, pre-internet fun. Interesting. So you then were in New Jersey, in Morristown, in high school, and did you have any deviation or other interests that came along besides painting during those years? Did you think of another career?

MR. PINETTE: I briefly thought about two other things, which have always been kind of interesting to me, and that was to study economics or to be a standup comedian. And I really thought about both of them and-

DR. LARSEN: Rather different.

MR. PINETTE: Oh, totally, totally different. Well, obviously I didn't become an economist or a standup comic, although I do have fun with senses of humor with people. I mean it's-but you got to be-if you're going to do something, you have to be completely focused with it, and the deepest thing to me was always painting. I mean, it was the most undeniable thing. I couldn't-there was no way it could be eclipsed by anything else other than the things that we have to do in life to survive, you know.

DR. LARSEN: Right. So, when you started to have this intense interest in painting, did you have a lot of curiosity about painting and painters?

MR. PINETTE: Oh yeah, very much so.

DR. LARSEN: And what did you do about that?

MR. PINETTE: I just looked and looked and looked and tried to understand the genius of simplicity, you know, in, say, the paintings of Fragonard, of which the Clark Art Institute has several. They're elegant but brutally direct paintings, in their paint application. So I was as much looking at the imagery even then as I was looking at the way the paint was sculpted, and how almost in a fractal-like way the strokes added up to an image. It was an incredibly mysterious thing.

DR. LARSEN: You were already sort of taking it apart and reconstructing it in your mind?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Did you have any help or guidance about this?

MR. PINETTE: I had a fantastically good and influential teacher. His name was John. D. Maziarz, who is-he's a recognized painter in-he lives in Adams, Massachusetts. He was-

DR. LARSEN: Can you spell that?

MR. PINETTE: Yup, John D. Maziarz, M-A-Z-I-A-R-Z. He was my junior high and high school art teacher at Mount Greylock [Regional High School, Williamstown, MA], and he was-I would say he was crucial, really crucial, in letting his students know the importance of this choice that you're making about, being an artist; that there was nothing frivolous or silly about it; that it was demanding and that at the same time it afforded you certain creative possibilities unavailable elsewhere. I mean, you are making something out of nothing and you are making something that is really deeply personal, and that it has-that the nature of art has all of this amazing power to provoke a viewer; that the logical conclusion to making it is to have others eyes see it. Plus, he was a very funny guy, on purpose. He was gruff, but very sensitive, very cool, very cool guy.

DR. LARSEN: Did he take you to museum and show you things, or did he leave that up to you?

MR. PINETTE: That was left up to us, we didn't really do field trips or anything like that, but he did have-and probably Williams College still has this painting. I remember it like it was yesterday, it was called: *Painting July Green, Green, Green*, and it was a big oil on canvas that Mr. Maziarz had done. I guess it was purchased by the Williams College Museum and it was just astounding to me to go see this painting, and I knew the painter.

DR. LARSEN: Wow.

MR. PINETTE: You know, and that-

DR. LARSEN: And he knew you, too.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah. And so the connection was real. And it all kind of made, you know, a logical sense. I know this man. He is my teacher. Here is his painting, and it's hanging here, and everyone's looking at it.

DR. LARSEN: And this is a place of honor.

MR. PINETTE: Yes. I remember thinking to myself, this must make Mr. Maziarz feel like his work is worth something, you know.

DR. LARSEN: Sure, sure it did. So from there, you went on to Morristown, right?

MR. PINETTE: Yes.

DR. LARSEN: And what did you find there?

MR. PINETTE: It was like total culture shock, going from Williamstown to Morristown. For one thing, it's the first time I was really around black people to any degree, which was-that was very cool. I made friends with almost the wrong crowd, you know, got into a little bit of trouble-not much. It was just a different kind of overwhelming experience to go from a high school that had 700 students from the seventh to the twelfth grade to, I think it was, 1400 in our graduating class alone. It was just huge culture shock, but there again I had a couple of pretty good art teachers. Well, no one holds a candle to John Maziarz. They were more like babysitters. It was kind of like at that point I already knew-I felt like I knew more than they did.

DR. LARSEN: But were they encouraging at least?

MR. PINETTE: Oh, yeah.

DR. LARSEN: What did you have there to do and look at?

MR. PINETTE: In Morristown?

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: There wasn't in great deal in Morristown, but then again, it was only 25 miles from New York and the Erie Lackawanna Railroad ran right through it. It was very easy to go into New York on weekends, which I did, you know. I would make a beeline to the Museum of Modern Art [New York, NY] or the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York, NY] or the Metropolitan [Museum of Art, New York, NY] or the Guggenheim [Museum of

Art, New York, NY] and then, you know, just bop around being, you know, a pseudo-hippie at the time-the late '60s-and then come home. It was great.

DR. LARSEN: Sounds good. Well, good. And-so, after that, I have from '69 to '73 you went to Hartford Art School in Hartford, Connecticut. Was that another family move that occasioned that or was it-

MR. PINETTE: No.

DR. LARSEN: -a choice that you made yourself?

MR. PINETTE: It was choice. I applied to three art schools and got into two of them, and so I decided to go over to Hartford Art School. One of my friends, a very fine painter named Peter Waite, had just been accepted the year before, and so I kind of-I was familiar with it a little bit maybe through him. I went and I looked at it and I liked it a lot, and I had some very good instructors there.

DR. LARSEN: And who were they? Do you remember?

MR. PINETTE: Rudolph [Franz] Zallinger, Michael Michalzk.

DR. LARSEN: Oh, you've got to spell that one if you can.

MR. PINETTE: I don't know if I can.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: I'll try. M-I-C-H-A-L-Z-I-K. I'm just taking a wild guess at that.

And Rudolph Zallinger was the-he's probably best known for the huge *Age of Dinosaurs* [properly the A*ge of Reptiles*, 1943-47], painting mural at Yale [University, New Haven, CT]. I think it's at the Peabody Museum at Yale. So he was kind of like the last-one of the last of the old formal art instructors where we patiently learned how to mix egg tempera and work up cartoons first before applying the egg tempera in this very methodical classical style, you know. He forced you to take your time working on a painting. It was not frenetic or anything. So that was a very good thing, and that sort of instructor has kind of like gone by the wayside.

DR. LARSEN: Did you rebel against it or?

MR. PINETTE: Not at all.

DR. LARSEN: No, you saw the good in that.

MR. PINETTE: Yes, absolutely.

DR. LARSEN: He must have loved you.

MR. PINETTE: He was very reserved, I don't know.

DR. LARSEN: No?

MR. PINETTE: He didn't express too much.

DR. LARSEN: But a patient student is a rare item.

MR. PINETTE: Well, he had such a commanding presence. He was so soft-spoken and so incredibly accomplished that you simply-you did not rebel. You were in the presence of a very masterful painter and a very good teacher, so if you had any brains about you, you would pay attention.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: And so-well, when I was at-when I was at the Hartford Art School, the four years that I was there, the school went through a really radical transformation from being a very classically based education to the introduction of lot of conceptual art. And it was a huge shift that happened.

DR. LARSEN: Sounds like it. Sounds like a total reversal.

MR. PINETTE: I mean, if I remember correctly, at one point it was announced that the Department of Painting will be abolished. And it was like, what? What is this? But there was a rebellion about that. The department of painting was in fact not abolished, but I think the easels got pretty dusty during that time.

DR. LARSEN: And who came into teach conceptual art? Anyone that you remember?

MR. PINETTE: I remember some visiting guest artists; Vito Acconci was there and-

DR. LARSEN: Was Sol LeWitt there?

MR. PINETTE: Oh, I think so. He's from the Hartford area.

DR. LARSEN: That's why I asked.

MR. PINETTE: I didn't-I wasn't really a part of this because I didn't pay any attention to it, but there was a certain conceptual art, anything-goes goofiness that started to take hold there, which to me seemed absolutely ridiculous. It seemed completely vacant, you know, just, "Ha, ha, let's have a party and call it art. Anything goes. If everything has meaning then nothing has meaning, and so what?" And it meant absolutely nothing to me.

DR. LARSEN: And what about your fellow students? Were they swept up in that?

