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Oral history interview with Nancy Spero, 2008 February 6-July 24

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Nancy Spero on February 6, May 27, and July 24, 2008. The interview took place at 530 LaGuardia Place in New York, New York, and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Judith Olch Richards has reviewed the transcript and has 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

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Nancy Spero at 530 LaGuardia Place, New York City, on February 6, 2008, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

So, Nancy, now we'll start. We can start slowly. And I want to ask you some really basic questions.

NANCY SPERO: Oh, dear.

MS. RICHARDS: And even though this has been published, there has been so much written about you, this recording for the Archives wants to be completely complete.

MS. SPERO: You mean you want it separated from all that other stuff?

MS. RICHARDS: No, no, no. I just want to say I'm going to ask you something like, when and where were you born? Now, you know that's been published. But just to be complete in one place, this will be everything about you from A to Z. [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: I don't know about -

MS. RICHARDS: Why don't you start out by -

MS. SPERO: I first want to put my pen away.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. SPERO: Or I'll be banging it and making noise with a pen. I can - you know. Then I will.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. So if you would like to begin.

MS. SPERO: Sure.

MS. RICHARDS: By where you were born and when.

MS. SPERO: Okay.

MS. RICHARDS: And a little about your -

MS. SPERO: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: Where you were born and when.

MS. SPERO: Okay. Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A., 1926.

MS. RICHARDS: And could you describe your family? Did you have brothers and sisters?

MS. SPERO: I have a younger sister, two years and two months, I believe. We did this once; we figured it out once. August, September -

MS. RICHARDS: What's your exact birthday?

MS. SPERO: My birthday?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: 8/24/26.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. So she's two years -

MS. SPERO: And two months.

MS. RICHARDS: And what's her name?

MS. SPERO: Carol, C-A-R-O-L.

MS. RICHARDS: And she was your only sibling?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And when you were a child, what was your - what did your parents do? What was your home like?

MS. SPERO: Oh, my home was like - I think my mother became a housewife. Because I think, before they had children, my parents - that she worked in an office. But before that, she had graduated college. And he had, as a lawyer. He was a young lawyer. My parents had moved from Cleveland to Chicago one year after I was born. So I believe that Carol was born in Chicago.

MS. RICHARDS: What neighborhood in Chicago did you live?

MS. SPERO: With my parents?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: You know, I don't rightly -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you live in Chicago your entire childhood?

MS. SPERO: No. No, they moved. My father wanted us to have the best education possible. And I didn't understand it, because I had the - and maybe I misunderstood, how one misunderstands one's parents. And the other way around, too - the parents don't understand their child. I thought that he didn't care much what we did, because we were girls, that he had the sense that he would have been more than interested to know what a boy was doing and for a boy to be doing something, to have a goal. And you know, just choose a - what do you call it? Something -

MS. RICHARDS: Profession?

MS. SPERO: Profession, yes, yes, yes. And choose something, and to work. And that was kind of strange, since - well, when they decided - the Chicago schools, they didn't like them. And there were some incidents that both my sister and I remembered in our classes that were more than ludicrous, you know, that, I guess, they decided to move to the burbs.

And they didn't really earn that much money to really live on. They went to the North Shore. Then I think they were the first of my father's part of the family, the Spero end - never knew much except for my cousins, two girls and an aunt in Philadelphia, and her husband.

MS. RICHARDS: Was your father born in Philadelphia?

MS. SPERO: No. My father was born in - I don't know where - he was born in 1998.

MS. RICHARDS: Eighteen ninety-eight?

MS. SPERO: Eighteen ninety-eight, I believe so. And my mother, I do believe, was born in - where was she born? She was born in the U.S., though.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: Because she was - my father was a little older than she was. I can't figure out how much younger she was than my father.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know how old she was when you were born?

MS. SPERO: I think she was 22 or 23. Yeah, I think it must have been 23 when I was born, something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: So she would have been born in 1903.

MS. SPERO: Something like that, hmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: You were born in 1926.

MS. SPERO: Nineteen oh-two or three.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, I think so. I have to ask Carol.

MS. RICHARDS: So you moved to the North Shore when you were in elementary school or junior high or high school?

MS. SPERO: Elementary. Oh, we were very young. We were.

MS. RICHARDS: And were you going to private school then?

MS. SPERO: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: No?

MS. SPERO: They didn't have money for that.

MS. RICHARDS: But it was a matter of their having money to even live in the neighborhood with a better school? That was the -

MS. SPERO: Well, they moved out to the North Shore. My sister and I happened to be talking about that the other day. And it never occurred to me at the time. It never occurred to me or Carol to even talk about it with each other. We loved the first house that we lived in when they moved. It was wonderful. It was huge and old and had all these porches that were - some weren't - you know, they were open, and on one of the porches there was a ping-pong table. It had windows in it. So we were able to play ping-pong even in the winter. I remember that. It was such a great house.

But then the next year, they moved to a smaller house; the parents did. And then it kept getting smaller and smaller.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know now why that was?

MS. SPERO: Well, we just figured it out. And I never thought about it. What do you think it is?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, the Depression.

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah. It must have been that.

MS. RICHARDS: Nineteen twenty-nine.

MS. SPERO: That's right.

MS. RICHARDS: You were born in '26 - 1929, the early '30s was difficult.

MS. SPERO: That's right. It had to be money.

MS. RICHARDS: Your father was a practicing attorney?

MS. SPERO: Oh, no, he wasn't. He was not a professional man.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I thought you said he went to law school.

MS. SPERO: No, no, no. He was looking - I mean, he was searching what to do. And he finally - he set up shop or something. He always called it his shop, in which he had - well, do you know, lately it's really true. I have forgotten, not how to talk entirely, but names and places and things. And it's so true. You know, one says that about getting older. And, by golly, some of these things are true. It's really more than unsettling. This folklore is so true about -

MS. RICHARDS: We can - it might come up again later. You can remember it.

MS. SPERO: Maybe, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: Maybe yes and maybe no. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] So when did you - when you were a child, do you remember being interested in art, being good at art? Or what were you most interested in as a child?

MS. SPERO: Art.

MS. RICHARDS: And your sister? Was she also?

MS. SPERO: No. No, not at all. I always wanted her to be interested in something. But she wasn't. Or maybe I never asked her. But I asked her, you know, why, when she went to - and she went to Stanford [University, Palo Alto, CA]. I was very impressed. She was a very good student until she went to Stanford. And she said - I mean, it was like she didn't care. And I guess it was true. She said all she cared about was getting a husband. She didn't put it in that forward a term. Or maybe she did. She said that all she was interested in was getting married and having children.

And I said, "Carol, no. It's not possible." And she said, "Yes." I said, "No." But she insisted. And it was true that she never wanted - and she wrote beautifully. She was very smart, obviously. She had gotten in Stanford in the old days, and was nobody to intervene for her. Nobody in the family had gone there and such.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were, though, a child and you were interested in art, was your family encouraging to you?

MS. SPERO: They weren't encouraging. It was just that -

MS. RICHARDS: They weren't discouraging?

MS. SPERO: No, no. But they weren't particularly encouraging. It was just to do what I wanted to do.

MS. RICHARDS: Were your teachers encouraging?

MS. SPERO: Yes, very. But that was not until I was - how old was I? I was in between schools.

MS. RICHARDS: In middle school? Junior high school?

MS. SPERO: No, but it was the - God almighty. I'm wondering what years, that when I went and it was that they encouraged me. It was quite early. It was after grammar school.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: And I then started - well, it was when one started having to memorize or remember facts from a book or history or they got more academic and tougher, kind of the school. And that didn't interest me at all, most of the subjects. And so I, obviously, did not do brilliantly in the regular school curricula. And it was because I wasn't interested, you see. So finally, they found out it was that and that it was art. And it was the kind of school that kind of gave in to a child's interests and didn't have to be on the straight and narrow. So that was kind of interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there one particular teacher who was a mentor, who was really special?

MS. SPERO: I didn't really have a mentor, but I did have a teacher. Was she in the high school?

MS. RICHARDS: Who might have encouraged you to go to art school after high school, or study art?

MS. SPERO: No, no, no. I didn't have that. But I did have, you know, adults, I remember, who were very - I say very - it sounds so vapid, very nice about my art. That were interested.

MS. RICHARDS: Complimented you?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. For a child, you know, at the time. And it happened to be the writer on the - there was a newspaper beside the *Chicago Tribune* at that time. It was the *Chicago Sun-Times* or something? There was another paper. And it was that other paper that he was editor. What was this guy's name? Because he was an artist himself, ostensibly an artist, because he didn't really have time, you know, to practice his art, working on a newspaper and even traveling and - about me.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you continue studying, especially focusing on art in high school? They let you spend a lot of time on your art?

MS. SPERO: I think in high school, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you know anything about what it would mean to be a professional artist? Did you imagine yourself that you were an artist?

MS. SPERO: No, never then. And when I went off to college, I didn't even say that I was interested in art.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you pick a college?

MS. SPERO: Well, I liked Colorado. I had gone to camp in Colorado, and then been a counselor at this camp in Colorado for one year.

MS. RICHARDS: In the mountains?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah. I loved Colorado at that time. And I don't know, I had this idea about cowboys, which was kind of apocryphal.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: [Laughs] I mean, way back when I was first in high school, you know, cowboys. And I guess it's -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember going to the movies and watching cowboy movies?

MS. SPERO: No, I didn't like cowboy movies at all. No, this was all just kind of like dream time, if you ask me. It was just imaginary, I would say. Wouldn't you think it was kind of imaginary?

MS. RICHARDS: So you -

MS. SPERO: They have these cowboys, Indians. And I really didn't like - it was beautiful, of course, Boulder, Colorado.

MS. RICHARDS: The University of Colorado in Boulder?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I really didn't get along great at all; especially I never did well with a roommate, either. You know, every semester that I was there, I had a different roommate. And the last one I had - I went for three semesters, two at the university. And I made it through the first year at the university. And then I took four - I don't know why I took an extra one. And that's when I really started drawing. And it was an -

MS. RICHARDS: An extra course? An extra -

MS. SPERO: I think so. But I stayed -

MS. RICHARDS: In the summer?

MS. SPERO: After the first year - see, I can't remember all this.

MS. RICHARDS: It's all right.

MS. SPERO: But I do think I had an extra term or something that I went, like, in the summer or very close to - after having gone for a year. I did all right. I was an average student. And I attribute that to not being - first of all, losing interest very soon, you know, in the subjects, which was really quite a shame in a certain way. And then I don't think I ever felt guilty about going off to school and then being a poor student.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: And then I just wouldn't go back the second year.

MS. RICHARDS: But you took a course in art in the summer or after the first year?

MS. SPERO: I didn't take any courses in art at the university, that I recall. Was it the university that I took a course? No, it was high school that I had a course in art and that I was encouraged. And then in grammar school by this - and I remember his name. He was the art critic at the *Chicago Sun-Times* at the time. I think his name was Frank Holland.

And then the woman teacher I had in high school that encouraged - I remember her name, too. Isn't that funny? It's coming. I haven't thought of this in years. Her name was Miss Murphy. And I kind of remember she was a very small woman, but very - she would walk around to the various desks or wherever we were painting and what we were doing and just kind of overlooking at what all her students were doing and making sure that we were working hard. And she was also encouraging.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember at the very beginning, then, of your making art, what you most enjoyed making? Was it representational drawings of people? Was it about color? Was it about storytelling? Do you remember what was that first impulse as an artist? What did you love to draw or paint? Do you remember what the imagery was like?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I think it was imagery of people. And it was forever drawing heads and stuff in the margin of my schoolbooks. And I think that was great fun that - I mean, my schoolbooks were really a mess.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: [Laughs] And no doubt, that's one of the reasons, too, that I didn't do well in school. And another - there were a few reasons, now that I'm trying to think about it - was that I'd always remark when I write. I say, "You see, I couldn't read my notes in school." And I couldn't. I could not read what I had written, my notes, that I was supposed to know for the homework and then for - you know, let's say we'd have little exams.

MS. RICHARDS: Tests, yeah.

MS. SPERO: Tests in class. And I did badly. I couldn't read what I had written. And that was no good. And in Chicago, though, before we moved, I remember - I don't know what one does with a kid whose writing is so bad. But I remember that in the first grade, that this - we moved after first grade finished, to the burbs - that the teacher had me copy every day.

She had me copying from the notes I had taken in the class that day on what had gone on in the class that day. There was a certain time in which we were supposed to write down certain things. And I can't remember what all this was. But I think it was quite a bit in the early days. I don't know if it was all the years or not, but it was enough to be shamed by my writing. And all this repetition did no good at all. If anything, it made it worse. But I do remember that.

MS. RICHARDS: Ah. When you left Colorado, when you decided to not return to that college, what did you do?

MS. SPERO: I went back home. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: To the North Shore?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, to my parents' house. I didn't know what to do. And I didn't know where to go. And I didn't have any friends that were there. They had all gone off to school, to university, college, God knows where. So everybody - I didn't have that many friends anyhow. And I made no real friends at Colorado either.

And one of the roommates I had was a - there is a photo of she and I there someplace - she was a big woman, young woman, and you know, with a pretty face, but she was really big and kind of pink.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: Pink skin, very rosy skin and kind of blonde. But it wasn't pretty. She was big. And her name was Tex. She was from Texas. Why all these people from Texas were named Texas - so Tex was her name. She and I were roommates for a semester. We just didn't get along at all. And she had never seen a Jew or probably even known about Jews. And you know, Leon said it was the same in the army. There was someone in his company that had never seen a Jew or known a Jew.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel that there was - you had equal access to going to the University of Colorado, and did you feel like your choices after that might be limited in some way because you were a Jew?

MS. SPERO: Possibly.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that in your consciousness, that there was discrimination?

MS. SPERO: It must have been, without my really facing it.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about your neighborhood where you grew up? Was it a mixed neighborhood?

MS. SPERO: Oh, yes, it was.

MS. RICHARDS: But do you remember any incidents?

MS. SPERO: Hmm-um [negative], none.

MS. RICHARDS: That's good.

MS. SPERO: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Did religion play any role in your life?