MR. PINETTE: Some of them were. My graduating class in 1973, I think, was-it was a class that was, you know, trained in some really solid stuff. The classes two and three years coming up, you know, behind us were just-it seemed like it was just party city-you know, let's have an art party. So I didn't really know too many of those people. I couldn't understand what they were doing.

DR. LARSEN: Did you ever think of not staying or-

MR. PINETTE: No. I never thought of not staying because I like to finish what I start. It's to be expected, you know. So-

DR. LARSEN: Maybe also, it's a-being in art school gives you kind of a-gives you structure to do what you would probably want to do anyway. So, you know, once you're out of art school, then it's like, okay, now what?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah. It's time to make some money somehow.

DR. LARSEN: Well, and so, you came to that and there you were in Hartford, Connecticut, and what came next? That sort-that was sort of like the-I would think that would be like the big crunch, like okay, here I am, I'm an artist and what do I do with myself.

MR. PINETTE: What I did was, a few weeks after I graduated from art school, I packed up knapsack and went to Block Island, which is a little island off of Rhode Island coast and got a job stocking groceries in-at McNerney's seaside market and lived in a crawl space above a garage on Professor Park's property on Dory's Cove, and basically, was trying to figure out what I should do. I had-when I graduated from art school, I actually had an offer made to me, and I had to choose between either going to Block Island to roam around and do sketches and work in stocking dog food, or I could've been sent to learn technical printing. I think it was the Connecticut Offset Company-I had had a part-time job there during college, they liked me and said, we want to put you on a career track if you want to do this. We will teach you commercial printing, and you can spend the rest of your life here if you want. You know, we will pay for your further education, you can get a masters degree in printing technology. We will pay for all of that. And I thought, okay, they're actually offering me this.

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: It's either that or I'm going to go to Block Island. So, well, I went to Block Island.

DR. LARSEN: That was a-

MR. PINETTE: That's probably smart-smarter choice.

DR. LARSEN: Although what did your-what did your family say about the choice? Or did you share that with them or not?

MR. PINETTE: I did. I think that they were-well, I don't think they had much of an opinion about it much at all really. I didn't-I don't think that they were in any way disappointed-

DR. LARSEN: Boy, are you fortunate. That's very good.

MR. PINETTE: Although I did have some college loans that I had to pay back.

DR. LARSEN: And so, obviously, Block Island wasn't a long-term career. Was it just a summer thing?

MR. PINETTE: It was summer into fall.

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: And it was just enough time, you know, when it started to get cold, I realized I've got to do something. I don't know what to do. So I went back to Hartford, found a little room is this God awful little house pretty near downtown, and I answered an ad for a picture framer in a picture framing shop in West Hartford. I went and applied for the job, and because it was the only thing I could think of when I saw this ad and I hadn't-never had any desire to be an art teacher. And so they called me back and said, if you're still interested in the position, call us. So I did, I called them, and they said, are you experienced in picture framing? And I completely lied and said, well, yes, of course. So I was hired and basically had to learn it real quick.

DR. LARSEN: Real quick.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, which was-they were okay with that, you know.

DR. LARSEN: Did you have to-I mean, did they discover quite quickly you were less experienced than you said?

MR. PINETTE: I think so, but I was a very fast learner. What I liked about it was handling the materials, precision and logic, which is basically what-that's the foundation for successful picture framing, you know. It's a logical progression of events. It's not that difficult; it's just that you can't make any mistakes. So I picked it up really fast and was-and just kind of settled into it because I had to make the money, you know, in order to pay back these loans that were coming due.

DR. LARSEN: And also is something that isn't bad for you to know for yourself either.

MR. PINETTE: Oh, it's very good to know.

DR. LARSEN: Yes.

MR. PINETTE: Because in terms of exhibiting your work and presenting it, it's kind of-well, it's very obvious that it's a good thing.

DR. LARSEN: That you weren't doing something so far afield that the knowledge didn't help you.

MR. PINETTE: Right.

DR. LARSEN: And so, did that give you any time to paint?

MR. PINETTE: Oh yeah, I had plenty of time. I would make my time. I would work at night obviously, you know. When you're really young, it's actually quite easy to burn both ends of the candle. Work all day, paint all night, go to sleep for a little while, work all day, stay up paint all night in this endless kind of routine, which, you know, starts to-it can wear you down a little bit, but the same time you feel completely alive-I am a painter.

DR. LARSEN: Yes, yes.

MR. PINETTE: And-

DR. LARSEN: And you're also-

MR. PINETTE: -this is how it's done.

DR. LARSEN: -you're also a person and self-supporting, and you know, you're making life choices, and that's extremely stimulating, isn't it?

MR. PINETTE: Oh, very.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah. So there you are in Hartford, Connecticut-how long were you there?

MR. PINETTE: Well, I guess that would be from the end of 1973 or beginning of '74, something like that, until maybe 1980.

DR. LARSEN: Okay. Now, did you have a time in New York City?

MR. PINETTE: No.

DR. LARSEN: You didn't? Now, there's a mistake in the literature.

MR. PINETTE: Yes, there is.

DR. LARSEN: Yes.

MR. PINETTE: And that was-I think you may be referring to something that was written in the *New York Times* article.

DR. LARSEN: Yes.

MR. PINETTE: I don't know how that got through or-what happened was I was-the person who wrote the article, Deborah Weisgall, called and asked me if I'd like to see the proof of it before it was printed. And I said, no, I don't need to, surprise me. And so when that came out in print, I thought, what?

DR. LARSEN: Where did she get that?

MR. PINETTE: I don't know.

DR. LARSEN: No?

MR. PINETTE: It was possibly some kind of-

DR. LARSEN: Misunderstanding, maybe.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, yeah. That's all I can think of because I in fact never had lived in New York City, you know. I'd been there many, many times and-

DR. LARSEN: Sure.

MR. PINETTE: -but that's not the same as, you know, having a residence there.

DR. LARSEN: No, no, or being involved in the New York scene on a day-to-day-

MR. PINETTE: Exactly.

DR. LARSEN: -you know, peer-to-peer kind of a-kind of a basis. Okay. So you-that's why we do these interviews, is to get information that we didn't even realize we were looking for, but if it doesn't jibe with the printed record then-

MR. PINETTE: Got it.

DR. LARSEN: -it's very important. Okay.

MR. PINETTE: So, this is a true discovery here.

DR. LARSEN: So, there you were in Hartford, and you stayed until-

MR. PINETTE: I think around 1980.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: And I got married in between in 1975.

DR. LARSEN: Okay. Now, was that to Megan?

MR. PINETTE: Yes.

DR. LARSEN: Okay. And what was Megan's maiden name?

MR. PINETTE: Smith.

DR. LARSEN: Megan Smith. Okay. We know her now as Megan Pinette. And so how did you meet Megan?

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. PINETTE: -was actually the drummer. He had his drums set up right there. And we decided to hire a model once a week, you know, for a model life drawing session and we let it be known-word of mouth-that anybody who wanted to come draw the model, could come. Everybody chipped in 50 cents and out of that we paid the model. And so Megan showed up one evening-

DR. LARSEN: As a model or painter?

MR. PINETTE: As an artist to draw.

DR. LARSEN: As artist.

MR. PINETTE: So that's when we kind of officially met, although Megan went to the Hartford Art School as well. She was one year behind me. She doesn't remember this, but I do. I tried to strike up a conversation with her once at the Hartford Art School in the printmaking room and she completely ignored me. And so I guess I wasn't too aggressive about it. I just kind of let it go and said, okay, fine. So here we were a few years later, she shows up. She shows up at this life drawing session and it was like, it's her.

DR. LARSEN: Isn't that nice.

MR. PINETTE: It's her again.

DR. LARSEN: Isn't that great.

MR. PINETTE: And so this time I just kind of like in a more considered kind of way struck up conversation.

DR. LARSEN: Not to be ignored this time.

MR. PINETTE: I invited her out on a date and we went out on a date in my old truck. We went swimming and for this she had made a Quiche Lorraine, which astounded me. You know, I thought, this is very cool.

DR. LARSEN: Yes, a woman who cooks.

MR. PINETTE: So it was kind of wonderful. The date concluded with us on the roof of the building where my studio was arranging cast-off heating ductwork in the form of sculptures. And we did this for hours and thought this was just really great. It was our idea of a really good time.