MS. SPERO: Hmm-um [negative], and so it didn't with our children. And much to our regret, Leon and mine, and theirs, the children, because they have no real base, and they don't have time. So it's only recently, the last number of years, that the older ones - the youngest was about seven years younger than me. So the older ones - and they're both living and working in Paris. And they had this need somehow. They wanted to know about Judaism, and were really curious to know.

But you know what? There was no time; both so busy.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were growing up, did you go to the Art Institute of Chicago or any Chicago museums to look at art with your parents or with your friends? Do you remember?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I might have, possibly. But you know, my family - they weren't that art oriented.

MS. RICHARDS: So the museums didn't play any role in sparking your interest or -

MS. SPERO: You know, I can't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: When you came back from the University of Colorado, so then you were a young adult.

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Then did you start looking at and going to the museums?

MS. SPERO: No. But you see, I wrote this paper - which I threw away then - but I found it in a drawer - in which I had written about - when I was out at the University of Colorado as a student, and I must have been 19 when I wrote that, and it was about Abstract Expressionism.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think it was because you had art history class and you wrote a paper for it?

MS. SPERO: It could be. But my awareness of Abstract Expressionism, which was -

MS. RICHARDS: That was very early.

MS. SPERO: Very early. It was very hot. And Leon and I - that's the reason -

MS. RICHARDS: You were 19. It was 1945 -

MS. SPERO: Or even, let's say, 20.

MS. RICHARDS: Or 1946.

MS. SPERO: Forty-six?

MS. RICHARDS: You were 20 in 1946. Born in '26, right?

MS. SPERO: You're probably - yeah. And so then Leon and I figured it out. Then we were married in - well, we were married in '51, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: But if you were in Colorado in 1945 -

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah, that's true.

MS. RICHARDS: - you never saw Abstract Expressionism in person. You were writing about it from, maybe, magazine pictures?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, I imagine.

MS. RICHARDS: If they filtered through to Colorado?

MS. SPERO: See, *ArtNews* was the big magazine at the time.

MS. RICHARDS: Ah.

MS. SPERO: These are good questions. But it's terrible now, you know, so long ago.

MS. RICHARDS: But things are coming back. You remembered Miss Murphy. [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: Well, yes. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: And Frank Holland.

MS. SPERO: This tiny woman - and what she looked like and everything and how she walked.

MS. RICHARDS: And you're small. She must have been really tiny.

MS. SPERO: I wasn't small then. I have lost about six, seven inches.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Well.

MS. SPERO: And I can't bear being small. I can't bear it, being a small woman. I was thin. I was always rather thin.

MS. RICHARDS: So what happened then? What did you finally decide to do when you went back home after Colorado?

MS. SPERO: Well, I had nothing to do. And schools were starting. There was just nothing, really. I thought maybe I'd get a job, find a place to live and get a job. And I thought how boring that would be. And so I - and I did something. It was like I had to do this, that I went down and I registered at the Art Institute of Chicago for the class, to be a freshman, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: They had a four-year [program], like a college or a university.

MS. RICHARDS: They still do.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah. And I was lucky they still had a few places left, or maybe just one. But I got in - because it was late getting in school. I was a couple of weeks late registering for the School of the Art Institute. And I got in. And then I loved school. It was so great. And even going in to school was so great. At that time, way before your time, the school was in the basement of the museum. And we walked downstairs or took the elevator. And downstairs - and it was very tall in the basement. And then there was a statue, or a copy of one of the horsemen. I forget which one it was that they had, in one of the other galleries. But it was brought down out of sight in the museum itself.

And so we would come up to the ground floor, and then the first floor for the museum itself, and then down in the basement was the school. And so there were all these school rooms. I think a number of years after - but I was well out of the School of the Art Institute - but they built the school, you know, behind, but not directly under the Art Institute - no, under the museum.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes. So did you go there for four years?

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you immediately pick a major? Or did you do all -

MS. SPERO: Well, they had it all set up. If I wanted to study painting, they had it all set up.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that what you chose?

MS. SPERO: Painting, mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah. And then - see, they had everything set up. And then, like something you had to have, a minor, the major was painting. Then they, kind of, gave me for a minor - and, I guess in deciding, it was printmaking.

MS. RICHARDS: Hmm.

MS. SPERO: So I had lithography. And then a year or so later, I had etching. Maybe it was the same year - I can't remember. But I remember I liked lithography a lot, the way, you know, they allowed it to be done in those days.

And I had the reputation of having the messiest paint box in the school. And unfortunately, I didn't save it, you know, like I save things now.

MS. RICHARDS: You used oils then?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And somebody took a picture of the paint box - and so careless in those days. I should have gotten a photo of that paint box.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you pay your way through Art Institute, or did your parents support you?

MS. SPERO: My parents supported me. It was really cheap. I mean, I didn't feel obliged to do any work. And I went five days to school. It wasn't like a regular college in which you just go a few days a week and then there's just homework and studying in the library, and study, study, study all the time when one is in college. It was painting and working in these visual arts all the time, you know. And it takes a great deal of time making a painting or doing all these things. And it doesn't seem feasible, but in many artists' cases, like my own, it just, kind of, took a long time in which to find my voice as an artist or as a young artist.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember when it came to you that you were an artist, that you would be an artist, that art was what you loved, what you wanted to do in your life? Did that happen while you were there?

MS. SPERO: I was trying to fight that all the time. That's why I did so badly and didn't like these other schools and didn't get along. And I was just - too much. But it was great. It was great fun at the Art Institute. I've always, kind of, said that I had met my, you know, that my true peers were the - it's like odd man and woman out that we were. You know, we weren't in the mainstream of -

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] When you got to art school, you found friendship.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You found people with a similar spirit.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So that must have been a very -

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - emotional kind of -

MS. SPERO: Very much so.

MS. RICHARDS: When - were you aware that - did you feel the teachers were wonderful? Or was it more that you were with all these students where you could share?

MS. SPERO: It was the other students, mostly. Although at that time, there were a few professors who - this one particularly that was very encouraging.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember who that was?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Mr. Wighart [ph] at the Art Institute.

MS. RICHARDS: Wheelhart?

MS. SPERO: Wighart.

MS. RICHARDS: Wighart.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I think he was Czech or German.

MS. RICHARDS: W -

MS. SPERO: I think he was Czech. He was a very nice man. But he was quite Frenchified in his love of art and the way he practiced, the way he painted, himself. It was actually not too - it was a little lightweight, actually, in the way I -

MS. RICHARDS: Did he study in Paris? Do you think he studied in Paris?

MS. SPERO: I don't know where he studied.

MS. RICHARDS: That generation of American artists who went to Paris to study?

MS. SPERO: Oh, no, he wasn't American.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. SPERO: He was European.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, oh.

MS. SPERO: But he was hired by the Art Institute.

MS. RICHARDS: That was the time right after World War II?

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: When European artists were coming here.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And he was hired by the Art Institute. Did they have a number of European faculty members?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, they did. But I don't know if it was - these are very good questions. I bet some of them maybe were hired at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there a traditional curriculum of - did you draw the figure and plaster casts?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah. There was kind of like a traditional setup of things that we would have to do there. You know, draw the figure and then paint - I don't know, paint something, and just do - let's see, well, I think just studying the third dimension and just doing a still life in, ostensibly, the study of the third dimension.

MS. RICHARDS: You think learning in perspective?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And then we had art history every year. And we had a brilliant teacher in art history. Her name was Miss - what's her name? She seemed very distinguished. What was her name? I can't remember. I've always remembered her name. That's funny. Should come back - but brilliant.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, did you have a chance to travel to New York or to Europe or anywhere outside Chicago to look at art or to meet artists?

MS. SPERO: No. I think I came -

MS. RICHARDS: Before you graduated?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I think I came to - who did I go with to New York? I think I went with a friend to New York. I'm not sure.

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe you saw the Abstract Expressionists?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, I must have. I really think I must have. And then another thing that really inspired me for the way I worked for a number of years, and had this exaggerated, this extended linear format, which, you know, the picture goes round and round - and by the way, we were allowed, from school, just to walk right into the museum from school and meander around the museum. And it was practically empty.

I've always been so shocked when art has become so popular that the museums are always extremely crowded - they're really crowded these days. And that was so far from the way it was when I was a student and before, and even after that for a few years. I felt I always had the prerogative of going into a school library or something. But now, of course, I would if I asked for it, to get a card to do these things, you know, when you're a student. But it just seemed - I don't know - that it was more bureaucratic or something.

MS. RICHARDS: When you went to New York with your friend, do you recall meeting other artists? Do you recall if you and your friend were going to New York because there's something you really had to see that might have been meaningful to your work at the time, whether it was in a gallery or a studio or a museum?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I'm trying to think. No, not really. It was a real eye-opener, though, going to art school and being able to go, now that I think of it and remember, and to actually see the things in the museum and their sizes, you know, all the different sizes from the small, you know, to the really huge ones. And that kind of gave me permission to think, and very early - not to think of art as just as a - or painting - as just a little rectangle or

square or even, you know, a double -

MS. RICHARDS: Diptych?

MS. SPERO: Diptych, something like that. I think going to art school and seeing other students' art, but seeing the art that was there, the museum art that they owned and what that meant and what they had that they considered, you know, to be relevant to what they were - you know, what shows were going on at the time or just to study, to know what younger artists and what was going on in those years.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: When you graduated, what happened then? Was it an easy transition to be finished with school and figure out what you were going to do next?

MS. SPERO: No. And I always tell students how difficult it is, this transition - you know, you make up your mind that you're going to do something, hopefully, within the art world, and then you get out of school and it's very difficult figuring out what to do. Are you a painter or a sculptor? Do you -

MS. RICHARDS: I was.

MS. SPERO: I thought I remembered that you were. And so what's that about you? What did you do?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, we have to talk about you now. [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: No, I just want to hear about you for a minute, though, just for a minute.

MS. RICHARDS: I went to graduate school after - so one -

MS. SPERO: What kind of graduate school?

MS. RICHARDS: I went to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque to study painting.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah?

MS. RICHARDS: And got a master's degree in painting.

MS. SPERO: Oh, you got a master's in painting?

MS. RICHARDS: And I continued painting and -

MS. SPERO: Leon did, too.

MS. RICHARDS: But after about six or seven years, I ended up drifting into museum work. And that was a long - that's a long story about me, which we -

MS. SPERO: Oh, it can't be that long.

MS. RICHARDS: No, no. We can't go there right now. But that - so I ended up not persisting. And I think that you must have felt a very strong passion and motivation that this was what you were going to do, because you know how hard, from retrospect - but then you did, too. You knew how hard that would be. But you were committed to doing that.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. And I rented this small apartment - and I mean small, a basement apartment - on the Upper West Side for a few years in New York.

MS. RICHARDS: But, wait, wait. When did you leave Chicago and get to New York? We didn't talk about that yet. After -

MS. SPERO: I think after I graduated.

MS. RICHARDS: You just moved to New York?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I moved to New York.

MS. RICHARDS: You just decided that was -

MS. SPERO: After the Art Institute.

MS. RICHARDS: That was the place to be?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's where all the action was. And I wanted to get out of Chicago. And so I moved to New York. And I lived and rented this basement apartment.

MS. RICHARDS: On the Upper West Side, you said?

MS. SPERO: On the Upper West Side, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember what street?

MS. SPERO: No, but it was on a cross street. And I forget which - from what cross street it was. It was probably 80s, 90s. I'm not sure. It was quite high. But I had lots of friends in my apartment. We'd meet. I had lots of cockroaches.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] Those were the friends?

MS. SPERO: [Laughs] My friends. Oh, my God, it was so horrible.

MS. RICHARDS: How did -

MS. SPERO: Oh, my God.

MS. RICHARDS: When you moved to New York, when you came, did you know people here, other people from Chicago? Did you know anyone in New York when you came here?

MS. SPERO: Not too many.

MS. RICHARDS: No relatives or classmates?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I must have had some. You know? I must have. I couldn't have been that isolated.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] So you got that first tiny basement apartment.

MS. SPERO: Apartment in New York, yeah, yeah, yeah. And then what happened was that after graduating from the Art Institute and all of us, you know, we still kind of stayed together. But school provided this real - what do you call it?

MS. RICHARDS: Social connections?

MS. SPERO: Well, not social connections. But it was kind of like a base or like a - what is it? What is it when you have a boat and you drop it to keep the boat -

MS. RICHARDS: Anchor.

MS. SPERO: Anchor. It was kind of the anchor of having this boat in, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: But right there is the meeting place, or someplace where you did sign up as, you know, an artist, being a graduate and being in New York, because school days were over then.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: And then this was to have students, the former students, kind of sign up and say what they're doing. And then I think the Archives - I think - how long have you been working at the Archives of American -

MS. RICHARDS: I'm not working at the Archives. I'm just doing interviews.

MS. SPERO: You're doing them a favor?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, kind of. I'm doing these interviews. I really work someplace - I work at iCI [Independent Curators International]. But this is an extra special project for me.

MS. SPERO: Oh, I see. That's where we met, huh?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes.

MS. SPERO: I see.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you came to New York and you lived in that basement apartment, you started to meet other artists?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I must have.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember your first friends, your new artist friends who you met? And how did you get out of the basement?

MS. SPERO: How did I get out of the basement? Oh, God, I can't remember. But I didn't like it.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know how long you lived there?

MS. SPERO: Not too long. I moved to another apartment, I think. I mean, it wasn't too brilliant of an apartment, but it wasn't as bad as -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have to work to support yourself when you were in New York?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, a little bit, sure.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of work did you do?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I wasn't very good at keeping jobs. It was really shameful. I was supposed to write letters and do all this stuff that you do in an office and file stuff and talk to the boss about, you know, what I was supposed to do. And I completely forgot what I was supposed to do. And the whole thing never worked out very brilliantly, for me. And I don't think I took it very seriously, kind of knowing that my father was so generous. And he was a great guy to fall back on. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: It was really terrible.

MS. RICHARDS: But when you were in New York in that first apartment, you were painting?

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember what those paintings looked like?

MS. SPERO: Kind of.

MS. RICHARDS: What the subject was?

MS. SPERO: There was something - I did a painting - yeah. When I was living in this - oh, it was horrible, this little apartment. It was really cheap, because the woman renting it, you know - there were two bathrooms and everything, I think. And she kept part of the place. And what a bad way of going out on one's own that is. You know, I had done it before, but this was really terrible.

And I can't remember what I was doing then to pay my way myself. I think I had these, you know, enough background to take some notes.

MS. RICHARDS: Stenography?

MS. SPERO: Not really.

MS. RICHARDS: But you're painting then; you still had time to paint?

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And do you remember what your paintings looked like?

MS. SPERO: Well, I remember this one painting. It was this one painting that I became so interested in while I was doing it. And it took forever, and I was always adding some figures and stuff. And that took quite a few months to finish that painting as I had kind of envisioned it from the beginning. Isn't that funny? And then somehow, I put it in the attic of my parents' house. And because they moved around so much, that painting was lost in some of their moves. They really moved a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did they move a lot?

MS. SPERO: I don't know. They just were that way. They just were.

MS. RICHARDS: So do you - you said when you went to the Art Institute and you went to the Art Institute museum, you realized you could paint in a long format, like a frieze.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And you realized it because you saw some first.

MS. SPERO: Yes. Now, the wonderful thing I saw was that one day, going upstairs to the museum, there were some French museum workers, and they were hanging the *Bayeux* [*Tapestry*, after 1066, Bayeux, France] - was it the *Bayeux*?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm, yes, yes.

MS. SPERO: Tapestries to go along the wall. And I can't remember what year that was or what year of class - you know, like it must have been - I don't think it was freshman or sophomore. I have to find out, you know, what year it was that I saw [it]. And it was great fun practicing my messy French. After all, I had been there for a year, in France.

MS. RICHARDS: When were you - you were in France for a year -

MS. SPERO: After I graduated. Didn't I go to - yeah, I went - did I go for a whole year to France? And I had kind of a job there.

MS. RICHARDS: Before Colorado?

MS. SPERO: No. No, see, I'm not getting this straight. No, it must have been after.

MS. RICHARDS: Before you went to the Art Institute?

MS. SPERO: No, no. It was after.

MS. RICHARDS: After you graduated the Art Institute?

MS. SPERO: After I graduated the Art Institute.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you go to France - but first you went to New York from Chicago before you went to France?

MS. SPERO: Now, what would I be doing in New York after Chicago? I think I went to - let's get this straight, Nancy. I wanted to graduate, after graduating, undergraduate, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: At the Art Institute?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I thought I wanted to do - to get graduate work. But I decided. I'd rather just do what I wanted to do and just study the courses or study what I wanted to study. And it was possibly the best way. It's really too bad that I so limited myself, you know, in that way.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But you were saying that when you were a student, you first saw the friezes?

MS. SPERO: When I was a student at the Art Institute.

MS. RICHARDS: And that had a big impact on you.

MS. SPERO: When going upstairs, I saw this frieze, this extended linear format -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes.

MS. SPERO: I think it was the *Bayeux Tapestry*. And I was really thrilled by that work.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: I had often seen pictures of it, and I had liked it well enough. But when you actually see work, you know, the original work, what a difference that makes.

MS. RICHARDS: And that had a big impact on your thinking about your work?

MS. SPERO: Very much so, very much so.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you - that painting you said that you painted when you were in the basement apartment in New York, brought it to your parents - was that a kind of linear format in that way? Or was that a simpler -

MS. SPERO: No, no, it was just - those were just painting. Going against my precepts.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: [Laughs] But in a way, it wasn't, because it was like paintings that you couldn't really see. You know, if I remember, you couldn't really see them. They were quite translucent.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. SPERO: They were like glass or something. You couldn't see what they really were.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Do you know how long you stayed in New York? Did you go from there to France? Or did you stay in New York for quite a few years?

MS. SPERO: Or was I in New York after France?

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MS. SPERO: I think that was more like it.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. SPERO: But, you know, I can't swear to it.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, it's not that important. So when you went to France, you went to Paris?

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: On your own? By yourself?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. And then my sister was with me a bit.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, after she dropped - after she finished Stanford?

MS. SPERO: No. She was at Stanford, but she took a little time out and came and stayed with me, which was very nice.

MS. RICHARDS: How nice. And do you remember when you were in Paris, were you painting?

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You had a garret, a studio?

MS. SPERO: I didn't -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember what neighborhood of Paris?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. It was in Montparnasse.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I studied - I didn't study really. I went to the atelier of - you know, these artists had set up these - a garage or something as a school. And I found a place; the atelier of André Lhote was in the neighborhood of where this cheap hotel that I was living in.

MS. RICHARDS: So you spent some time in this atelier?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah. And it was really fun.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was in Montparnasse?

MS. SPERO: In Montparnasse. And there was a ground floor.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm going to change disks.

[END MD 01.]

This is Judith Richards interviewing Nancy Spero at 530 LaGuardia Place in New York on May 27, 2008, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number two, the first disc for today, but the second disc in these interviews.

Okay, Nancy.

MS. SPERO: Yes, ma'am. Sorry about my voice.

MS. RICHARDS: That's okay. It's very clear. So when we last spoke, you finished your talking about -

MS. SPERO: Where were we?

MS. RICHARDS: We finished your talking about growing up and going to the Art Institute of Chicago and meeting Leon and the things you did in Chicago. And I believe that we were at the point of what you did after you left Chicago. And I know that there are some brief stops, where you went to Ischia, in Florence, for a year, and you went to Bloomington, Indiana, for another year, because Leon had a teaching job, you had said.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative], in Bloomington.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there anything - did you -

MS. SPERO: And in Ischia, I can't remember why we went to Italy for that year. We had chosen to go there. It was a certain amount of money that I think Leon had. It wasn't very much. And we had to choose a place to go to that wasn't too expensive. And we settled on Ischia, I think. And that's an island in the Bay of Naples.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: You know that?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah. There's one side that's more expensive - not - expensive is the wrong word. But it's more -

MS. RICHARDS: Upper class?

MS. SPERO: Kind of. And we just kind of - we went; we chose the part of the island that was, let's say, the more modest in terms of expenses. So it wouldn't be too expensive.

MS. RICHARDS: And you had two little children, your two sons, then?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. We went with two of our older sons then, yeah. And then Paul was born. The youngest was born -

MS. RICHARDS: That was after you came back?

MS. SPERO: But he was born in Europe, though.

MS. RICHARDS: In Paris.

MS. SPERO: Yes, he was.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. So when you came back from Ischia, you went to Bloomington, you had said because Leon had a teaching job.

MS. SPERO: He did, in Bloomington, Indiana.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were painting, though, at the same time?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, sure.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you - you had a studio in your home?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, always. I like to do that because I like to be able to go into the studio, like at night or the day, whenever I possibly can, you see.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Did you have - so that was for a limited period of time you were in Bloomington.

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah. We went to Indiana, was that one or two years? It might have been two years.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: Was it?

MS. RICHARDS: It says in this biography, 1957 to '59.

MS. SPERO: That's two years.

MS. RICHARDS: And then why did you decide to move to Paris?

MS. SPERO: So right after that, we moved to Paris?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it hard to -

MS. SPERO: I guess I wanted to go to Paris. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] Was it a good place for you to work?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I had been there after I graduated the Art Institute.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: I had been there for a year, and I liked it a lot. And I wanted to go back. Just the aura of Paris is - I mean, the name.

MS. RICHARDS: And you speak French, or you learned then?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, in my fashion. Our children all speak it. They're bilingual, which is great.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Do you remember what you were working on? What you were working on then, in those early years right after - well, not so much after - soon after you left school.

MS. SPERO: Probably the Paris Black Paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: And were you -

MS. SPERO: That sounds logical, doesn't it?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Were you part of a group of artists in Paris? Did you have a network?

MS. SPERO: Good heavens. I guess we knew artists. But we were always kind of - I don't know that we were really with a group so much. But I can't swear to it. It was a long time ago.

MS. RICHARDS: So those Paris Black Paintings - that's interesting. I don't have an image of them. But -

MS. SPERO: Oh, you don't?

MS. RICHARDS: Not right here. But you - it was conceived as a series when you were working on them?

MS. SPERO: Well, I think it turned into a series. I started, and then it did work itself into a series, the Paris Black Paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: And what was the imagery of those paintings?

MS. SPERO: *Lovers*. And figures. I think it was mostly lovers.

MS. RICHARDS: And were you working from images of the figure or from your imagination entirely?

MS. SPERO: It was figurative. It was the imagination, I think, and kind of what I remembered of what I had done in the past, as far as painting the figure went.

MS. RICHARDS: I see some images right here of lovers.

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MS. SPERO: That must be.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there - can you recall -

MS. SPERO: Does it give the dimension of the painting?

MS. RICHARDS: In centimeters. They are fairly large, 160 by 122, very large.

MS. SPERO: They are large, that's right.

MS. RICHARDS: And the other one, Lovers, 137 by 199. That's a very large painting.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And they were very dark.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Why were they dark?

MS. SPERO: Because I'd paint and repaint and repaint. And I'd start with beautiful bright colors. And I used to buy - in Chicago, they had - or they were probably all over, but they had this wonderful set of paints that a manufacturer in Chicago - what was his name? But - and I used those. And I always started out with those beautiful colors. But it inevitably turned gray and then dark, darker and darker, to the gray. It got quite grayed.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there any - did that -

MS. SPERO: It was just by rework - I think that I didn't want it to be so bright. I think it offended me, and I just kept working and reworking.

MS. RICHARDS: It offended you?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, for some reason. I wanted it to be - I guess I wanted it to be toned down. And that's a funny thing I said; it offended me. Isn't that funny that I said that? But I didn't want it to be bright. And I wanted it to be kind of like -

MS. RICHARDS: In the shadows?

MS. SPERO: Well, not really the shadows, but kind of darkened and grayed. And not even a monotone, but just - I just didn't want it bright.

MS. RICHARDS: And the figures are depicted in a very loose, poetic way.

MS. SPERO: That's a nice way of putting it.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: No, that's a very nice way of putting it.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you thinking at all of referencing anything outside of art when you were working on these? Was it your personal experience?

MS. SPERO: I think the subject was mainly lovers. Lovers -

MS. RICHARDS: But lovers could have been from your looking at lovers in Paris -

MS. SPERO: Previous.

MS. RICHARDS: Or reading poetry or -

MS. SPERO: No, I'm just choosing a subject. Lovers and - what else was it? But it was kind of limiting, like the subject matter to one or two. Like lovers would mean, probably, two figures, usually.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: You know? As I think about it. And I guess that's what I wanted. I didn't want it too crowded, you know, the space.

MS. RICHARDS: Did that have anything to do with Paris as a kind of a fantasy of a place where lovers would -

MS. SPERO: I wonder, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] It's famous as a place for lovers.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, right. I mean, it was just such nonsense, in a way.

MS. RICHARDS: Or were you thinking of past French painters?

MS. SPERO: It's such nonsense.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you thinking about what was going on in New York? Were you painting -

MS. SPERO: Well, actually, that's a good question. I think it was kind of like an escape from New York, that I wasn't too keen on what was going on in New York, nor was I interested in, kind of, following that sort of a thing. And I wanted to kind of create my own kind of rhythm and a continuum. So I was investigating how to do that, I guess. And I guess that's why I called it the Paris Black Paintings and kind of limiting it to Paris Black Paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you feel that those limitations were tools to help you focus, that you purposely decided that you would look at something deeply and continually for those years? Or did that just - in the end, you saw it that way?

MS. SPERO: No, I think that's a good analysis, about the first one you said, that I gave myself a limit.

MS. RICHARDS: That you decided -

MS. SPERO: Must have been kind of a limitation of sorts.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. Yeah.

MS. SPERO: And so it became this - like I thought of it as a series, the Paris Black Paintings. And so it kind of limited the number of images in a painting and - to mostly two, I imagine.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: And that I kind of kept it - I guess I wanted to be consistent and a little more rigorous. And "rigorous" isn't quite the word either, but to keep it kind of in a continuum.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] After a while, as you saw these paintings evolving and continuing and all of the darkness of them, then you didn't keep starting them as bright, did you?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, I always did.

MS. RICHARDS: You did?

MS. SPERO: And there was always a little flicker of light or a color always somewhere, barely perceptible in these paintings. It was funny.

MS. RICHARDS: That kind of sounds - I know that at some point, you were -

MS. SPERO: It seems like -

MS. RICHARDS: It's called the "existential years" in this book that I'm looking at.

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And that has a sense of existentialism to it.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I guess I thought of it as that kind of existential. And existential kind of means it's not too - it's not really too cheery.

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. SPERO: It has to do more with existentialist kind of - well, I suppose I kind of thought of it as a Frenchified way of looking at my work and keeping it - not Frenchified, but a way of describing the series, in a way.

MS. RICHARDS: And that - but when you left Paris in 1965 to come back to New York - or actually, you left in

1964. Did that -

MS. SPERO: And then what happened? We came back to New York?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. But was it -

MS. SPERO: So long ago.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were there and you were immersed in the city and in the sensibility that was shared with other artists and intellectuals - and I think existentialism is very much a part of that.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: When you left, did you carry that back to New York, or did you feel like there was a kind of a break, and your work changed?

MS. SPERO: That, too, is a good question. I think I kind of took it with me a bit. You know, both things - when I went there and when I came back, because I like things to be kind of a continuum, you see, and to work, kind of, together. I think it was for myself more than anyone that I did want to create this kind of way of looking, and maybe even thinking about and remembering how I had done my art and why it was this way - which sounds very vague, but I mean why it was like the Paris Black Paintings, and then kind of letting that go, but keeping the Paris Black Paintings in.

MS. RICHARDS: When you came back - before you came back, you had your son Paul. So you had three little children. How did you manage to continue working?

MS. SPERO: I didn't. As I say, I was exhausted. I was simply exhausted.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. SPERO: And I remember - well, see, then that, too, that kind of fades into the ever-distant past. I guess that's just a way of classifying it and putting it in order, kind of putting them in order. And it's moving around from, you know, from U.S. to Europe, maybe, and just doing - I think it was a mode of classifying my art and what I was doing.

MS. RICHARDS: Can you remember what caused you and Leon to decide to move back to New York from France?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I think we used the term between us that we had to face the music.

MS. RICHARDS: Ah.