DR. LARSEN: So was she being an artist as well? She was trying to be self-supporting as an artist?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Okay. And were you doing the picture framing all this time?

MR. PINETTE: I was working for the shop in West Hartford, yeah. Soon after, Megan and I got married. Now, let me see, it would've been maybe three or four years-two or three years after that. We decided that-this, what I'm about to describe, is a very funny phase in our life-talk about the yin, yang of things. But we decided that the only way to have a really flexible time for art was to be self-employed. So we dreamed up this business where we would make these easel-back picture frames in standard photographic sizes and then distribute them either through organized consignment or through sales reps, you know, big umbrella group sales rep houses. So we developed this thing. We just-we worked and worked and worked at it and it started to work. We were actually making a living from it, but the nature of small business is that it wants to grow, and so it started growing. And we're thinking, well, you know, kind of like, we're thinking, well, be careful what you dream of, it might come true.

So it started to consume all of our time and we're thinking, well, the reason we dreamt this up was to have all kinds of time because, of course, when you're self-employed you have nothing but time on your hands. I mean, this is totally naïve and idealistic, but the reality of-

DR. LARSEN: You're in control of your time anyway, yeah.

MR. PINETTE: Right.

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: And so the money started coming in from this venture, but we didn't have enough time. And so we had to make a very critical choice and that was to downsize it and walk away from it or just forget about everything and just go in the pursuit of money. And so the pursuit of money was-I mean, we already knew the answer. It was unacceptable. And so we just kind of let it drift away. We deliberately did not grow that business, although we could've.

DR. LARSEN: How long did that-how much time did that take?

MR. PINETTE: Probably a good 10 years.

DR. LARSEN: Wow, goodness gracious.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah. I mean, I was painting all along and everything, but it was just getting to be-I was losing focus and-

DR. LARSEN: But you would get an order and someone would see it and someone else would order, and that would just go on and on and on?

MR. PINETTE: We developed scores and scores and scores of individual accounts and we had sales reps, and it was just getting to be out of control. I felt like I was drowning.

DR. LARSEN: And could you sell the business to someone else?

MR. PINETTE: There wouldn't have been really anything to sell.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: Essentially, we'd be selling some equipment and a list of accounts, you know.

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: Not enough-so, we never really considered that. So what was happening simultaneous with that was that as a painter I was becoming more and more abstract and I was into this journey, which started to feel delusional to me. Because as an abstract painter, if you're working with something that is so uniquely codified that if you are-if you don't believe in your own codes, your own abstract logic-if you start to feel like it's completely phony, then you have to assume that your work will look that way and no one will believe your work. So I ended up like totally not believing my work.

DR. LARSEN: Wow.

MR. PINETTE: I could see it. It wasn't-you know, I couldn't make excuses for it even within myself. So I started to-I just kind of freaked out about it.

DR. LARSEN: I would think so.

MR. PINETTE: And walked away from it and said, I'm not going paint for a year at least. Just pack it up, put it away and settle up, and a sense of logic and self-trust will come back. I know it will, and it in fact did. And so that-it was kind of a wrenching thing, you know.

DR. LARSEN: I would think so.

MR. PINETTE: It was little bit of kind of confusing, but there was nowhere to-no way out of it other than to just jump out of it and leave it alone instead of being in this quagmire of this system of doing meaningless paintings. You see what I'm saying?

DR. LARSEN: Yes, I do. I do understand. So this was in the '80s?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Okay. And you were still in Hartford?

MR. PINETTE: No, by then we had moved to Westerly, Rhode Island, which is where the business and the delusional painting was-was all hitting like this big intersection, like two glaciers coming together. Something had to give, so it was at that point that Megan and I decided that we were either going to move to New York City or we were going to move to Maine, and so we drove up to Maine under the pretense of going canoeing, which in fact we did, and while we were up here-

DR. LARSEN: When was this?

MR. PINETTE: It would've been in 1983.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: It would be the summer of 1983. We came up and looked around and we had a very idealistic set of requirements for purchasing property. I mean, just ludicrous. It had to be extremely cheap, no bank points, architecturally beautiful, had to be near the ocean, private. Let's see, what else? What else can we throw in there? And so we found it here.

DR. LARSEN: And spacious?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: You found this house, this place?

MR. PINETTE: This place, yeah. There was no asking price. They just said, make an offer. If we don't sell, we're going to bulldoze it.

DR. LARSEN: You're kidding?

MR. PINETTE: I'm not kidding. And so we made this ridiculous offer and they kind of smirked and thought they'll never take this but of course they did. And so we looked at each other and said, oh, my God, what have we done? Well, I think this is a good thing. And so suddenly we had a focus that was something like a new beginning and something that was going to be built on clarity and just a new place, a new state of being, which is basically why we moved here.

DR. LARSEN: And ironically, too, here you are in a place you were born even though you had very few strings here.

MR. PINETTE: And oh, it was just such a funny circumstance. It's a delightful circumstance, by the way. It was just one of those odd little things. I don't know. I don't know how much karma has to do with it.

DR. LARSEN: Did you come to Belfast to look especially or was it just that you wandered around and saw something here or-

MR. PINETTE: We wandered around and we looked at a few properties, not a lot, and rejected them immediately, until we found this place, and it hit us like a ton of bricks that it's perfect.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: Complete with its 55 broken windows and the trash and the junk cars that were here, and all the rest of it, you know, but that's what they say about location. And -

DR. LARSEN: Also, you weren't afraid of the work to set it right.

MR. PINETTE: Oh, not at all.

DR. LARSEN: And some people would be. Anybody who would move around the ducting on the roof wouldn't see the old cars as too much of a deal.

MR. PINETTE: Right.

DR. LARSEN: So that's-how interesting.

MR. PINETTE: Fortunately, back then junk cars in Maine were desirable. I mean, you just call someone up and they'd actually pay you to take it away.

DR. LARSEN: Is that so?

MR. PINETTE: We thought so; in fact, that was wonderful.

DR. LARSEN: Yes.

MR. PINETTE: Now you have to pay to have it removed.

DR. LARSEN: Right. People were driving old cars and needed the parts. Now they don't drive old cars.

What was Belfast like in '83?

MR. PINETTE: Rough, down at the heels. Really, the chicken industry was on its last legs, the housing stock was decrepit. There were no boats in the bay-in the harbor other than a few commercial boats. It stunk.

DR. LARSEN: From what? The fish?

MR. PINETTE: Chicken, awful.

DR. LARSEN: Now tell me about-what was the chicken industry?

MR. PINETTE: Chicken processing plants that were in Belfast. It was the broiler capital of Maine-or broiler capital

of the world.

DR. LARSEN: Really?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, it was-the chicken processing industry in Belfast was absolutely immense, just huge and-

DR. LARSEN: Like it is in the South now?

MR. PINETTE: Yes.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: The South basically took it over. No one could compete with Frank Perdue. So really by 1988, I think it was '88-'89, the last chicken plant closed, hundreds of people were put out of work and Belfast, Maine, had absolutely nowhere to go but up. It just couldn't go any further down, which is kind of one of the reasons why this general area and Belfast included-it became such an attractive magnet for artists and self-motivated creative people. There was just this vacuum that had to be filled. You had, just by necessity, people looking for property at a very low price, which is what artists are always digging and looking for, and here it was: this entire city being given away.

DR. LARSEN: Unfashionable areas.

MR. PINETTE: People just came right in.

DR. LARSEN: And who came? If you can remember, who else came?

MR. PINETTE: Well, let's see, Stewart Henderson and Dudley Zopp, Richard Norton, who is since deceased. He was our dear friend.

DR. LARSEN: Great.

MR. PINETTE: You know, there was a whole wave before that, of course, Neil Welliver and Alex Katz and Yvonne Jacquette and there was Matthew O'Donnell, Scott Moore, Stefan Pastuhon; Linden Frederick is here and there's kind of a-there's a pretty long list. There are a lot of musicians here too. There were a lot of back-to-landers-back-to-the-land types from the late '70s.

DR. LARSEN: That's why your wonderful co-op feels so crunchy.

MR. PINETTE: Oh, yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: It's a direct offshoot-

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: -from that time.

DR. LARSEN: So your choice to come here-did you realize that it was all going around-going to go around you or were you doing this pretty independently?