MS. SPERO: That we really did. We just couldn't, kind of, live in this -

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of being part of the New York art world?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. And really, we hadn't really participated in the New York art world to any real extent. We were from the Midwest, from Chicago.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: And I guess we both felt, and simultaneously, that we really had to, you know, change and just see what it was going to be like to do our art and to shift a little way in what we would do, in terms of a continuum.

MS. RICHARDS: When you got here, were you surprised by what - when you first got here, you started to show people your work in your studio, and Leon did, too. Did you feel immediately any commonality? Did you find artists whom you felt - you say that at first, when you went to Paris, that you weren't too enthusiastic about what was happening in New York, what was happening in the art world here.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And when you got back, five years later, did you find that to be different than you had imagined or seen?

MS. SPERO: No, I guess by being gone so long and not really having participated in the New York art world that much, I guess I did feel - or I'd kind of excluded myself in a certain way, too.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: I think. And so it was a matter of, kind of, finding a place in the New York art world, in the art scene here, and seeing how to manage that, to be a part of it rather than kind of like on the outer edge, like in Paris.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. It seemed that when you got back, you became involved in protests against the Vietnam War.

MS. SPERO: Is that what it says on the CV?

MS. RICHARDS: That you became a member of Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam.

MS. SPERO: Oh, right, right.

MS. RICHARDS: And at the same time, you did a series called the War Paintings. Now, maybe there was other important work in between the lovers - in between the Paris Black Paintings. But do you remember that you -

MS. SPERO: I don't think so.

MS. RICHARDS: When you got here, that was at such a pressing reality in your life, the Vietnam War -

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: - that you became active politically, and your paintings reflected that.

MS. SPERO: Right. I guess we became friendly with some other artists who were protesting the war. And their practice was different than ours.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember who those people were?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, they were Abstract [Expressionists]. They were very nice, kind of - oh, my goodness, I haven't thought about them in so many years. Like Jack Sonnenberg and Phoebe Helman.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes.

MS. SPERO: Remember them?

MS. RICHARDS: I do.

MS. SPERO: My God, I haven't uttered their names in so -

MS. RICHARDS: I studied with Jack Sonnenberg in New Mexico.

MS. SPERO: Did you? He was a very nice man. In Mexico?

MS. RICHARDS: In New Mexico.

MS. SPERO: In New Mexico. Very nice man. She was more - Phoebe, I think, became ill, didn't she? She died or something. I can't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: I think he died - he might have died before her. He died about 10 years ago?

MS. SPERO: Did he? Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm not sure.

MS. SPERO: But I remember that - yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So they were your friends?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Somehow, we - it was because they - it had to do with the Vietnam War. And there were some others like that, too. Yet their art practice was quite different than ours.

MS. RICHARDS: Totally abstract.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah. But somehow, because they were antiwar, and we were, that that political kind of -

MS. RICHARDS: Did other artists influence - have an impact on your deciding to do those War Paintings? Or were you thinking - I mean, were you thinking of other contemporary artists, artists of that time? Or looking back at much earlier artists addressing war, like [Francisco de] Goya or anybody?

MS. SPERO: I can't remember really. But I think that they didn't really fit in my war paintings too much. But I did them because I was - it was just that I - politically, I was antiwar. And so trying to, I guess, trying to fit it in then. Not being - not fitting in very well.

MS. RICHARDS: Wanting to fit your political feelings with your life as an artist, wanting to put those two things together?

MS. SPERO: Maybe, maybe. I don't think I tried too hard, but [laughs.. -

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] And you and Leon were both - do you remember the relationship between your work and Leon's work at that time?

MS. SPERO: Well, I remember that we always - we'd do our art and then discuss it and then show it to each other. And I've always been kind of shy about even mentioning it, but lately, I've been reading how - like [Simone] de Beauvoir and [Jean-Paul] Sartre, they always did that. I have just read about some famous people that did this. And there was another very famous couple that did that, as well, and I felt so relieved in reading that and learning that, that these couples did that, as well. They kind of checked each other out. They worked autonomously, as we did, but then we would, you know, show each other our work and discuss it.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. You -

MS. SPERO: To each other.

MS. RICHARDS: It seems logical that that would be a fantastic source of honest critique. But what was the part that scared you about talking -

MS. SPERO: Well, that people would think that, you know, too dependent on Leon.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm, yes.

MS. SPERO: You know, that it wouldn't have been - I thought that I might have gotten kind of - Leon was much more articulate about the whole thing, I felt. And maybe I felt a little shy about that. And I didn't want people to feel - to think - that I hadn't thought this out and what, you know -

MS. RICHARDS: Right, right, that you were any less than an equal.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Exactly.

MS. RICHARDS: It certainly hasn't been a problem, as far as I know. Your work is very distinctly -

MS. SPERO: No, it wouldn't.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Did you - when you were doing those War Paintings, were you thinking about - I'm not sure - actually, I'm not sure when your personal alphabet of hieroglyphs, the images that you've used in so much of your work - when you began consciously identifying those images and using them in your work. Was it as early as the War Paintings, these kinds of images?

MS. SPERO: I don't think so.

MS. RICHARDS: No?

MS. SPERO: I think I just did the War Paintings and these images emerged, quite spontaneously. It wasn't so rational that I tried to figure out, you know, the images, the characters.

MS. RICHARDS: The war series not only references Vietnam, but it looks like it references World War II, as well, with the swastikas.

MS. SPERO: That's true. You're very right. That's true.

MS. RICHARDS: So it spans the entire - all the - well, you were alive. You experienced World War II as a young adult.

MS. SPERO: Sure.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you feel that doing this kind of gave you permission, or opened the door? I don't know if you had ever done paintings that dealt with war, World War II or any other subsequent war before Vietnam. Was this the first time that you directly addressed -

MS. SPERO: I don't recall. I'd have to look at my CV.

MS. RICHARDS: And these paintings have a very - also have some strong sexual content. So was that consciously merging in your mind, the images of bombs exploding? [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: And to make it a scatological -

MS. RICHARDS: And male aggression?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, exactly, and to make it as scatological as possible.

MS. RICHARDS: And why did you want to do that?

MS. SPERO: Because I thought war was - there was nothing more obscene than war, and all that kind of brutalizing, and death, and all this stuff. And so I did want to show it as nasty as I could. And I thought the best way to do it was through showing this nasty kind of sexuality, which might shock.

MS. RICHARDS: That it's a male aggression.

MS. SPERO: Exactly, that might shock, you see.

MS. RICHARDS: And you felt comfortable with creating work that might be shocking?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I wanted to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you find, when it was shown, that it did shock people in a way that you expected?

MS. SPERO: Oh -

MS. RICHARDS: Could people deal with it in New York at that time? Maybe there wasn't such explicit antiwar imagery being -

MS. SPERO: No. I think I was trying to create kind of a statement and, you know, kind of a negative, to try to create my attitude toward all this and war.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you think that you would have a real impact, political impact? Was that part of your aspiration?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I really don't know. I just know that I wanted to make images that were as extreme as possible. So that to show my anger and - to use that word again - scatological and just to make it nasty in the way that, to kind of give a real onus of, you know, this negative attitude toward war and all this.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember who, if any, critics championed this work, or if other artists or critics were supportive? Do you remember if you felt that the work was accepted?

MS. SPERO: I think maybe Lawrence Alloway came in at that point. We became friendly with Lawrence and Sylvia, Lawrence Alloway and Sylvia Sleigh, I think. And we were friendly, too, again with Max Kozloff and Joyce Kozloff. But Max wasn't as - Max, you know, very big fellow, but he never was - it was like he was very - you know, he was so big and everything. He still had kind of a delicate way of - not delicate, but he didn't really - I felt sad, like it really was. I felt that he didn't say things as strongly as he might have, in terms of that, or react - it's hard to remember. But I do remember that I felt that he didn't say it like it was really.

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of speaking about your work or -

MS. SPERO: I mean, in terms of war.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: And just that kind of subject matter.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think he maintained a kind of academic arm's length?

MS. SPERO: Not academic, but I thought it was a - what was it with him that he was - it was like he was - and "delicate" is the wrong word with him, too. But he didn't really make strong - like whatever he did, the images he showed or wrote, it wasn't that strong in terms of reaction to what I thought it might have been as a reaction, as my reaction to the war might have been, kind of explosive and fast, whereas he wasn't that way. He was careful the way he -

MS. RICHARDS: These works, the war paintings - they're all much - ironically, maybe, they're all much lighter than the Paris - the Black Paintings from Paris. They have a lightness behind them, even though the imagery is dark.

MS. SPERO: Interesting. Is that so?

MS. RICHARDS: You can see that there's lot of -

MS. SPERO: Yeah, I see, now that you're saying that, yeah. A lot of white space.

MS. RICHARDS: And they're not set - I mean, just like the others, the space is abstract.

MS. SPERO: They're in arbitrary space.

MS. RICHARDS: That's right. Did you think of that consciously, so that they wouldn't be tied to any specific moment, but have a broader impact?

MS. SPERO: Maybe. It's possible.

MS. RICHARDS: And these are smaller than those Paris paintings, I presume?

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah. The Paris Black Paintings are big paintings - you know, oil on canvas. I think they are, whereas these were smaller.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. And the medium is gouache. A lot of these are on paper.

MS. SPERO: Did you say gouache?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, gouache and ink on paper.

MS. SPERO: The War Paintings?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: Oh, my goodness, I completely forgot.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. In this book I'm looking at, which is Nancy Spero: the War Series, 1966 to 1970 [Milano: Charta, 2003].

MS. SPERO: What book is that?

MS. RICHARDS: Charta published this book.

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: In 2003 - and the list of works illustrated includes the medium as gouache and ink on paper. So they were all - now, that might have also had something to do with the size of your studio? That you didn't have a space in New York, with the three children, that you could do giant paintings?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I think at that point, Leon and I were sharing this space.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. You moved here as the first place in New York?

MS. SPERO: No. But Leon had another space. And then he moved, too. He was on this side and I was on this side.

MS. RICHARDS: In this 530 LaGuardia?

MS. SPERO: Finally, were - we finally, then, shared this studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. SPERO: But we didn't in the beginning.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, maybe - so might it be correct that you did these works on paper in part because of physically not having space to do giant paintings that you were doing in Paris?

MS. SPERO: No. I think I just did like working on paper.

MS. RICHARDS: You just wanted to do these. And they're smaller works. Did you have any sense that you could

sell these?

MS. SPERO: Oh, no.

MS. RICHARDS: That was totally beside the point?

MS. SPERO: Totally beside the point.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you - let's see. Did you exhibit these? I think that you did exhibit these.

MS. SPERO: Did I? Does it say where? Isn't that something, I can't remember all that?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I'm not -

MS. SPERO: It's a long time ago.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm not positive. I think that they were exhibited. But I don't have that detail right here. But you did this whole series of paintings from 1966 to 1970. And during that time, you were active in those - in the Artists and Writers Against the War, member of the Art Workers Coalition.

MS. SPERO: Oh, right.

MS. RICHARDS: And did those activities impact your work? Or I mean, did you think of -

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I mean, I think it was simultaneous with what I was painting.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: It seemed of a - it would seem more unified in a certain way.

MS. RICHARDS: Which was satisfying?

MS. SPERO: Well, yeah. I think it was - yeah. I don't know if I was satisfied, but -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember at that time there were some people who felt that it was practically immoral not to address the war as an artist, and some people who felt they could be involved in political activities, but when they go back to the studio, their work - like Jack Sonnenberg, as you said, would not - might not reflect those?

MS. SPERO: I don't remember what their attitudes were. Jack's or Phoebe's.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Yeah. And as then you - I think the next series of paintings you did were the Artaud Paintings.

MS. SPERO: That's right.

MS. RICHARDS: Did that come from some ideas that you had started to develop when you were still in Paris? Were you reading his [Antonin] Artaud and thinking that, just because -

MS. SPERO: No. I think it grew out of the War Paintings and violence. And then I wanted something on a personal level, rather than just this generalization of war.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: And I think that's why I did those, and started those, just to, kind of, try that to make it like a person rather than a -

MS. RICHARDS: And what was most important to you about his writing, Artaud?

MS. SPERO: Well, it was so violent and expressive.

MS. RICHARDS: So you felt that you wanted to go from a more abstract violence of war to a more personal connection with -

MS. SPERO: I think so. I can't swear to it. But I think that was it, that I really wanted to -

MS. RICHARDS: And those paintings, were they possibly even more difficult for the New York art world to accept? Or did you find the response - do you remember what the response was?

MS. SPERO: None of the responses, as I remember, were too keen. If I remember.

MS. RICHARDS: It was so different than what everyone else - or some of the people were doing.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there any other artists you think of who you felt a kind of connection to, in terms of their work and what they were thinking of doing, besides Leon?

MS. SPERO: Hm-hmm, hm-hmm. [Negative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever feel isolated in terms of -

MS. SPERO: Oh, sure.

MS. RICHARDS: And that was just - and how did you cope with that?

MS. SPERO: I just did the work, you know. And that's kind of the way it was. And I felt I was doing my work in pretty much isolation.

MS. RICHARDS: Even though you were in New York and you were gradually - did you - so you did these art -

MS. SPERO: Except for Leon, of course.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. What about other women artists? Do you remember being -

MS. SPERO: When did the women's movement start in the arts? See, then that started -

MS. RICHARDS: Well, in 1970, which was - the Artaud Paintings were in 1969 and 1970.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: It says you joined the Women Artists in Revolution, W-A-R, in 1970.

MS. SPERO: Oh, I see. So -

MS. RICHARDS: In 1972, you were a cofounder of the A.I.R. Gallery [Artists In Residence Gallery, SoHo, New York City].

MS. SPERO: I see. So things were beginning to move, then, in terms of -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. And it says - so do you remember feeling in isolation? Or were there other artists - women - who you felt - or anyone who was dealing with images of violence and this kind of subject matter that you were dealing with? Maybe artists who were working in Europe more than New York?

MS. SPERO: I don't think so.

MS. RICHARDS: There were artists in Austria and other places who -

MS. SPERO: No, I don't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't know about their work?

MS. SPERO: No, no, no, not that I could recall. No.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that you had - you probably still do - have a special - a kind of strength? I mean, what maintained you for those years, in both War Paintings and the Artaud, the works on paper that are -

MS. SPERO: Well, I think just kind of an expression of anger, you know, in general, at just, you know, just at the war and - the Vietnam War - and just, kind of, the art world and just, kind of, life in general. And so that was very sustaining to be so angry. [They laugh.] It was very sustaining.

MS. RICHARDS: The anger sustained you, even though you were isolated, in a way.

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: It was sustaining.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Anger is.

MS. RICHARDS: So then where did your work go after the Artaud Paintings? And it says here that, yeah, after the Artaud Paintings, I don't - which was '69 and '70 - it says then you did something called *Codex Artaud*.

MS. SPERO: Oh, *Codex Artaud*.

MS. RICHARDS: And what?

MS. SPERO: That was a more stylized Artaud, the Codex.

MS. RICHARDS: And what were the style references in that?

MS. SPERO: Well, it became just a little more abstract. But it was the same subject of the Artaud. And the Artaud was kind of like this war stuff, too. I mean, it was kind of violent, Artaud's language. And even that, as well - so all of this was pretty violent, the whole thing, the War Paintings and Artaud and everything. You know, I guess I'm drawn to that, the extremes. See, I'd been drawn to the extreme rather than the - more than just kind of the regular.

MS. RICHARDS: And the *Codex* was having more of a narrative element to it?

MS. SPERO: The *Codex*?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: Maybe, maybe.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm looking at a work called *The Hours of the Night*, in 1974.

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's a big piece.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. And that's the same time as the -

MS. SPERO: Well, it's a narrative about a story, really, without a continuum in the way.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you - around that time, after the Codex, you started finding the kind of references from the Bible, from illustrated manuscripts -

MS. SPERO: Not the Bible.

MS. RICHARDS: But from ancient imagery and text and artworks.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Can you recall what attracted you -

MS. SPERO: No, I'd have to look at the artwork to tell you.

MS. RICHARDS: No. What fascinated you and compelled you and drew you to those ancient, earlier works from mythology?

MS. SPERO: I guess I felt they were so powerful, and to use that strange word, timeless, in a way.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Do you know, I just see a reference here that you had a studio in 1973 on 71st Street.

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah, we lived there.

MS. RICHARDS: Ah. So when you first came from Paris -

MS. SPERO: Seventy-first and - no, we lived on Tompkins Square, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MS. SPERO: Tompkins? And then we moved to 71st Street. And then - yeah. Mm-hmm.

MS. RICHARDS: The image that I've seen here, the *Codex Artaud* detail, you have this head here.

MS. SPERO: In the Codex, that's like - a codex is kind of like putting it in order. Isn't it kind of like making it more -

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: Isn't it, kind of?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes. Were you envisioning, in that series, that these images could be reproduced and disseminated widely?

MS. SPERO: [No audible response.]

MS. RICHARDS: No. They were always pictured as unique works of art. And it looks here that you started to - you were trying to use these, kind of, archetypal images, the snake and the head and the -

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah. That's in the Codex Artaud, right?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MS. SPERO: And so that was a longer one, if you look at the dimensions.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: It's much more horizontal.

MS. RICHARDS: That's right. That's right, 52 by 316 centimeters.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, they got very large.

MS. RICHARDS: That's three - 10 feet.

MS. SPERO: In extended linear format, and occasionally vertical, but mostly horizontal, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And was this the first time that you worked on a very long, horizontal format?

MS. SPERO: I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Which you've done again since then.

MS. SPERO: I don't know, unless it's in the catalogue.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: I really can't -

MS. RICHARDS: That's okay.

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And do you remember why you said, "Okay, I've focused on Artaud enough; I'm going to move on," how you felt about the transition you made from that work?

MS. SPERO: I forgot what I did after the Artaud and the War Paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: It said - well, I think you decided to focus entirely on women, representations of women.

MS. SPERO: Ah. And what year was that? That was in the '80s?

MS. RICHARDS: Seventy-four.

MS. SPERO: Oh, '74.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you did a series called The Torture of Women.

MS. SPERO: Right, right.

MS. RICHARDS: So you're still involved with violence. This is hard for most people to live with and to work with. And yet you were able to -

MS. SPERO: I kept doing it, didn't I?

MS. RICHARDS: You must have felt - well, obviously, you had a very - a kind of sense of protection, safety, a feeling of security, in order to be dealing with that all the time in your thinking and in your work.

MS. SPERO: That's interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: You had your great supporter, Leon, and your sons.

MS. SPERO: Well, it was just kind of a violent reaction to, I guess, just to life and art and -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel disappointed or angry about the New York art world?

MS. SPERO: Probably. Yeah. I mentioned before that it wasn't just, you know, abstract things. It was the art world, too, and a lack of, you know, reaction to the work, really.

MS. RICHARDS: To the work?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. And I guess I didn't get - I'm not sure. I didn't really get it out that -

MS. RICHARDS: And how did you feel about being a woman artist? I mean, obviously, you were involved in these groups.

MS. SPERO: I started thinking about it once I started working. And when was that? When I started working with - I was aware of women artists. Remember that, politically, that started opening up, in talking about women artists and - and I hadn't thought about it previously.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember - when you were a cofounder of the A.I.R. Gallery, that was -

MS. SPERO: There were 20 of us, though, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: And you did it in part because you -

MS. SPERO: A lot of us.

MS. RICHARDS: You felt you needed to create a place to show your work?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And it was good. It was like a - I think there were a number of us. And it was kind of interesting, and I kind of felt that was a strong way of, you know, expressing.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there women who - of those 20, were you all of a certain generation? Or were there two generations?

MS. SPERO: No, I think I was older. I was older than a lot of them.

MS. RICHARDS: Some of them were born in the '40s and '50s, maybe?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, I was -

MS. RICHARDS: Not the '50s, the '40s.

MS. SPERO: No. I was sometimes about 10 years older than some of them.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you continue to be involved in that gallery for a length of time?

MS. SPERO: Which gallery, A.I.R.?

MS. RICHARDS: A.I.R. You had several shows there?

MS. SPERO: I might have, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Did you feel that it was -

MS. SPERO: I felt it was like - it was another way of, like, almost raising my fist in anger to - you know, being in an alternative gallery like that. I considered it an alternative gallery, which it was.

MS. RICHARDS: So your next - do you remember how you decided to focus on the torture of women? How you went from Artaud violence to violence against women? And torture is not just personal, it's political.

MS. SPERO: It's political. Yeah. I just felt it was kind of a logical -

MS. RICHARDS: Something that no one else was doing.

MS. SPERO: No. No.

MS. RICHARDS: So again, you're -

MS. SPERO: So just meandering in the wilderness. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: But you were always completely convinced, in this conviction that that was -

MS. SPERO: Oh, well, I'm sure that there were times that I had misgivings. But I think probably you're right, that I felt I had to do it, on some very profound level, that that's what my art was and that's why I had to do it, I think - mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: One thing that's totally consistent all the time is, throughout, is the way you approached the space on the canvas, the way you approached the medium, the paint, the gouache, or whatever the medium.

MS. SPERO: That's a good observation.

MS. RICHARDS: There was always a consistent - you seem to have found your voice. The Paris paintings were different a little bit.

MS. SPERO: Yes, they were.

MS. RICHARDS: But it looks like, when you got back to New York and you started the War series, that you found your approach.

MS. SPERO: It does seem so.

MS. RICHARDS: And the touch of your brush on the canvas.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I often talk about my touch, that it would - something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: It's very - and it's very personal. Do you remember feeling that "ah ha" - a kind of a sense, either looking back or - that you'd established that, that that had been something that you - "Ah, that's how I want to work"?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. Very good, yeah. I did, but it was kind of wild and - but that I had established this. And it was in a continuum, of sorts.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. And it seems like it was a method that would be particularly open to the, kind of, range of imagery that you were using.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It seemed like a logical progression, to me. I don't know why, but it did.

MS. RICHARDS: And do you remember - when you're dealing with this difficult topic of torture -

MS. SPERO: Are you exhausted from looking at my art? [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: No. [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: That was a big sigh.

MS. RICHARDS: There's so much to -

MS. SPERO: That was a very big sigh.

MS. RICHARDS: There is so much; there is so much. When you're dealing with the subject of torture of women, and the imagery is so graphic and difficult, you obviously - how did you decide what to depict? What drove you from one image to the next?

MS. SPERO: I guess I decided to concentrate on women, painting the idea of women, or the torture of women.

MS. RICHARDS: Did critics attack you? Did people talk -

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I wasn't too popular.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: I don't think that's ever bothered you.

MS. SPERO: Well, it did, of course.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, but it didn't stop you, ever.

MS. SPERO: No. No. Hmm-um, hmm-um. [Negative.]

MS. RICHARDS: But you were saying Barbara Rose? You mentioned Barbara Rose just now?

MS. SPERO: No. No.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there anyone, a critic who supported that work, who you felt - do you remember who was particularly -

MS. SPERO: I don't remember. I think later on, maybe, Lucy finally came in. But that was quite awhile later.

MS. RICHARDS: Lucy Lippard?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I think that later some came in, like Lucy. That took a long time, if I remember correctly. We'd have to look at the dates.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. SPERO: Of if and when she wrote anything.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were doing your work later in the '70s, and you're always focusing on women, and you're looking at - you're taking images from Greek painting and from all kinds of ancient cultures, do you remember, kind of, stopping and doing research to look for these? Did these come to you just as you were looking through books each day, going to museums? Did you consciously compile a vocabulary of images to pick from?

MS. SPERO: No. But I think I looked around at books.

MS. RICHARDS: And was it organized in the sense of, you would record - in this book they called them hieroglyphs?

MS. SPERO: No.

MS. RICHARDS: You kept them?

MS. SPERO: No, no, no, no.

MS. RICHARDS: They were just all in your mind. And as you were doing them,when you were working in your studio, did you have earlier works all around you?

MS. SPERO: Hmm-um. [Negative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Was that conscious that you only wanted to look at your current work and you didn't want to look at your earlier work?

MS. SPERO: No. I mean, maybe, and there just wasn't that much room. You know, I didn't want it too cluttered in my mind. I wanted to concentrate on what I was doing. That's what I think I did. Just to kind of clean it up, in a way.

MS. RICHARDS: And you're combining all kinds of painting and collage and gouache, different kinds of elements.

MS. SPERO: Definitely.

MS. RICHARDS: Did that, kind of, collage esthetic start coming in your work in the '70s when you were -

MS. SPERO: Probably. And I like that, that I used all these different kinds of ways of working, that I didn't, kind of, narrow it, you know, that I kept it open to all these ways of working.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there some point when you decided - when you did these works about women and torture, did you continue them until you felt that you had come to a certain point where enough had been said?

MS. SPERO: Exactly. Definitely. And then I stopped.

MS. RICHARDS: You couldn't possibly measure the impact that they were having.

MS. SPERO: No.

MS. RICHARDS: You just decided to stop.

MS. SPERO: I just decided to stop.

MS. RICHARDS: And when you stopped, then you started expanding your idea - your -

MS. SPERO: Then I would do something else.

MS. RICHARDS: But always with imagery of women.

MS. SPERO: At that point, probably yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And there were series - there were works. Do you remember always thinking about working in series, or did you -

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah. I think I still do, in a way.

MS. RICHARDS: That was a time when other artists were doing series as well.

MS. SPERO: Was it?

MS. RICHARDS: I think so. But that wasn't something that you thought about.

MS. SPERO: I can't recall. Can you recall who it might have been?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, there are all - the Minimalists worked in series. You can think of Hanne Darboven. You can think of Frank Stella.

MS. SPERO: I wouldn't have even thought about them.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] Well, I know -

MS. SPERO: To tell you the truth. They just didn't enter my - and they would never have thought of me as doing much of anything either, so - kind of a mutual thing.

MS. RICHARDS: What - in the '70s, do you recall what artists, what work excited you in looking around? Your contemporaries? No?

MS. SPERO: I'd have to look in my book again.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah. As you started going beyond the torture paintings and drawings, and you were - but still thinking about women, the imagery - there's imagery that has a very positive feeling about women and women as warriors and women as strong figures.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: How did that evolve from the images of the torture?

MS. SPERO: I guess it just did. You know, but I like to challenge myself, in a certain way, what I'm doing. And bringing in other modes of looking at subjects is challenging myself.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that there's a lot of improvisation in your working methods?

MS. SPERO: That's a very good response, yeah. Very much so.

MS. RICHARDS: And so you'd be working on something, and if it was a long piece, you wouldn't have planned it ahead. You'd begin at a certain place. Did you feel it was a kind of a narrative?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, but without a real history.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: There was no real story, if you notice. I mean, you couldn't glean anything, much of anything, even if it was kind of a narrative.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you want the viewer to understand the references to the images?

MS. SPERO: Not particularly. It was only - I did that for my own way of, kind of, putting it down and doing the art.

MS. RICHARDS: You did what? I mean, you picked the images for your -

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that you were working, then, from an intuitive - intuitively?

MS. SPERO: Definitely.

MS. RICHARDS: But, of course, based on -

MS. SPERO: Definitely. Wouldn't you think?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Based on your mental archive.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Really.

MS. RICHARDS: When you work now and when you were working on site, I mean - in those works, you were working in the studio and you weren't thinking of where they would be installed. There was nothing specific about it. You didn't even imagine that anyone would show them?

MS. SPERO: No. No.

MS. RICHARDS: And as your work evolved in later years, do you remember when - let's say, this image right here, called *The First Language*, 1981, has very long horizontal panels. When you were doing that work, were you envisioning how it would be installed?

MS. SPERO: Not really, because as I worked, there was kind of a simultaneity of all that, just working together, you know, without too much - a little preplanning, but not - it was all working together, kind of.

MS. RICHARDS: And in this image, you have three horizontal - maybe I'm not seeing everything, even. You have three horizontal bands. Now, are you thinking about this in terms of time? I mean -

MS. SPERO: Definitely.

MS. RICHARDS: There's an element of time in this.

MS. SPERO: Time and space - yeah, all that kind of stuff. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: But not an actual time, a poetic time?

MS. SPERO: No, no, no. And not literal at all.

MS. RICHARDS: Did the making of these go quickly? Or did you do something and then think - what was the experience of making something like The First Language?