MR. PINETTE: I was doing it independently. In fact, no one could've predicted really what-what Belfast was to become, you know, within a few years, just kind of upscale, and I hate the word gentrified. I just bristle at that word because, I mean, look at me, I am not a gentry and I am not surrounded by gentry.

DR. LARSEN: And you don't aspire to be gentry or anything?

MR. PINETTE: Not at all.

DR. LARSEN: Although there is gentry around here, that's for sure.

MR. PINETTE: There can be, I suppose, but what you have really is a lot of pull it up by the bootstraps kind of people who took beautiful but decrepit housing stock and turned it around; you know, making a stand. You know, not a lot of wealthy artists moving in to this area, it wasn't like that.

DR. LARSEN: No. And then there was Artfellows, when did Artfellows start?

MR. PINETTE: Artfellows started around 1980, and its truly glorious years were from 1980 to about 1986-87. It

was-Edgar Allen Beam called it the sweatshop, the experimental art sweatshop, and he was pretty accurate about that.

DR. LARSEN: Great praise.

MR. PINETTE: So it was a great deal of camaraderie there.

DR. LARSEN: And it was a-it was a co-op on Main Street?

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DR. LARSEN: Yep, and it was-everybody sat the gallery for a certain number of hours or-

MR. PINETTE: Basically, yes. You know, like any kind of co-op, it all comes down to two or three people who actually do all the work, and take out the trash, do the promotion and everything.

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: And so, by around 1987-88 the original members had all kind of gone on to other things, and so Artfellows devolved into a mere shadow of itself.

DR. LARSEN: Was it successful?

MR. PINETTE: It was successful in terms of being like a place where there was a lot of camaraderie and support between artists and certain members of the community who admired what was going on, yes, it was. Financially, it was just on a shoestring. But yeah, in terms of being a springboard for some people, it was very successful. I think that was the whole idea behind it.

DR. LARSEN: That's usually the success analysis for one of those-did it lead some people elsewhere?

MR. PINETTE: Uh-huh, it very much did. I mean, it attracted the attention of, well, say somebody like Bruce Brown was very familiar with Artfellows right from the get-go.

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: And he was at the time a fledgling collector, not at all the Bruce Brown that we know now.

DR. LARSEN: He was the curator at the Maine, the CMCA-Center for Maine Contemporary Art.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah. I mean, he would come around and we would-there would be this buzz, you know, that would be like a game of telephone; Bruce Brown is here, really. Who is he? He is this heavyweight from Portland, and he was at Artfellows. And you know, it was extremely exciting to us.

DR. LARSEN: He was a-he is a wonderful, earnest schoolteacher who collected art on a shoestring.

MR. PINETTE: Exactly.

DR. LARSEN: And created a level of expertise that few people have about-that no one else has, as far as I know-about art in Maine.

MR. PINETTE: That's absolutely right. Bruce is this-I can't think of anyone who is like Bruce.

DR. LARSEN: No, no.

MR. PINETTE: He is standalone, unique.

DR. LARSEN: No, no one would be as indefatigable, as perennially optimistic in searching, as devoted, as patient, as fascinated, and as humble about it. I mean, he's just a great guy, you know.

Well, maybe we'll stop there and we'll pick up next time, and then we talk about your work.

MR. PINETTE: Okay.

DR. LARSEN: Kind of talked a lot about your life and we'll focus the next time on your work.

MR. PINETTE: Okay.

DR. LARSEN: Okay, all right.

[Audio break.]

DR. LARSEN: It's September 1, 2005, and I'm here with Mr. Dennis Pinette in Belfast, Maine, and this is the second of our two interview sessions for the Archives of American Art. And it's a lovely sunny day and it's nice to be here with you, Dennis.

MR. PINETTE: It's good to be here with you too, Susan.

DR. LARSEN: Okay. And oh, by the way, I am Susan Larsen. I'm doing this interview.

So last we spoke, we talked about your career as-your student career and then the early stages of your professional career and your time as a framer and the business that you had, and we had arrived at the point in 1983 when you moved to Belfast, Maine-

MR. PINETTE: Right.

DR. LARSEN: -with your wife, Megan. And you bought this house that we're in a very nice house by the sea. And we also talked about Artfellows and something about your community of artists here at the time in the '80s. And when you came to-when you came back to Maine and you set your life up, you really were making, it seems from what you told me, quite a big change?

MR. PINETTE: Huge; it was a wholesale shift. Well, let's see, it was big because we had moved from a far more urban area to this part of the world. It was just, yeah, very big and very different on a lot of different levels.

DR. LARSEN: What did you envision as a life support system here in Belfast and how did it work out?

MR. PINETTE: I figured, well, as usual, I would make it up as we went or we'd make it up as we went along with, you know, just the absolute faith that something would happen, you know, because both Megan and I have various skills at different things. So I was never really worried about making a living or paying the bills. I believe that that just naturally happens if you put some effort into it.

DR. LARSEN: And did you start immediately organizing the studio and setting into painting or did you-

MR. PINETTE: No, I had to work on this place. It was a wreck. It was extremely demanding and it took me-oh, it took at least a year of just really focused effort on getting the place secured and like I'd mentioned earlier, I was coming hot off a-this time of, kind of, well, I was just wallowing in delusion about my work. I couldn't paint. I just couldn't paint anymore. And so it was kind of perfect in a way in moving here and dealing with the physical plant that this place is, that was the first and foremost thing I had to address and it just so happened that it was a great way for me to walk away from my painting. I had a replacement, in other words.

DR. LARSEN: Did it purge some of the anxiety that you had been feeling about what you were doing?

MR. PINETTE: It did. It was like letting a wound bleed and then you're just letting it, allowing it-allowing time to heal it. And when I was ready to start working again, I just kind of did an about-face and addressed realism, which is kind of-I think I always sort of knew that that's what I was going to come back to.

DR. LARSEN: And you had been-what kind of abstraction had you been doing? Can you describe it? I have never seen any of the work from that time.

MR. PINETTE: There's a barn full of it-one of the other barns. They were kind of-they were topographical paintings, where I was kind of like creating imaginary landforms and landmasses. That was like science fiction aerial paintings. They were very abstract and they barely alluded to recognizable landmasses and islands and things like that. And-

DR. LARSEN: Were they thickly painted? Thinly painted?

MR. PINETTE: They were very thickly painted. I made my own paint. I made this, well, it was kind of goop made from sawdust and pigment, Elmer's glue which was the binder. So I could just make buckets of this stuff and kind of sculpt it. It was nice and I would use acrylic paint as well. It was kind of a paint alchemy that I was working-

DR. LARSEN: And did you show that work at all?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, I did.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: Way, way back I had a show of those paintings at the Westerly Art Center-Westerly Center for the

Arts in Westerly, Rhode Island. It was just a small show, but it was very exciting to me at the time. But the further I got into that abstract work, as I said before, for some reason it just didn't make any sense to me at all, and I realized that most of this work that I've been doing, that I've been spending years on was something horrible.

DR. LARSEN: Well, you know, it's-I once spoke to Richard Diebenkorn about that different shifts in his career path, because he started out doing representational work with a kind of expressionist quality and then he moved toward virtual abstraction, still with some references to nature. And then one day, he said that he found working purely as an abstract artist was limiting because all the things he experienced in daily life were off limits and those things were meaningful and vital, and yet he feared to let them back into his paintings.

And then one time in sort of late 1960s he just said, well, okay, I'm going to do that and we'll see what happens, and he began doing still lives [sic]. And then all that very beautiful semi-representational painting that he did in San Francisco and LA suddenly happened. But I found that very interesting, you know, that how you miss life and the activities of life that really are part of your life, in your art, if you're not able to use that part of your experience. How did you find that move to representation? Was it realism or representation?

MR. PINETTE: I'd like to think of it as kind of like, you know, illuminated realism, but I've got to say, the way you just expressed that process, what happened to Diebenkorn-you expressed that really well. It's very accurate.

DR. LARSEN: Oh, that's him. What was it that you were experiencing that you wanted to put into the paintings?

MR. PINETTE: I think I started looking at objects, things, industrial things and particularly things like bridges and old brick, New England buildings, and they just seemed so iconographic to me that they resonated and spoke of some kind of noble, but hardscrabble life. So I started painting bridges, actually-highway bridges and they-

DR. LARSEN: From above, from below, from a car, from where?