MS. SPERO: Some went more quickly than others. Some went quickly, and some did not at all.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you destroy work that wasn't right?

MS. SPERO: No. The most - the work that I really destroyed the most was when I - gee, I really destroyed a lot when I came back from Paris or something. I don't know why I did that, but I did.

MS. RICHARDS: Huh.

MS. SPERO: There have been times when I destroyed work, but this wasn't the time that I destroyed it.

MS. RICHARDS: When did you destroy work?

MS. SPERO: Oh, gosh, I was just thinking about that the other day. I think when I came back from Paris - I can't quite place what year that might have been.

MS. RICHARDS: When you came back, rather than before you left? So you hauled all the works back from Paris? And then you -

MS. SPERO: Well, I brought them back, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. And then you think maybe you destroyed -

MS. SPERO: I mean, I didn't know what else to do with them. I brought them back.

MS. RICHARDS: And you maybe destroyed some things that you brought back? Or maybe the works you had done way before -

MS. SPERO: Maybe not. I -

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe works you had done in Indiana - in school, or in Bloomington?

MS. SPERO: No. No, I can't remember what I did -

MS. RICHARDS: But mostly, if a work doesn't turn out the way you want it to, you keep working at it until you - but the way you work, and the imagery is very transparent almost, very delicate. And it doesn't look like you can make mistakes and erase them too well. [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: That's nice. That's nice.

MS. RICHARDS: It looks like it's very immediate and it's either right or it's not.

MS. SPERO: Very good. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So that kind of means that either you accept everything as being right, or you actually destroy things that don't turn out.

MS. SPERO: I think I got more tolerant of what - at that point, what I was doing. And I didn't destroy the work.

[END MD 02.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is disc three with Nancy Spero on May 27 [2008], Judith Richards.

MS. SPERO: I mean, I don't know how far you want to get into my art and just what your aim is.

MS. RICHARDS: As far - to collect as much information about your work.

MS. SPERO: Is that what you've done with the others?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes. And the evolution of your work and all the elements of your life that affect you work, so it's as complete as possible, as you're willing to make it.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: You continued to be involved in political action. I see here you joined the Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America. But your work, it seems, maybe in the '80s, wasn't taking an explicit position against - in any political way, as it had been in the War Paintings.

MS. SPERO: Hm-hmm. [Negative.] It was different.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were still focused on women. So you were not picturing male warriors; you were picturing women.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah. That's true.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you feel that as the years have gone by - well, we know that the reaction to your work has become more and more and more positive and more responsive.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, that's true.

MS. RICHARDS: How did that kind of success, which built gradually, but continues to build - how did that impact your work? How did success affect you? [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: I guess it gives a certain buoyancy to it, kind of a - you know, there's an acknowledgement of it out

there, somehow. But I wasn't too willing to acknowledge too, too much. I wouldn't let it impinge on what I was doing too much, this acknowledgement.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever feel that it was a little bit distracting or dangerous to your being able to keep doing just exactly what you wanted to do? Some artists talk about when they are successful - in fact, knowing what will sell might -

MS. SPERO: I never thought about that. Impossible. Impossible. No kidding.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] Do you think that that has something to do with the entire reality of artists of your generation? You began never imagining achieving great financial success - different expectations.

MS. SPERO: Well, I think I was realistic enough to know that the subject matter of my art and what it was was not a big success, you know, in terms of being collected and being bought, really, by collectors. People didn't necessarily want to hang it on their walls, what I was doing.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] Has that changed? I mean, your work isn't - you're not dealing with the same kind of such difficult subjects, but still -

MS. SPERO: Yeah, it's more accepted now, isn't it? Than it has been. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: So you've gradually - the collage and the different approaches, like stenciling and printing, the combination is - it's built a personal iconography, you might say. And did that kind of way of working make you think about doing prints or site-specific installations? Did it take you did the iconography in your work expand your approach to the kind of work you were doing? I'm not sure if I'm asking this question correctly.

MS. SPERO: No. No, huh-uh. It was just difficult keeping it all separated. And I actually didn't want it to impinge in any way on something that I could sell or -

MS. RICHARDS: Keeping what separated?

MS. SPERO: The kind of art I was doing. And I didn't want to, you know, keep it - I just wanted it all of a piece.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you do separate - did you make prints as separate prints? Because you're doing hand printing on your work.

MS. SPERO: A bit. A bit.

MS. RICHARDS: But that wasn't something that was strong?

MS. SPERO: No, it wasn't. No, no. But I did do that.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you found over the years, as you presented your work way beyond New York, internationally, that the response to your work varies depending on the culture in which it's shown?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I imagine.

MS. RICHARDS: You haven't - have you been surprised?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I really imagine so. And what the circumstances might be - maybe. I can't rightly say.

MS. RICHARDS: When you started doing -

MS. SPERO: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: What were you - I mean, this work I'm looking at here, Sky Goddess, 1985, and you have these images from different - it looks like images from Greece and images that look much older and Egyptian. Did you consciously want to blend cultural references?

MS. SPERO: Definitely.

MS. RICHARDS: And why?

MS. SPERO: I mean, I just loved them, particularly Egyptian art, ancient Egyptian art, and some of the other stuff. And I did like combining all these, kind of, different disciplines of the ancient and the contemporary and all this. I like challenging myself, meaning my art, to, kind of, combining all this, if I possibly could, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And how do you think that affected the power of your work to - and

when you were doing that, did you decide - I know it's intuitive, but did you decide, okay, I'm going to approach this - I'm going to deal with the idea of the goddess. Or did that come up afterward, that you -

MS. SPERO: No, it was all of the simultaneity, I think, and a little bit preplanned, as well, things I was going to talk about.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever do sketches or drawings or anything to preplan?

MS. SPERO: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Everything was immediate?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I mean, I have done sketches and stuff. But it was never preplanning for any other kind of work I was doing, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You spent quite a bit of time working with different - here's one on Aphrodite - working on these classical references. Did those come from looking at art, from reading?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, from looking at art and reading about it or thinking about it, yeah. Not too much, but a bit, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] When you were compiling this, well, the alphabet of hieroglyphs that we see in this book, did you at one point realize that you really were making an alphabet? I mean, is that a wrong way of describing this?

MS. SPERO: Not really. It's just that -

MS. RICHARDS: Someone else made -

MS. SPERO: He - what's-his-name - I forgot his name. He is the one that put it that way.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay. You just -

MS. SPERO: He ordered it into an alphabet.

MS. RICHARDS: I see. You didn't have that idea?

MS. SPERO: No.

MS. RICHARDS: No. And did you have these images, sitting in the studio, that you would look at and think about?

MS. SPERO: No, no, no.

MS. RICHARDS: So these were pulled from your artworks then?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. And maybe I did have some of them around. But I mean, I didn't make an alphabet. I wasn't that orderly, kind of a - creating anything that rigorous, in a way. I kind of did it when I wanted to.

MS. RICHARDS: There are some images that keep reappearing in your work.

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: The Celtic goddess, the Sheela-na-Gig [grotesque witch figure].

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: There are certain work images that keep reappearing.

MS. SPERO: That's right.

MS. RICHARDS: And what brings them back to your work?

MS. SPERO: I don't know. I just think that they obviously are - I think that they're really powerful. And it obviously must say a lot to me, in a way.

MS. RICHARDS: And you feel that they have power to communicate to audiences?

MS. SPERO: Well, at least to me.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you felt that it was really better not to tell people how to think about your work? I mean, what is your approach to text on the wall when your work is exhibited? Let's say, the show that was at Galerie Lelong [New York City] a couple of years ago, or any of the times when your works have been exhibited - have you wanted text to explain the images?

MS. SPERO: No, no, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you want the curators purposely not to provide that?

MS. SPERO: No, no, only if they ask. But I don't offer - well, sometimes I do start talking about it a lot, actually. That's not true. I do. But it just depends on my mood and whether I feel like explaining or not.

MS. RICHARDS: So if someone found an explanation that you had given of a particular work, previously, when you first exhibited, and they were going to exhibit again, that explanation could be presented?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, it could.

MS. RICHARDS: Over the years, how would you want to describe your relationship to art and to the galleries, the art dealers that you have worked with? And how have they been helpful, or not, to the work?

MS. SPERO: No. I mean, it's so arbitrary, such a matter of taste and how it fits in, you know, with the receiving - like with the dealers, when they do accept the work and bring it in, you know, to the gallery. Like the way it is now with the gallery, with Mary Sabbatino and stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, Galerie Lelong.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you recall - I know you showed with A.I.R., and there have been other galleries. Have you always selected the work yourself that you would exhibit?

MS. SPERO: Well, in the past I did.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, in galleries. And you would - that was -

MS. SPERO: I mean, when I - it was entirely up to me. But, for instance, like with Lelong or something, I think I leave it kind of open. If it's working with me - you know, it depends. It's not cut and dried. I don't care for it to be cut and dried. There are no rules in what way I want it to be. I just don't want it just to be, you know, opened up for an exhibit. I just don't want that.

MS. RICHARDS: Over the years when you've been as an artist, have you felt that there have been other artists, your contemporaries, whose work has had an impact on your work?

MS. SPERO: Oh, probably. But, you know, I'll be damned if I can remember what it is now. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: I'm sure there must have been.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Is there someone -

MS. SPERO: Or maybe not. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Right now, do you go to see other artists' exhibitions?

MS. SPERO: I don't so much anymore. It's just such an effort.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. SPERO: And I have so much in the past that I've kind of let it drop - too much, probably.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, there's -

MS. SPERO: There gets to be a point where you can't - I mean, there's just no time for all this.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, there's priorities. You have to have priorities.

MS. SPERO: There are. Yeah. And energy and lack of energy or whatever. I have to kind of guard that now.

MS. RICHARDS: You haven't done any teaching in your -

MS. SPERO: On and off. It's nothing, really, to -

MS. RICHARDS: But you've been tremendously involved in talking to writers about your work and about your life as an artist.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And have those experiences been very nourishing, or annoying? I mean, you've done a lot of interviews.

MS. SPERO: No, it's interesting to do all this.

MS. RICHARDS: And you've done interviews with artists. I was reading one with Sue Williams.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And that's been interesting.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you felt that the community of artists in New York has been an important part of your life?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I think so. I do.

MS. RICHARDS: So being in New York, you and Leon - you said that you had to come back.

MS. SPERO: Definitely.

MS. RICHARDS: It's been a positive experience? [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: Definitely, I had to come back. It was just too isolating the other way.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah. You haven't left New York for a long period of time since and lived somewhere else.

MS. SPERO: No. Hmm-um.

MS. RICHARDS: When did you think about doing site-specific installations? When people first invited you? Was that always a very intriguing idea that would be exciting? Or was it difficult for you to imagine?

MS. SPERO: I guess when the matter was brought up to me, you know, I would either say yes or no if I found that interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Have you - you have never stopped working, focusing on women, in your work.

MS. SPERO: Not that I can remember.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] No, no. You haven't.

MS. SPERO: I seem to have found my subject.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. That's really sustained you.

MS. SPERO: Very much so.

MS. RICHARDS: And do you feel that if you see any progress, in terms of women's position in the art world and in the world, has that affected your work? I mean, your - the imagery combines the past and the present. Have you felt that the subject or the way you're working acknowledges this, kind of, sense of feminine empowerment?

MS. SPERO: I hope so. Well, I hope so.

MS. RICHARDS: You have a work called The *Goddess Nut*, 1989.

MS. SPERO: There was a Goddess Nut [pronounced newt] - I forget.

MS. RICHARDS: Nut, N-U-T.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, Nut, mm-hmm.

MS. RICHARDS: That was a real goddess?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, I think so. It was the name, and I don't know what mythological - but I got it from something. I can't remember where [Egyptian sky goddess].

MS. RICHARDS: And of course, you worked with the sky goddess and Egyptian goddesses.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: When you're thinking about your work now - there's a performative aspect about your work. And as time has gone by, with the stencils and the creating the site-specific pieces and all the hand printing, have you thought about how important it is to you that you have that kind of physical relationship with making the work? And are other people then brought into it to assist you?

MS. SPERO: Sometimes, but not so much. But sometimes I've needed it, yes. Yeah, definitely, I've had artists brought it, you know, to assist me. I've had some help.

MS. RICHARDS: When you're working on a day-to-day basis, over the years - it doesn't have to be about right now - do you just go from one work to another work? Or have there been times when you've struggled, and you didn't know what to do, and you had to stop working for a period of time to think about what should come next? Or has it always been very smooth and just continuous?

MS. SPERO: No, it's never been just terribly smooth. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: No, it hasn't.

MS. RICHARDS: So there have been times when you really didn't know what to do.

MS. SPERO: Sure, sure.

MS. RICHARDS: And what - how long do those times last?

MS. SPERO: Well, not too long. I think that it goes pretty naturally, one thing into another. You know, but it's not always so perfectly smooth. It really depends, how it is. But for the most part, there is a weaving and, kind of, thinking about the complexity of it all, with different motifs and different backgrounds, you know, brought in - other kind of - other art, you know, artists' work.

MS. RICHARDS: When you think about the work you did - let's say this work from 2001, *The Hours of the Night*; it has a density about it. The amount of color - it's hand printing and printed collage. But there's a tremendous amount of color density. You don't have white backgrounds, as much of your earlier work, or plain backgrounds. Do you recall what brought you to this image, this multipanel, 11-panel, piece? And what caused the change in this work from the previous?

MS. SPERO: Well, it's just that I like to experiment and move around a lot. I really do. It's not that different than some of the other stuff I've done.

MS. RICHARDS: No, no, no. But there's -

MS. SPERO: But there's a difference.

MS. RICHARDS: The fact that they are dense with color.

MS. SPERO: They are dense. They are. And so it's an experiment. I've done that quite deliberately and partially accidentally, too. I mean, I bring it in purposely, and then accidentally, and it, sort of, all works, you know. And so in that way I can maintain my - be interested in my own art in a certain way.

MS. RICHARDS: The element of spontaneity, too, was used.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: This is called The Hours of the Night, and they're vertical strips.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Does each strip represent an hour in the night? Do you take it literally?