MR. PINETTE: From below, from ground level. And it occurred to me that to take an object such as one would paint almost a still life, in this case a bridge, was my armature-my excuse for creating something politically provocative, and this I just could not do with abstract painting. There was nothing there, literally, to look at. There was nothing-first and foremost with my abstract work. There was nothing there to understand. With realism, there is immediately something there to understand and to-for the viewer to interpret.

So, in other words, maybe a better way to put it is to say that with realism, at least the way I try to handle it, the viewer comes to the picture from an immediate point of view where they can walk into the picture. They own it right away, and then they could walk around in the painting. So with realism there is a point-the point of beginning, that the beginning point of the image is based on some kind of solid logic. Not to say that it's a simple, that it's-that I'm rendering an image simple. This is very-it's difficult to express this.

DR. LARSEN: Well, when the viewer enters that point and feels somewhat confident or comfortable, it seems to me looking at your paintings that they soon realize that it's not as comfortable as they thought, nor is it what they normally experience with that scene or that object. You've added another dimension there and it's like they almost walk into a room and thought they'd have maybe one kind of experience and suddenly the experience changes.

MR. PINETTE: That's about right.

DR. LARSEN: I mean, there's a certain kind of animated, almost-it's not exactly purely dark-but it's somewhat shot through with a certain kind of uncertainty maybe or anxiety that's not entirely comfortable sometimes.

MR. PINETTE: Well, that's a very desirable element. Some people call my work spooky, but that's okay because spooky things are humorous. And so there's a certain element of uncanny humor, I hope, in my work.

DR. LARSEN: I was interested in-there is a particular painting in this catalogue. I don't know if I can find it. It was done in 1988, *The Transformers*.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm.

DR. LARSEN: Which-

MR. PINETTE: Substation.

DR. LARSEN: Or substation, okay. It had almost a little Gustonish [similar to the artist Philip Guston] quality, stylistically were you-am I seeing something that was just coincidence or what were you thinking about?

MR. PINETTE: Probably more coincidence than influence.

DR. LARSEN: Because that didn't seem to last but for a minute; you know, that particular way of working.

MR. PINETTE: Oh, on my part you mean?

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: I was working in that vein for several years. I mean, it was-I think my work has gotten a little more refined-I don't know if that's a good thing or not-from where that painting was. There were many in that series. There were a lot of paintings.

DR. LARSEN: Because that one did seem somewhat humorous. That one did seem to have a-almost as though that things were animated and dancing around and having a psychological life that you wouldn't assume they would have.

MR. PINETTE: They did-exactly. There were two transformers in that painting that kind of sit, or stand, side by side like a funny, sturdy old couple. I think maybe that was intentional, yeah.

DR. LARSEN: And the colors are very vivid or they're kind of jazzy and juicy colors.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, it's fairly brash. I mean, it's a fun painting.

DR. LARSEN: That's I think why it stands out, you know, because the-it didn't seem as brooding-but there is a sort of brooding quality about it too, as if you've walked in on a party that they maybe didn't want you to see; that you wouldn't ordinarily assume would be happening.

MR. PINETTE: That's a good description. That's very funny.

DR. LARSEN: I had never seen-

[Audio break.]

-that painting, in particular, in person, but I liked it and thought was interesting in the book, but so what were your wanderings at that time? Where did you go to find suitable starting point subjects?

MR. PINETTE: The Maine Yankee Nuclear Power Plant in Wiscasset was a fabulous-well, was a fabulous place. They tore it down, but I did a lot of work down there. I actually had a friend who was a public relations director there, I guess, you'd call her. So with her, I was able to just walk around the perimeter of the whole place and I took some photographs, I did some sketches and brought that work back here and extrapolated some big funny drawings. I mean, I don't mean "ha-ha" funny-

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm, peculiar?

MR. PINETTE: -but very agitated, smokestack paintings and that was when I was starting to put together, kind of compose or choreograph spotlights, wires, smokestacks and smoke and chimneys and brick walls, all kind of together in this theatrical sort of way.

DR. LARSEN: What was it like hanging around Maine Yankee, which I think some of us would drive by as quickly as possible and hope we don't glow in the dark?

MR. PINETTE: Oh, it was-visually, it was very exciting, you know. We have all of these great forms and just endless geometries intersecting, you know, with the high tension lines and the whole-it was just the whole array of transformers and whatever all that stuff is, you know, support buildings. And then, of course, the big dome, the containment building-it just exudes sinister possibilities. And it was just kind of irresistible just as form, to look at.

DR. LARSEN: Did you have a sociological agenda in part, in that subject?

MR. PINETTE: Not at all, no, no. I've been accused of making statements about pollution in my work, but that is absolutely not my interest at all. I mean, if I was an activist, I wouldn't be a painter, I'd be an activist, but I'm a visual poet, first and foremost, or first and last.

DR. LARSEN: But a lot of the people around you have those concerns and you could see how they might bring their own reading to the subject matter?

MR. PINETTE: Oh, sure, I totally understand that. Well, I just-I find industrial things just extremely exciting to look at. It's so visceral and just very, very beautiful.

DR. LARSEN: Belfast was going through some changes in its harbor and industrial infrastructure too at that time, wasn't it?

MR. PINETTE: Yes, it was. It was a very gritty place and really down at the heels, really crummy, just sagging under the weight of used up industry, just crumbling into the ground.

DR. LARSEN: And through the 1980s though, it reversed itself, didn't it, to some degree?

MR. PINETTE: Well, when the chicken plants moved south-when that happened, the place was just-they had nowhere to go, but up.

DR. LARSEN: Uh-huh. There was a cannery, wasn't there a cannery? I saw a documentary-

MR. PINETTE: Sardine plant.

DR. LARSEN: Okay, uh-huh.

MR. PINETTE: There was at least one, maybe way in years passed, there were more than one-there was more than one sardine cannery, but there was-until fairly recently, there was one very large one. And I think there's only one sardine cannery left in America.

DR. LARSEN: Uh-huh. And what did Belfast become?

MR. PINETTE: It became a quirky magnet for creative people, which of course attracts people, with a lot more wherewithal, who like to be around quirky creative people and they move in, and it's a two-edged sword. The beautiful, old, falling-apart houses get fixed up, and now it's all very beautiful, and now it's all very expensive. It's a typical story: the artists move in, the place becomes glamorous, if you will, and that attracts people who have money who want to be around that. The difference with Belfast is that you have so many people here who actually own their own homes, so they can't be pushed out.

DR. LARSEN: Isn't that great?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, it is. I mean, it's-

DR. LARSEN: It's not like New York with the lofts where you're part of a group or your, you know, landlord owns the building or-

MR. PINETTE: Exactly.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah. So, that old generation pretty much has stuck, haven't they?

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm.

DR. LARSEN: Quite a lot, which is-

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: -which is good. You know, a lot of the Artfellows people are still here.

MR. PINETTE: They are.

DR. LARSEN: So how were your industrially based paintings received?

MR. PINETTE: They were received pretty well. I could tell that people were responding to them, that people were excited by what they were looking at, which in turn, very frankly, excited me, to have that kind of response. And I realized that I was on a track now of being able to provoke a response in the viewer and I want that response to be kind of shrouded in mystery.

An artist that I like very much who was an influence is Charles Burchfield. I think of him as an illuminist/realist. His work is based in realism, obviously, but it so far beyond a picture of a house. What he is really saying-what he is really asking you to think about-is what goes on in this house and why is it so delightfully weird to look at his pictures. Anyway, Charles Burchfield is a great influence on me.

DR. LARSEN: He also painted-especially during the Depression-he painted fading towns and old houses that had several generations, and were kind of incongruous in terms of who lived there now. He even gave-windows looked like eyes.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: That there is a sense of something inhabiting that house beyond the people. And he had quite an interesting philosophy. I think he was a transcendentalist of sorts.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Where did you just pick up-did you see Burchfield early on?

MR. PINETTE: Oh, yeah. I was aware of him real early. Always liked him.

DR. LARSEN: What about-

MR. PINETTE: I was always attracted to his work.

DR. LARSEN: What about [Edward] Hopper?