MS. SPERO: No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. SPERO: No, each is - no, I don't know what I did. But I have 11 hours in the night instead of 12. See, there are actually 12 hours of the night in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. But I made it 11. I did the other one, too, 11, just to be ornery.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: [Laughs] Really.

MS. RICHARDS: And when you were doing this, you did the one, and then the next, and the next, without preplanning what the entire piece would be?

MS. SPERO: Maybe.

MS. RICHARDS: Or did you -

MS. SPERO: Yeah, I'm laying down some.

MS. RICHARDS: Or did you lay it down?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, I did, probably a number of them together on the floor at once.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh [affirmative], because, obviously, it looks like the color had to be conceived in a unified way.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, I forget exactly. It's always slightly different. But I lay it down and then start working around. You know, I don't have any more energy. I'm sorry.

MS. RICHARDS: That's fine. That's fine.

MS. SPERO: I'm very sorry. I never get enough sleep.

MS. RICHARDS: No, no, no, that's fine. That's fine. We'll stop.

[END MD 03.]

This is Judith Richards interviewing Nancy Spero at 530 LaGuardia Place, New York, on July 24, 2008, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

So, Nancy.

MS. SPERO: Yes, ma'am.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to start out by asking you a few questions about, I think, a very important work that you - an early work and now a new work. And that is, in 1967, you did a work called Kill Commies/Maypole.

MS. SPERO: Oh, yeah, that was in the War series.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. Here's a picture of it right here.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And it's in your new - this retrospective in Barcelona [Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Spain]. And I wanted to ask you about this work, and then how you've used it again very recently to create a piece called *Maypole/Take No Prisoners*. So when you first did this, *Kill Commies* - of course, this is the Vietnam War; it's 1967 - where did the idea of using the maypole come from?

MS. SPERO: Where did the idea of the maypole come?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, using a maypole, which is usually a festive -

MS. SPERO: Oh, because it's ironic, because it's usually festive.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: It's celebratory, dancing around the maypole and probably in May - I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it in May?

MS. SPERO: This history of May - I have no idea. But I just have the idea that it must have been, because there always pictures of, usually of young women, sometimes young men, dancing around. But the women are in nice, almost summery-looking outfits, you know, dresses and such. So I figured it must be warm, and the maypole, dancing, in May, and celebratory. And so this is just quite the - it's celebratory of - there's these - well, not fascists, that's too strong a term - but of these guys taking over.

MS. RICHARDS: And so then, on the maypole - of course, the top of the maypole, that's the American flag.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. I didn't do that for - not in a thousand years - I didn't do that for Venice.

MS. RICHARDS: No, no, we'll get to Venice. I want to ask you about Venice.

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: But - and then hanging from the maypole, it looks like heads.

MS. SPERO: There are heads. Oh, oh - in the original?

MS. RICHARDS: In the original.

MS. SPERO: I think they are.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: I think they are.

MS. RICHARDS: And is that -

MS. SPERO: Oh, they definitely are. They're severed heads, with tongues sticking out.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. And was that the first time you had used that kind of imagery?

MS. SPERO: What? Heads with tongues?

MS. RICHARDS: The severed heads?

MS. SPERO: No, no. Not at all.

MS. RICHARDS: That was -

MS. SPERO: I had been using that - I can't quite even remember when I did start using that kind of imagery. But it got really rather prevalent in my art around that time.

MS. RICHARDS: And it's - as you said, it's ironic. You have the idea of the sweet maypole, and you have the most horrific kind of imagery.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. It's totally ironic.

MS. RICHARDS: It's extremely strong.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah. It's supposed to be - it's celebratory. And I know, too, that in - like in the Central America, or God knows where, that some of these tin-pot dictators or what-have-you - they wore belts or necklaces with shrunken heads or whatever on them as looted, to show their prowess as fighters and of all the goods, goodies, meaning the people that they had -

MS. RICHARDS: Trophies of war.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, trophies of war, so to speak. That's perfect.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. SPERO: Trophies of war, which were literally.

MS. RICHARDS: Now, you've talked about how you see a kind of continuum, or a repeating with the Iraq war.

MS. SPERO: Definitely.

MS. RICHARDS: And that's why you brought this image back when you did this work at the Venice Biennale last summer, the summer of 2007? That's the work called Maypole/Take No Prisoners, right?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: So how had you - am I wrong? I mean, had you used this in between?

MS. SPERO: Did I use what in between?

MS. RICHARDS: The maypole image?

MS. SPERO: In between? No, no.

MS. RICHARDS: No. So here, 30 - exactly 30 years later, '67 -

MS. SPERO: It just came to mind.

MS. RICHARDS: No, 40 years later, '67 to 2007.

MS. SPERO: Cannibalizing my own art.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, but that brings up the other interesting element I wanted to talk to you about. And that is, you have a kind of - I think you've used the word "jewel box." You have a whole group of different personages that you - characters, maybe 100, 500 different characters who you use and put into play in your work. And so when it came to the piece in Venice, how did you think about that maypole and what heads and what characters you'd use on that piece?

MS. SPERO: You mean for Venice?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. This is a picture of the maypole in Venice. Now, were those -

MS. SPERO: Oh, well, I mean, I just took some heads and - you know, that I had used throughout, you know, then, before, and subsequently, and then, and just reused them or did some new ones, you know, and felt very free. After all, I had painted and drawn those images myself. And so I felt very free just to, as a continuum, to just continue using them.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure. And when you placed them - when you decided where to put them, was there any kind -

MS. SPERO: Where do you mean, "where to put them"?

MS. RICHARDS: The placement of which head went into which spot on the maypole?

MS. SPERO: No, no, no, no, no.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it -

MS. SPERO: No. It was just merely put on the ropes and on the - and the whatever, the chains, and whatever. It was just arbitrary, in terms of, a vicious kind of esthetic was going to work there.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Do you intend for it to be redone exactly the same way?

MS. SPERO: Of course not.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. So the idea is that every time it's installed, those heads can go up differently?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I mean, it would be pretty difficult to do it exactly, with all those heads, wouldn't it?

MS. RICHARDS: But if you insisted, they would do it.

MS. SPERO: Of course, of course. You're absolutely right that they would. But there are too many.

MS. RICHARDS: How many are there?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: A hundred?

MS. SPERO: I think more. I think many more than one hundred. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you decide that it would be this, the height it is, for that space?

MS. SPERO: Well, I found out how tall the space was at the Biennale, in the room. And I went with it, you know, making it really huge.

MS. RICHARDS: You wanted to make it as tall as you could?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And it's the entrance to that building, you see.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. And did that give you a chance to make it even larger, more heads on it?

MS. SPERO: Well, I don't know. I guess, you know. I just went with it. I go along with the spaces.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you think it had - what did you think when you saw it? Did you get to see it in person?

MS. SPERO: No.

MS. RICHARDS: When you look at this picture, do you feel that it's surprisingly powerful, that it's so big?

MS. SPERO: Well, I mean, I can't even - the only time I really saw it was when I had the photograph of the man from the company that made it. And standing below, you know, his arm up on the - you saw the picture, didn't you?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: The photograph - so that showed me how really huge the pole was. And then I could see - like below, it's like a huge trunk of a tree. I mean, really big and solid like the trunk of a tree, really. It's quite huge, the maypole. I think that's the largest. And I don't think - well, never say never, you know? But - so I just pushed it for what it was worth and made it as large as I could, you see.

And to give it that size and to give it that - so I thought would give it that ferocity, for this kind of subject, you see? And I think the size and the repetition of the images would really make it very - you know, it would make it unique and - meaning unique, that there wasn't anyone else working on such a subject that I knew of, meaning the celebratory kind of tree.

You say - by saying even "tree," that's kind of ironic, too, to a growingness, a tree, which has to do with beauty and nature and naturalness, that I have it quite the other way around, you see, in its natural kind of state as a natural pole for a maypole. And we've all seen - I mean, I bet you've seen a few maypoles. I'm not sure, but a lot of us have, and in different, you know, places, to celebrate or to express or celebrate different occasions, I think. And I've always thought of a maypole as celebratory.

And there's nothing much celebratory about - well, a maypole that has severed heads or a wartime kind of theme, you see. So the whole thing is just filled with contradictions.

MS. RICHARDS: In the work *Kill Commies/Maypole*, which is a drawing - so this piece you did in Venice, was that the first time you realized this maypole image beyond the drawing and in actuality?

MS. SPERO: Of course, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: This was the first time?

MS. SPERO: And I don't consider it a drawing. I consider it a painting.

MS. RICHARDS: A painting, okay.

MS. SPERO: Those are War Paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Right. I'm sorry.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] See, I did those over a period of the War Paintings, over two years. And so that's my main kind of expression, the War Paintings, you see?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: And that's just the way it is. And you say "drawings," and others say drawings, and I say paintings. They're the War Paintings. And they covered a period of a couple of years, you see, that they had more

presence, as far as I'm concerned, than just, let's say, some drawings might have, you see. Just to give it more substance.

MS. RICHARDS: Absolutely.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever thought, looking at the maypole piece in Venice, of the idea that this could be permanently installed somewhere?

MS. SPERO: Well, not until it was done, of course. Then, of course, it would be terrific, you know, if it was. And I think it's going to be, but I'm not sure where. But I can't be sure. It probably could be gone with the wind.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: [Laughs] I have no idea. So much of my stuff is - has been kind of like lost in time, except for the, you know, the kind of documenting - the documentation that I have of all this stuff. So that means a great deal to me, to have a documentation and to come back to it. And I don't know how long that would last or what that means in terms of my history of my art, you know, of the things I have done, my art projects, so to speak - you know, in quotes, art projects, that they're not just - which they look like a burst of energetic ideas to be used as a strong statement, an antiwar kind of statement.

And it is supposed to be spontaneous and very, very strong, in terms of someone coming along and self - you know, in seeing it corrected - or not even corrected, but when you say "body," this body of work, that it's hard to fix it. To fix it meaning to make it so that it's not too - it doesn't remain too static. I like things to be open and to be able to say that one can work from a certain point on. It doesn't have to be, again, exactly as I've done it. It can be left open, unless I just hate a new, you know - that I really don't want it to be so trapped, really. That I could make it again in another - in this other configuration, you see, open.

And if an artist - and myself, particularly - redoing that kind of an installation, I would like to find it myself. We looked for it a little bit. But, my God, so many slides and so many places where I've done work, that I don't know whether I'd ever, ever find it, or could just find it in a snap, you know, the click of a - I just wonder about these things sometimes. So in a way, I'm resuscitating that. And I resuscitated it myself. It didn't come up on behalf of anyone. It was in terms of my coming out, in terms of it being reinvented.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: I don't know if that explains it to you very well.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. And I think the sense of openness that you were talking about is one of the key qualities that your work has had.

MS. SPERO: That's very good, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And that does keep it alive, and this openness allows, I think, the feeling of new generations coming to your work.

MS. SPERO: That's nice.

MS. RICHARDS: And seeing it being open to interpretation and open to your almost playful - as well as, obviously, very serious - approach to it.

MS. SPERO: Right, right, right.

MS. RICHARDS: And being able to use all of the elements from the past, and they're still alive.

MS. SPERO: Right, right, right.

MS. RICHARDS: Because you have this open approach. And this maypole looks very alive, ironically, since these heads are dead.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: But do you also have the feeling that there's a, kind of, a strange dance of death?

MS. SPERO: That's very nice, Judith, yes. That's wonderful what you just said. Definitely.

MS. RICHARDS: These heads kind of bobbing, and like the dance of a maypole. It would be interesting - did you

ever imagine performing, that this piece could be performed, that people would -

MS. SPERO: That's nice, too. Well, that's very good what you're saying because, in going over a lot of the work that I've done, that people have remarked on, that it's performative, you know; there could be performances. And so even that could be maybe this piece, in Italy at the Biennale, could again be something that's shown, and an active principle. It's just not there making a big, museum-like statement. So - which I find very - well, I should be quiet.

MS. RICHARDS: Hmm.

MS. SPERO: Which I find very tiresome, for me. See, I have a very short teller. I like to go on to other things. And so in this way I've done it. And to me, that sets me free to go on to do, you know, other ads, other advertisements.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, yeah, yeah. So a lot of my work is that way. It's not supposed to be that rigid in the intention - in the attention of it. I don't know how you react to such a thing. But I certainly intend for my art to have a sense of movement through time and to be - and that I wanted to be able to say to someone looking at my art that those aren't necessarily painted as -

MS. RICHARDS: They are not necessarily what?

MS. SPERO: Oh, they're not necessarily fine art. They're not necessarily fine art, like the, you know, the statement. That it could be like a theme and variation of that statement. And it could be - it's the idea, too. It's conceptual. It's it, but it's conceptual, as well. You know?

MS. RICHARDS: Even though this piece has so much to do with your work and pieces in the past and all the way back to the Kill Commies/Maypole, did you think about the - when this was in Venice and you have these heads that could be seen as masks and the whole tradition of masks in Venice, did that come to your mind at all in terms of deciding to put this piece there?

MS. SPERO: Oh, sure. I wanted it to be masklike and kind of a - it could be, in a way, playful, but playful in the sense that it's a grim kind of playfulness, not terribly personal, not so much. They're impermanent, as you see even from the - what I like about the catalogue, too, it's not just absolutely permanent-looking, even though it's - when it's something I've done. I don't know. It's just not that didactic. I don't like the work to be too didactic.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You want your process, your thinking, and your - the choices in the sense of exploration, building the work - to be seen?

MS. SPERO: That's nice, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And that's part of your openness.

MS. SPERO: That's right. That's good.

MS. RICHARDS: When you made the piece in Venice so big - this is a kind of a technical question. But did you have to leave that all - I mean, except for the heads, did you have to leave that all behind? Could you actually reinstall that piece somewhere else?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: But is it the same piece in Barcelona, the height? I have a picture of the piece in Barcelona, but you can't tell from the photograph. It looks very, very large. But could it be the exact same piece?

MS. SPERO: I would have to ask Sam that.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, that's not so important. And you always use red, these red ribbonlike -

MS. SPERO: It's like blood.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. And ironically, it is cheerfulness.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And of course, all the heads are completely timeless. They could be from any war.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And really, that's part of the openness, too, of your work, that it shifts in time. You have this very porous, wonderful, unified - well, it's not so wonderful that war is a constant, but there's this certain unity.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: Looking back now, could you have seen that? Was that one of the ideas that you had very early, that your work, while it's constantly evolving and moving, that you would never leave anything behind, that it would always all come with you?

MS. SPERO: Well, it can't always all come with me.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, the ideas were always possible to be reused?

MS. SPERO: The ideas are to be -

MS. RICHARDS: In the images, the imagery.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The ideas are there, and to be used and reused and reinterpreted.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And that way, I do give others a mode of interpretation, that it isn't just there to be copied as a total - if it's supposed to be taken down and painted on, like, a shirt or something - awful. So in a way, that again is another kind of openness, although in a way, it's open, but it's also directing. It certainly is directing what it is supposed to be, which means if - I should have thought that this took much longer to activate than it did.

[Telephone rings.]

MS. RICHARDS: When you thought about making the *Maypole/Take No Prisoners*, the reinstallation of that piece that was done in Venice, at the museum in Barcelona where it is now, did you think - did you purposely decide to select a different cast of characters, a different group of heads?

MS. SPERO: Hmm-um, hmm-um. [Negative.]

MS. RICHARDS: You just made a selection of the ones you felt?

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: And you didn't check to see, were they the same ones that were in Venice?

MS. SPERO: No, no, no. And I made a lot that I never used in the final piece, see. So I've gotten a lot done.

MS. RICHARDS: You've never used what in the final piece?

MS. SPERO: Oh, I didn't necessarily want to use them, necessarily, in the final piece. But I used and reused some of them. I let it be open what I wanted to, and what I intended to put into this piece beforehand. And I really didn't want to make it too, you know, stuffy. It was just too stuffy.

MS. RICHARDS: Too stuffy?

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Stuffy - to do it again; I didn't want to.

MS. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] When you talk about openness, I think also of open-form music.

MS. SPERO: Interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever think about that?

MS. SPERO: Music?

MS. RICHARDS: Interest in that kind of approach to composing music, when you were working early on in that kind of openness to interpretation?

MS. SPERO: Well, that's good. I didn't think of music in particular. But I thought about the other arts in general. That it could be kind of like a skimming over or dipping in, and that it could be - you know, it could be because she was watching things here. I don't see any reason -

MS. RICHARDS: Who was watching things?

MS. SPERO: Anyone was watching it in particular.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: You see? And that I was - even I was not watching it in particular. But I had this idea, and it would come out, using - let's say that you said that you recognized [inaudible] from Kiki [Smith]. You recognized how she had been recognized of - so I like to have that idea that it was - I could use it and the reuse of certain ideas and images.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: And that I didn't want to have them so, you know, just so, kind of like not - an idea, and you couldn't cross it, and that's the way it was. And not so didactic in all the ways that it's been shown or wanting to be shown.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: So I always like to do stuff that isn't absolutely definitive, but one does have the idea of, you know, that there I am, and here I am, and there is a six-hour difference. So I think in England, in - oh my goodness, I think there's a six-hour difference, isn't there?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: With Europe there, and then even seven hours further on east. But I'm using the six-hour difference. And so I think that's plenty of difference and plenty of drawing, as far as I'm concerned. It keeps it in the same thing.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you. There's a wonderful installation [Artemis, Acrobats, Divas and Dancers, 1999-2000] you did in the New York City subway. And I think it's in the Lincoln Center. We're talking about music and performance and openness. How did you - was that an exciting idea for you, to make a piece in the subway, where you lived here for so many - all your life - well, a lot of your life? And use the subway, as it's such a public place - was it exciting for you to be able to do a piece in the subway? Or was it something that you were not sure you wanted to do? How was that, that piece you did there?

MS. SPERO: Well, it was exciting to be able to do a piece there and to do it in a way that it wasn't too, you know - that I would be at my destination, maybe, that it would be finished very shortly and that I would be finished, again. And so I started working like I always worked, with shoving ideas around, talking to -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have to collaborate with a lot of people for that piece?

MS. SPERO: No. No, no, no.

MS. RICHARDS: You could just decide on your own in your own studio?

MS. SPERO: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: That's nice.

MS. SPERO: It is nice. It certainly is.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: And it could be collaborative. And it is collaborative, in the sense that, righteously or wrongly, it could be of another era. And it could be another image.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you conceive of the entire piece here on a big table in the studio? Or did you think about part of it and - did you have to go back to the subway space?

MS. SPERO: No, no. I didn't have to go back.

MS. RICHARDS: You just had the dimensions.

MS. SPERO: No.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you think about what to do in terms of the fact that this was such a public site and that there would be so many millions of people seeing it? How did that affect what you chose to make?

MS. SPERO: So the second, the second. That's the way I thought of it.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you decide what to make? How did the fact that this was something that millions of people would see help determine what you chose to put there on the walls, what the images would be?

MS. SPERO: Well -

MS. RICHARDS: If this space weren't the subway, you might have picked different images.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And so -

MS. SPERO: But I just wanted it to be understood as to what it really was. And it was a work on paper, but that it did have this - it was difficult always. And I wanted it to be very - well -

MS. RICHARDS: The piece in the subway started out as a work on paper?

MS. SPERO: Yes. Yes, as a sketch, kind of. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you decided how to convert it to ceramic? I mean, it's tile on the wall.

MS. SPERO: Well, it's not tile. It's metal.

MS. RICHARDS: Metal - plus tile. I mean, it's metal in tile, in the round - around your images.

MS. SPERO: Is it?

MS. RICHARDS: So you decided how to transform the drawings to -

MS. SPERO: No, that was up to them. In the studio here in New York, when they brought me, looking at it for them, in New York, there was this idea. So I only decided on what material it would be after a bit, after working on the idea, after a drunken idiot. I didn't think it should be so, so near completion, 2001. I didn't think that it had to be absolutely absolute, you see. It could have been different materials.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: And I did like the idea that it could be a stricter borough.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you - were you excited about it being that particular subway stop, the Lincoln Center stop?

MS. SPERO: Oh, yes. Because I thought -

MS. RICHARDS: Did you get to choose, or did they choose?

MS. SPERO: They chose. It came about. And I was very glad that it - there was a juxtaposition of some of the carefree ideas of my art.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you gone back to see it and -

MS. SPERO: I did. I did afterwards.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you see people looking at it and thinking about it?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, a little bit, uh-huh.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you want to ask them what they thought?

MS. SPERO: Well, I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Did they know you were the artist?

MS. SPERO: No.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: No, no, no, no. No. No. That I just wondered, you know, what people - what they would think. So I - no, the decision was not a final decision until it was there on the paper, and it was there on the -

MS. RICHARDS: On the subway wall?

MS. SPERO: Yeah, the - yeah, yeah. It was a - what do you call it? The subway wall was kind of like a - what's that very fine, protective device that - it's pretty permanent to have - what do you call it?

MS. RICHARDS: Tile?

MS. SPERO: Tile, well, yeah. But it's put in the -

MS. RICHARDS: Cement?

MS. SPERO: What's it called when you kind of -

MS. RICHARDS: Mosaic?

MS. SPERO: Mosaic, yeah, mosaic.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: Which is rather a painstaking kind of procedure.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yeah.

MS. SPERO: It takes time. And if one looks at it, you can see that, oh, that makes out for a number of, you know, really bad - that takes a lot of time sometimes, as a building block for making something flat like sculpture.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I kind of like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Mosaic seems to be a nice medium for your work because, in a way, all the images create a mosaic.

MS. SPERO: I think so. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I think that I was very pleased that I was able to do that, that that juxtaposed very well, the subject matter of the mosaic at Lincoln Center and the age and that I thought that it - and that it shifted from, you know, tragedy to sadness in a way.

MS. RICHARDS: Because it was 2001? I mean, because it was -

MS. SPERO: What do you mean, because it was 2001?

MS. RICHARDS: I'm sorry. Because you were saying that you did that piece, it had something to do with 9/11?

MS. SPERO: No, no, no, no, no. Only the subject matter of the place, in the subway, which I guess they all are. But I like that, that it's underground. I was very pleased to be able to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there anything really surprising to you about how the experience of making a piece in mosaic in a subway, that you had never done that before? Were you surprised in any way about how the work looked?

MS. SPERO: Well, not really surprised, no. No. But I just - you know, it just kind of interested me that it was different. And I liked the large - or large enough, the -

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: One last question.

MS. SPERO: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there something that you imagined doing that you haven't had a chance to do, a kind of a fantasy project that you would have been intrigued to do? Maybe it will happen, but it hasn't happened yet. But it's just a kind of a fantasy because it's so - it's maybe so complicated or large or whatever that you haven't been able to do it?

MS. SPERO: Well, I kind of like the investigating different spaces and being able to use downtown more than - more than uptown - is considered - well, that's investigating something else in a very different kind of setting for the art. It's amazing in New York, and I think maybe in other cities as well, that you go to different places. And that doesn't mean that we should throw away the socks - the images - and wash them, but - oh, I don't know what I'm even talking about, with the socks.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: [Laughs] I don't even know what I mean by that. But it's in terms of that they aren't - it's not so permanent. It kind of gives them a support system in which to keep it going on, going. So I do like stuff that has a look of impermanence, although it's contradictory because it certainly is permanent, isn't it?

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: Being a permanent kind of impermanent - and I'm glad about that. I like it to be big, larger than it is. I really like that. [Inaudible.] Well, you know, it's kind of like - I find it very interesting, the idea of public art and working in different spaces and the conflict of making - in my mind, of either making it - which I'm reiterating again, of either making it permanent, or seemingly permanent.

And that it can be read in a more - as a more casual expression of the space of paper, even, than taking over and getting some of that pattern that would be representative.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: I think I would find it very interesting to work on again, to give it another kind of effect.

MS. RICHARDS: Work on it again?

MS. SPERO: Work on - to do different materials, to have the different materials. I find that rather interesting, you see, and it comes out in other kinds of spaces that it's not so temperamental that - it's so contradictory in a way that this would be a -

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MS. SPERO: In a way, I do want it to have a contradictory kind of expression, because it's kind of more permanent.

MS. RICHARDS: Because it's contradictory?

MS. SPERO: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: Because it's contradictory, it's more permanent?

MS. SPERO: Well, it's contradictory in thinking that a wall piece like that would be more permanent, a wall piece.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. SPERO: And that it's ever so much longer for their team to do it than my team, you see.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: So I kind of like the idea that different teams can come in and can find this -

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SPERO: So I just don't want the work to be, like, didactic.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. SPERO: You see, which I think public art could be a series of -

MS. RICHARDS: Lessons.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. That's very good to say that, lessons.

MS. RICHARDS: That's not what you want.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah, I like that. But is not -

MS. RICHARDS: That reminds me, when you're talking about it, this ambiguity - it seems like it's more truthful. Because things are ambiguous.

MS. SPERO: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm, yeah. I don't know if it's more truthful. But it's more - you find it more truthful?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, most things are ambiguous in some way. Or it's complicated. It doesn't mean just one thing.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, that's good - complicated.

MS. RICHARDS: It's not just one -

MS. SPERO: Complex.

MS. RICHARDS: Complex.

MS. SPERO: And it could be, say, installed in other - you know, it could be kind of lifted, in quotes, meaning that kind of a stagnant of mind, canned mind, which is repetitious. So where in the devil did that idea come? So how about - would you like a little tea or something, Judith?

MS. RICHARDS: No, you know, we could wrap it up now. And I can let you rest.

MS. SPERO: I'm sorry that I didn't do it more, you know, give you more definitive kinds of answers to your questions. But I don't think that I'm kind of this definitive -

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs] Well, you are right.

MS. SPERO: - way of saying. I mean, I do have my own ideas about it.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MS. SPERO: And it shifts, and it changes.

MS. RICHARDS: So I think that it's been great. And I'm going to just -

MS. SPERO: Well, I really appreciate your looking at it so carefully, Judith, and your questions. They are very thoughtful, the way you've looked at my art. And I bet you have with everything that you've done, all the different artists.

MS. RICHARDS: Thank you.

MS. SPERO: Yeah, yeah. I really mean that. I totally appreciate it. And it's hard, sometimes, for me to wiggle out and - and I know that it's not meant to be - it is meant to bring out, to get at the reasons, and how I did get caught, you know, doing what I do.

MS. RICHARDS: Caught? [Laughs.]

MS. SPERO: Caught. Trapped.

MS. RICHARDS: Trapped?

MS. SPERO: Trapped with my - you know, with the idea of the installations, because they are intended, I think, to be more - wouldn't you say? - to be more permanent in a way, a kind of like in - I don't know. I hated to be too -

MS. RICHARDS: But there's your contradiction again.

MS. SPERO: [Laughs] Yeah, that's right. That's right. That's right. I know. Isn't that funny?

MS. RICHARDS: Permanent and impermanent. If you're too permanent, you can't be open.

MS. SPERO: That's right.

MS. RICHARDS: You can't be flexible.

MS. SPERO: And to be - that's exactly right. And to do it in this way - I don't want it to be didactic, and yet it has to be stronger to be carrying all that weight of when I'm doing - when the mosaisist is working on it. I mean, really, that is a big deal, like, for the mosaisist to create it. And I am thinking, what should I do next? Should I

trouble you next? Yeah. And should it be more permanent or impermanent, or just what should it be? Or should it be just kind of naturally going from what I'm thinking of? And I don't want it all to be at one level, which I think - and I don't know how you do it. But you see, you are born, you just go and you pick up the reasons that - I don't know.

I like the idea of having something on a wall like that at the subway and something that speaks to - I do like it, in that it does speak of - there's a contradiction again - this impermanence, but in a more permanent way, which is this - well, I would lull you to sleep.

MS. RICHARDS: One of the qualities of doing that is having your art seen outside of the museum context.

MS. SPERO: Definitely. Very good.

MS. RICHARDS: People are seeing it in their daily lives.

MS. SPERO: That's very good, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And that especially seems right for your work.

MS. SPERO: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: That people will see it at all times, and they could be thinking about what they read in the newspaper, and look up and see it. Or they could be thinking about their own personal lives and look up and see it. It makes your work even more open, being outside the museum.

MS. SPERO: Right, right, right.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I'm going to say goodnight.

MS. SPERO: Oh, dear.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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