MR. PINETTE: Oh, he was another one. Another good influence; Hopper and [Charles] Burchfield and [Charles] Sheeler, and even some of the Ashcan School-painters like John Sloan, [William] Glackens; to me they represent a really peculiar American muscular way of looking at things, taking domestic places and domestic motifs, and not saying anything overtly elegant about them. I guess that's the genius of painting is to be able to-at least in realism-is to very-just very naturally provoke a story.

DR. LARSEN: They seemed kind of quietly subversive too-those artists.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: You know, they-if you investigate their lives, you realize that many of them had a lot of troubled feelings about some of the things they saw in society, but they weren't telling an overt story. I mean, the provocative qualities are right underneath the surface, but you feel them.

MR. PINETTE: Yes.

DR. LARSEN: You look at their paintings and you-the longer you look and the more you think, the sooner you're going to find that other substrata that's disquieting.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. PINETTE: A good painting, to me, carries that quality. A bad painting is one that is narcissistic: the painting can't get out of its own way; the painting has nothing to say. A bad painting is a painting that has nothing to say beyond what you are looking at-what you are told to see in the painting.

DR. LARSEN: Do you-do you sometimes make a painting and-and find it wanting in that dimension?

MR. PINETTE: Oh, sure. I mean, sometimes we are not the best editors of our own work. I mean more than once I have done a painting and have thought, well, this is a really mediocre painting. I just can't-I can't get the thing going here. I'll set it aside and someone else will see the painting and say, wow, this is a fantastic painting, and I don't know what they're talking about.

In fact, it kind of bothered me-at one point I sold the painting through a dealer and I thought the painting-I didn't say anything-I probably shouldn't have said anything, but I thought painting was really weak. And he sold the painting immediately and said, Dennis, if the world worked like this-if you had ten more of these, they would all be sold. And I thought, what are you talking about? The painting is just nothing. So I don't always fully understand that.

DR. LARSEN: Do you sometimes come around to see what the others are seeing?

MR. PINETTE: Not necessarily, because I don't-you can never really know totally what somebody else is seeing in your painting.

DR. LARSEN: And also, you are the artist and you're in charge. I think a good artist always is in charge of how they see their own work. They are not going to be knocked off of what they think about what they are doing by what someone else tells them they are doing.

MR. PINETTE: I think you are right about that. You can't fake it, yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Otherwise, you've lost your way and you are just looking for stop and go lights from other people.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, exactly. If you were susceptible to influences like that, not to say that an artist isn't influenced, you do have influences that come from the strangest places, but if you were-if you were just doing

paintings that you thought were what somebody else wanted, that's a very warped point of view to come from in the first place and in the second place your painting will look horrible. It will be dishonest, and it will say nothing.

And you will know it too yourself, and then you'll fall apart.

DR. LARSEN: And that's not to be wished. So you were finding a lot of subjects around in the relatively immediate area within a hundred miles or so?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah-yeah.

DR. LARSEN: You were kind of sticking to semi-developed areas at that time, towns and-

MR. PINETTE: Paper mills, railroad sidings, tank farms.

DR. LARSEN: Boy, you hit the glamorous spots.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, oh, they're great places. I mean, they're just visually-I like them very much because I can do something about them.

So what happened was I had-from time to time we have epiphanies-and so I had one one day in the-when was it? In the early 1990s. I started to focus more on landscape, as opposed to landscape being a theatrical setting for my industrial work. I started to almost like remove the industrial things and just allow this empty stage to be there-this is when I started doing paintings of fields. I was literally walking in a field one day and it just struck me like a ton of bricks, I just looked down at the grass. It was kind of windy and it was just blowing in this perfect symmetry and I thought, well, this is the most simple geometry I could possibly imagine-these blades of grass-but how I am going paint them? I really want to paint this. I want to remove everything else and just create a bare stage for-once again-to provoke imagination. So I started painting fields, which in some cases just turned into endless plains of disappearing space.

DR. LARSEN: Were they mowed fields or-

MR. PINETTE: No.

DR. LARSEN: No.

MR. PINETTE: They were not manicured or mowed or anything. Well, in some cases they would be bush-hogged fields, so there might be a pattern in the grass and stuff, which of course is a good excuse for creating spiraling shadows; almost like painting a maze-suggestive of a maze. And I've got to say when we talk about influences, the painter Agnes Martin is someone who has always intrigued me mostly because I simply couldn't understand her work, but I desperately wanted to, because I really liked her work; it was just the weirdest thing. And as I started painting these fields and reducing them to like total bare simplicity, I started to have an understanding of Agnes Martin's work about how it is just organized contemplation-a very extremely internalized contemplation. And so this felt very good to me, to finally, at least, think that I understood her work.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm, and she chose to live in the country as well.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: To use nature as-it's not overtly there, but it's there.

MR. PINETTE: It's-oh, it's just-her work is, I think, a very peculiar code, but it makes complete and total sense.

DR. LARSEN: I always feel very transcendent around her work. I feel-

MR. PINETTE: Good word.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah, I just feel lighter than air and very happy and yet it's not about something. It's just happy. It's not, you know, laughing, chuckling. It's just a joyous feeling and it's not about any particular thing-just being there with the work is joyful.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm. There is another painting-speaking of things like that-there's a Jackson Pollock painting that does about the same thing for me, and that painting is *Lavender Mist* [1950]. It's an incredible painting. It's just-it's a silent-it's just an overwhelmingly silent, quiet painting, and yet it is so-it's just so completely loaded with marks.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: But they are of a consistency that-well, I just think that it's that painting is very much like an Agnes Martin painting.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. And in the flow of ideas in painting in the 20th century, they are relatives. They are. They are different, but they're related. Interesting.

I wanted to ask you about the landscape and we both live here in Maine, and the landscape because I am a clumsy walker; I am born and bred on the city streets. I find the Maine landscape like, you know, walking through a thicket: it's messy and it's gnarly and it threatens to trip you up-and that, at first, seemed rather annoying, and yet through artists I've-I think occasionally some of the Neil Welliver paintings that are so overwhelming and some of yours that-and just life, that there is something here that artists are feeding off of.

MR. PINETTE: It's a hard thing to pin down, but the landscape here is unique. It's just so varied. It's an amazing varied landscape. Parts of northern Maine almost look like the Midwest because they are so flat and expansive and huge. You can see entire wet weather systems encapsulated on the horizon. It's a funny, mysterious kind of pull. Being a landscape painter in Maine is pretty tricky-very tricky territory because it's so trodden and it's eternally irresistible, so you have to bring your own sense of the unique and your own sense of discovery to it, and then dare to paint it.

DR. LARSEN: Your field paintings are so-I mean, they are-when you think of say someone like Fairfield Porter-you know, they are like a whole other view of this place. You know, you are not looking at the Lawrence going down to the sea, but everything else but.

MR. PINETTE: Right, I am not looking for it, and I wouldn't really know how to, inject a certain domestic gentility into my work. I would be afraid-I would be terrified of trying to do that. I couldn't pull it off and it's mostly because it's of no interest to me whatsoever. And I had a hard enough time painting a blue sky because it can be just terrifying because of its automatic association to something calm.

DR. LARSEN: So maybe there is a link between the landscape paintings and the industrial paintings?

MR. PINETTE: I think very much so.

DR. LARSEN: There is a state of feeling that it is consistent between the two bodies of work. People have written and been fascinated by-as you were painting the field paintings and they were well received. I believe they-people really liked them. Then all of a sudden they have seen little streaks of fire in the fields. How did that come about?

MR. PINETTE: Well that was in deep fun, almost like a child with a book of matches. I just started painting-I just started introducing this new element, subversive I suppose, into the field paintings and pretty soon they were-I was just painting full scale conflagrations. The fire paintings are-the fire paintings are probably the most abstract work I have done, and I am comfortable with it now because I know that I am painting-I am holding onto, in my mind, a very real element. I am not making it up. Fire is real. Fire is hypnotic and it's there, but it totally defies physical form. Visually, you can make physical form out of fire and I can handle an attitude toward abstraction now that I couldn't handle previously way back then, because I have a deeper sense of what makes sense to me.

DR. LARSEN: Those were very beautiful paintings, very intense.

MR. PINETTE: Thank you.

DR. LARSEN: Your-the admiration of a painting like *Lavender Mist* makes complete sense when you look at your fire paintings. Technically what was the challenge there, in terms of how the paint was built?

MR. PINETTE: In the fire paintings?

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. PINETTE: Well, the challenge was to interweave. I don't know if this answers the question the right-I don't know if I can answer it, but the challenge was to interweave fire with that which the fire is consuming and in this case these were-these are paintings of field fires, forest fires, and just micro close-ups of-of flames burning something, so I guess the challenge was to logically pull off a painting of something that's-a painting that is abstract, but it's about something completely totally real. So I guess the real challenge was to make it believable-make it believable without making it illustrative. Imagine a painting of air, a painting of nothingness? Now, that's possible. It would be a stretch, but you would have to come to it with a sense of believing what you are looking at. So with the fire paintings, it's more than just painting air or vapor or nothingness; it's actually-what you're painting is heat and your painting is nothing, and that is just totally elusive.

DR. LARSEN: And it's-

MR. PINETTE: -but instantly understandable, so I guess that was the challenge, we tried to pull off all of that.

DR. LARSEN: Well, they were very vivid and extremely convincing and there is also the relationship to being in its presence as a viewer. It's like you described the child's fascination with matches.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm.

DR. LARSEN: The interest in looking at it and the feeling you should get away, so you are pulling the viewer's string a lot, you know, as you are showing them something very beautiful. And the more they believe in it the more they maybe want to back off. You know, because it's scary. It's a scary thing, but they are just ravishing.

What were the years you did those?

MR. PINETTE: Well, that would be throughout the middle 1990s and late 1990s, you know right up to 2000-2001. It's not a subject that I am done with by any means. I like to stay with a subject for a long time and then that subject will open a door to something else and frequently I will come back to the same subjects again kind of as an ever expanding loop.

DR. LARSEN: Or maybe in combination?

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DR. LARSEN: What body of work came after the fire paintings?

MR. PINETTE: Strangely enough, I started painting water. The fire paintings kind of led in to some more industrial paintings where I was using more and more smoke and vapor, and that, I guess, just naturally led into the paintings I have been doing about turbulent water. The water paintings are very-for the most part-completely, totally understandable, you can walk right in to them. In some cases they are just about volume and threat. I don't know, I have a compulsion about creating threat in a-in a painting; not in a cartoonish "in your face" kind of way, but I know that very subtly it's there.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: There is nothing I can do about it, nor would I want to do anything about it. So water, being the ultimate solvent, one of the foundations of life, is just, to me, an extremely mysterious and worthy subject.

DR. LARSEN: Do you spend a lot of time by the water here because it's just down the street?

MR. PINETTE: Oh yeah, yeah. I like to be around it a lot. I like to observe it. I like to kayak on it. I like everything about it. So I do-I tend to operate off of a mental Rolodex of things. I have a fairly sharp memory for things, so I can pull things up.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. Things that you experience or see-

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm.

DR. LARSEN: -you file it away for your art?

MR. PINETTE: Yes.

DR. LARSEN: Even as you are experiencing it?

MR. PINETTE: Not-I don't file it away as in like a photographic memory type of thing-

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: -where I am going to just, you know, pull a picture out of my head and replicate the picture, but what I have is, like I said, a mental rolodex of overlapping flip images. That's always there. It's my greatest resource, actually.

DR. LARSEN: Do you do a lot of sketching or studies?

MR. PINETTE: I don't do a lot of drawing. I do work outside from life plein-air and I do that seasonally. It's just kind of the rhythm that I like and I do that-I have been doing it for years. I work outside in the early fall right through to early winter and then occasionally in the spring. I find that for the way that I have decided to be a realist, I have to work from life, at least on a seasonal or cyclical kind of basis.

DR. LARSEN: That's interesting because most Maine painters paint in the summer. You have kind of omitted that chunk of typical painting time there.

MR. PINETTE: I never had really liked painting in the summer. Also, I have some work that comes along in the summer where I can frame work-mostly for other artists, and since I have a son to support, I have to think about that. Summertime is just different for me than it is for many other artists. It's way too demanding. I cannot start and stop on painting. I have to be immersed in it for weeks and months at a time and so I actually don't mind not painting in the summer. For one thing, it's too hot. And it's just-I can't be private enough in the summer.

DR. LARSEN: Well, I understand that: the phone rings, people come by, you are describing long-lost cousins showing up on your door step. Maybe shutting all that out would deprive you maybe of something good in your life, too. As we always say at home, it's a long winter. You know, I would say that when something comes up to do in the summer and I am thinking, is this an extravagance or not, in terms of my time, and then I think of the long winter and I think do it now. Seize the moment, do it now. The winter is long.

MR. PINETTE: Exactly.

DR. LARSEN: But the landscape in the world is very different in fall and winter.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: You know, and is that a preference, is that partly the-

MR. PINETTE: I think that probably it is, I mean I like summer, I like the way everything looks, so I just don't have any interest really in painting hot summer days, you know, in Maine. It's the last thing I would ever want to paint. It's too nice.

DR. LARSEN: I thought we would get around to that word, you know, I thought we could-the niceness is not the purpose of-

MR. PINETTE: No, not at all.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: No, I have no interest in painting soothing things or anything that alludes to nostalgia. The word almost sounds like a disease.

DR. LARSEN: That's funny. Somewhere around 2001 you did a series of large works on paper, trees close-up, that I admire greatly and they seemed to have a kind of majestic solidity and yet they spin when they move and they have a glossiness or technically they have a certain kind of sheen or light filled-ness [sic] that-well, it seems there in those paintings. How did that series come about?

MR. PINETTE: That series came about when I was-during a period when I was getting very intensely into plein-air painting and I was working out in Searsmont. It was day after day, after day, for months, working up this-I was trying to address what I call God's tangle, which is, again, this perfect that almost impossible geometry that is the woods. It is total chaos and yet there was total order to it.

Now, I am not a really religious person but it's the-the perfect sense that all of this chaos made-makes, which is what we called the woods, so it was irresistible. I just had to paint it.

DR. LARSEN: But how do you get your hands around all that stuff that's leaning and broken in piles and I mean, how do you choose?

MR. PINETTE: That's a good question. This is what plein-air painting helps you do: it helps you to sort this out. When you are painting from life, you are painting what you choose to see. You are not really painting what you are seeing in its totality, because that would be impossible. You have to be willing to make a choice and then through the-what's the word?-the facture of painting, as you make a mark on your paper or canvas, the choice that you have made is suddenly the revelation: that's the mark. So you have to be willing to go with that and to really actually make it up as you go, but it's made up completely on what you are seeing.

Plein-air painting is very confrontational. It's-it's a total jolt of logical demands. And at the same time, you have to bring all of yourself to it, in order to synthesize the reality that you are looking at and to put it through you, and then on to the paper. You are-the painter is the-the person is the filter. The filtering mechanism for taking the reality of what you are looking at and making a picture.

DR. LARSEN: Sure. You're all alone there out in the woods and this complex process is going on.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, it's frightening.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: With me, there is almost a routine and it happens like this. I will set up my material; my easel, my paints, everything, and I will be into a painting for maybe two hours.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: And towards the end of those two hours I will start to feel almost physically ill.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: Because I am on the verge of total, complete collapse in this painting. It's just not working. It's flawed. I can't get it. It happens every single time. I will back away from the painting, smoke a cigarette, have a sandwich and then just try to calm myself down and then I will go back to the painting and completely nail it.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: I will get the painting, but it's this process that is just always the same.

DR. LARSEN: Sounds like torture.

MR. PINETTE: Well, sometimes it's not fun.

DR. LARSEN: But then it's great when you feel you have nailed it, you know-

MR. PINETTE: Oh, it's-

DR. LARSEN: And if you see that you have. What happens in between there? I mean, it's not the cigarette and the sandwich. What happens in between?

MR. PINETTE: I don't know. I don't know what it is. I guess it's I have to have a little in terms dialogue chat with myself-

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: -about are you going to reach nirvana or not, can you do this, can you not do this, and I will just beat myself up and then realize what I am doing and I talk to myself and say, stop beating yourself up. The thing that you are expecting from this painting is only going to happen if you let it happen and don't try to contrive it.

DR. LARSEN: Force it, yeah.

MR. PINETTE: The beginning stage of a painting is tremendously difficult. The end stage of a painting is-I am not going to say it's easy-you are not on easy street at that point, but you are at a level that is so far beyond, obviously, the beginning stage of the painting.

DR. LARSEN: Do most of them take a day or do they come back to the studio and get edited?

MR. PINETTE: All of the above-

DR. LARSEN: Played with?

MR. PINETTE: Sometimes they happen very quickly. And sometimes they do go through some more process in the studio.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: But as much as possible, I like to keep it-work wet into wet. That's just a kind of little technical thing.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: But it does add up to certain results you know, in mark making. A painting can turn on one mark-

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: -on one brush stroke.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: And sometimes when you make a certain brush stroke, the evidence of that stroke, the way the painting falls off the brush, they way it looks can be so profoundly moving.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: It just snaps the entire painting.

DR. LARSEN: Well, I think that's what have I seeing in those paintings, those big painting on paper. There is a certain sheen or a shine to them that-it wasn't just the wonderful torsion or the solidity of it. It was also the surface. All of it worked together.

So you went back and back and back to the same woods for days on end?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, up on Moody Mountain. It's a fantastic place to paint because you can just have your-you'll stand there and look at something and then shift your eyes 20 feet to the left have this something completely different.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: It's just endlessly-endless possibilities.

DR. LARSEN: Was that autumn?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Okay. The air is great in the autumn too.

MR. PINETTE: Oh it's great yeah, it's a-it's almost a creepy place in some ways up there. It's remote. There are things that go walking through the woods that you can't quite see.

DR. LARSEN: Is that hunting season?

MR. PINETTE: Every time I have ever been up there, I hear gunshots, whether it's hunting season or not.

DR. LARSEN: That, too, is Maine.

MR. PINETTE: But I have not been all that worried about it.

DR. LARSEN: Okay, interesting.

MR. PINETTE: I don't look like a deer I hope.

DR. LARSEN: You don't have to-you just have to move and-

MR. PINETTE: Yeah. Well, I have a red pickup truck you see and I work off the tailgate of my truck.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: Because I have to bring so much stuff with me. I bring a full oil workup. But it's just as exciting to work outside on-all those new railroad paintings that I have been doing good for the most part done outside.

DR. LARSEN: Now, where is the railroad that you are painting? Is it Belfast?

MR. PINETTE: It's in Searsport.

DR. LARSEN: In Searsport.

MR. PINETTE: It's the Guilford rail systems; they have the sidings that basically shoot right into the Irving tank farm.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: It's an active rail siding. It's a very nice place.

DR. LARSEN: And when did you start those paintings?

MR. PINETTE: I started them about a year and a half ago.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. So that would be about 2003?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm, in the fall?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Okay.

MR. PINETTE: I concentrated on them all last winter, doing some small-scale industrial paintings. I would occasionally go out to set up dashboard studio in the truck during bad weather, snow storms. It's great. You have a portable little studio; you work right from your dashboard.

DR. LARSEN: With gloves on?

MR. PINETTE: No, no, I have a heater in the truck.

DR. LARSEN: So what's-from first industrial paintings you did to these-to these last-this last series here, how have your industrial images evolved or changed for-

MR. PINETTE: I don't know. I think maybe they have a gotten a little more playful.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: Quirky.

DR. LARSEN: Are those among the ones you're talking about?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah? They are many-there are many layers to this one too-the ones I'm looking at. There is a foreground, middle ground, background layer.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm.

DR. LARSEN: And that strikes me as a little different.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, they are kind of staged.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm, and they looked little more fragile-these three here.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: The infrastructure looks like it could blow over in the wind or not that it would, but I mean it's very linear.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: They are not big fat shapes, they are pipes and lines and-

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, they are almost elegant.

DR. LARSEN: Yeah.

MR. PINETTE: And the actual places that they are are just kind of like again a woven, hand made, free-form geometry of intersecting pipes and things. It's just very visually pleasing.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. Which is so different than the solidity of those early ones with the great massive forms and they just kind of presented themselves in the near mid-ground. And in some ways your surfaces has also have changed a lot and your-there is an intricacy and even delicacy at times to the surface.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DR. LARSEN: It is very woven and-

MR. PINETTE: That is a function of how I lay down paint, which looks chaotic.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: It looks like an endless mishmash of disconnected tiny shapes, but actually is very-I mean, there is certain element of accident, obviously, in putting down paint, but it is a technique that it's very deliberately kind of built.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: It's not meticulous, but it is deliberate.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm, so and then the very latest ones are the-the water. Is the water picture there? Is that the one you are working on?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, that would-

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: Those two on the wall.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: And actually, the two paper mill paintings in the corner on the wall are all-

DR. LARSEN: Wow.

MR. PINETTE: -they are all of-really of the same time. This is all very chronologically close together.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. Those are almost apocalyptic looking of those-the paper mill paintings.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm.

DR. LARSEN: What is it like being near those paper mills?

MR. PINETTE: Oh, it's great.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: Visually it's just wonderful and I find them-it is very peaceful.

DR. LARSEN: And do you meet people who are working there?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: Or do you ever engage with the actual activity?

MR. PINETTE: No, not really.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: For one thing you cannot-you can't really get inside the property there. There is all the security, but there are ways to get right up close to it.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm.

MR. PINETTE: You know, stay out of people's way; no one will bother me. I once painted the Dragon cement plant in Thomaston. I did a few paintings there and I actually drove in and went to the office, which you can't see, from the road. And I knocked on the door and said, I just would like to be able to set up back here and paint. I am an artist. And the manager said, you find this attractive? And I said, well, yes I do. And he said, well, we do too.

DR. LARSEN: Really?

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: That's great.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah, and he said set up anywhere you want, just do not get in the way of the trucks. And I said, no problem. I won't get in your way. And it was just delightful.

DR. LARSEN: Isn't that nice?

MR. PINETTE: Everything back there has the same monochromatic patina of pinkish gray.

DR. LARSEN: Yup.

MR. PINETTE: That just covers everything. It's like seeing the world through the filter, like some kind of colored lens because of all the concrete dust.

DR. LARSEN: Did you ever show him what you have painted?

MR. PINETTE: I didn't.

DR. LARSEN: No?

MR. PINETTE: I don't think there were too interested, you know.

DR. LARSEN: That's quite a statement. I think that's very interesting. You know, so many people say, I wish you would go away you know and I wish you wouldn't-wasn't there.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm.

DR. LARSEN: And it spoils the gentility of the town otherwise. So, in sort of sum total, what do you think your body of work perhaps might add to the record and experience of the life that we are living here today? I guess I am speaking of the imagery. I mean, for me, if you hadn't painted what you painted, there would be a certain major aspect of the truth about what goes on here that-that wouldn't have been painted, and there is a lot of painting that happens in Maine that's about nostalgic fiction.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm.

DR. LARSEN: And it's perhaps even the majority of the painting that goes on in Maine, and for me the body of work you have made is an essential-it isn't that it tells the truth in a lecturing sort of way, but it just says that this is part of what's here, too, and I think that's valuable.

MR. PINETTE: I would agree with that.

DR. LARSEN: Mm-hmm. It's maybe not what your purpose has been. You know, it's not your primary purpose.

MR. PINETTE: No, I am not trying to instruct anybody on the way things are or, you know, or make any kind of culturally or time-rooted statement, but inevitably it's going to reflect something of our times. You know, that's kind of automatic. I am not trying to say anything, again, that is anyway even remotely political or-or making commentary, because I think that will be a little smarmy to do so. It's-it's just a poetic pursuit.

DR. LARSEN: Right, but it belongs to you, you know.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: It's an activity that belongs to you, and when those of us who see your paintings, we get a lot of different things, but part of that is the subject matter. Maybe not the most important part, but part of it is that.

MR. PINETTE: Mm-hmm. Well the subject matter, obviously, is a very important choice because that's going to be the armature.

DR. LARSEN: That's right. Right.

MR. PINETTE: The armature that is-goes hopefully beyond the subject matter.

DR. LARSEN: Right.

MR. PINETTE: And so I guess, all I can say is that which I choose to paint are just very simple things-elemental, just the bare components of life.

DR. LARSEN: Your choices are different than other people's choices.

MR. PINETTE: Yeah.

DR. LARSEN: And in part, that's the strength of your body of work.

MR. PINETTE: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...January 9, 2006