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Oral history interview with May Stevens,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with May Stevens on 2009 August 10 and 11. The interview took place at Stevens's home and studio in Santa Fe, NM, and was conducted by Judith O. Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing May Stevens on August 10, 2009, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

It's a pleasure to be here, May.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And I wanted to start from the very beginning and ask you to speak about your parents and even your grandparents as much as you wish, their background, and then come to when you were born, the time you were born.

MAY STEVENS: The only grandparent I knew was my grandmother, but very briefly. They were from—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is it your maternal grandmother or your paternal?

MAY STEVENS: Maternal. My father's parents were not alive.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Where were they from, your father's parents?

MAY STEVENS: They grew up in Massachusetts. He grew up in Massachusetts. He was in Dorchester outside of Boston.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Those were the Stevens.

MAY STEVENS: Yes, and there's one photograph—I have some around—which shows his father.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was his name?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember his first name. His last name was Stevens. I think that he was in front of a grocery store with a sign on the top which said Stevens & Greene. Probably Greene with an E on the end. And in front of it were these two men in white outfits with aprons or something. So I know that my paternal grandfather had a big house in Dorchester, it must have been. And you walked up a few steps to get to this—it had a lot of land around it and a fence and all that. I can kind of see it. And in fact I remember I used to walk on the sidewalk when I was very small because we moved to Quincy, Massachusetts, out of Dorchester when I was four. And we went on the Fourth of July, and I thought, "They're celebrating my arrival." So that's my father's family.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So they came to the United States in the 19th century?

MAY STEVENS: I have no idea. But I believe—Well, my father had four, at least four, sisters and one brother. So about six children. And I think their mother had died. And the oldest sister took care of all the kids. And then the father remarried. So I don't know too much of the details. There were two boys: my father and his brother, Oliver. But anyway—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And they had died before you were—

MAY STEVENS: Those parents, I never knew them. I never knew the father, the grandfather. I only have pictures. So I was going to tell you about my mother's family. They lived in Canada and came—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Eastern or western?

MAY STEVENS: Near the river. Miramichi I think is the name of the river. The River Miramichi [New Brunswick, Canada]. Must be an Indian name. And that's quite western—I mean eastern. And it's quite north of where they came to. So my mother had a sister and a brother, I think. Anyway, they came—she came.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Your mother's name was Alice?

MAY STEVENS: Alice Margaret Dick. Dick was her last name.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Alice Margaret Dick.

MAY STEVENS: So she came to I think Athol, Massachusetts. I have no idea why. And she got a job sewing, I don't know, in a shoe factory or something. I can't remember.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So she grew up where?

MAY STEVENS: In Canada. Where in Canada? They were close to the border, I believe. I don't know the town at all. Although there is a picture when I was visiting them. When I was a kid. Anyway, when she got a little bit of money, she sent for her sister.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Whose name was what?

MAY STEVENS: Mary. Mary Dick. Alice and Mary Dick. And then when my mother finished working—I mean left that job—she went to Boston, and she got a job working as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant. My father came in with his father and sat at her table. And she waited on them. And then she brought them the check. And the check said that they had to sign. My father was paying the check. He had to sign it with his initials. So—I mean with her initials; she had to sign it with her initials. So it said, AD, which is Alice Dick. And so my father said to her, "What does AD stand for?" And she said, "After Dinner." And that started it all. [Laughs.] That's why I'm here today. So they got married.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was it an issue in her family for her to be working, that she was relatively independent then and supporting herself?

MAY STEVENS: I think they had no money. She came here to get a job.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was she supporting her family do you suppose?

MAY STEVENS: The mother, what I know about the mother and father, the father was a cripple. He was in a wheelchair, and he died. So I don't think he was very useful to begin with. And then they had a horse and maybe a cow or something. And the mother used to cook things, make food, bring milk. She used to do the whole job; she did everything. She had the horse, and she would bring around to the neighbors whatever they needed and whatever she could make. And she was supporting the family herself. And she had three or four kids. So that's all, you know. My mother doesn't remember much about—did not remember much about her father. And it was clear that the mother took all the responsibility. And then I guess one of the ways of continuing that was to go to the United States and get a job. And she must have gotten a job and tried to support herself and then bring her sister and got her a job.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Where did they live in the U.S. when they came to the United States? Where did Alice and her family live when they came to the U.S.?

MAY STEVENS: Boston. Boston, South Boston. South Boston was full of Irish and Italian people at that time. So my mother and father got married. And I guess then I lived when they first got married—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Your father's name?

MAY STEVENS: Ralph Stanley Stevens. And I guess I lived with him and his father and his father's new wife in that nice big house on a hill kind of thing.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What did his father do for a living?

MAY STEVENS: He had the market.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, I'm sorry. That's right.

MAY STEVENS: He had the market. That's what he did. And he was okay, you know, and he had money. I don't know why. And when he died, all of the children, six of them or whatever they were, got the same amount of money from him because he had money. I don't know how it came into being. But he had this big house, he had this business. So what my father always said [laughs], he said that all of his sisters married men who simply spent their money. [Laughs.] And he bought a house in Quincy, Massachusetts, which is where we moved. We moved from Boston on the Fourth of July when I was four years old.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was your birthday?

MAY STEVENS: My birthday is—what is my birthday? It'll come to me [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Okay.

MAY STEVENS: But I guess we thought—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, June 9, 1924.

MAY STEVENS: June 9th. So I thought all that fuss was celebrating my birthday.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Right, so you moved to Quincy in 1928.

MAY STEVENS: Quincy. And I was very happy about moving. And as I said, I thought they were celebrating my arrival. At any rate, what I loved is the fact that we were one block away from the beach. And I spent the rest of my life in Quincy every day I could on the beach. So I grew up in the water. And on that beach there was no lifeguard. In fact there was no control and no anything. Only there were two small rafts for kids, and then two big rafts for adults. But otherwise—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you say rafts, you mean wooden?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Right. But they were floated, you know, they had stuff underneath them to keep them up. So nobody taught you to swim. You learned from the kids. And it was interesting because there was nobody to protect you, nobody to look after you. Your parents came with you sometimes and sometimes they didn't. And this was my life as a child. I loved the beach. I taught myself to swim. And when I wasn't swimming, I'd be lying on the beach getting sunburned. I'd go up on the sidewalk when it was still wet, you know, and lie on the sidewalk with sand on me, you know, and get all—and then go back and wash it off. I had a wonderful time.

I always wanted to cross over because far across the river you could see a spit of green land, and there was nobody there. And I forget what it was called, but nobody was there. It wasn't a place where people lived. And I always wanted to swim there. And I didn't do it until I think I was maybe 13. And I swam with my dog, and the two of us. But of course the dog circled me all the time because they go much faster. I got there, and I got up on the beach and started to walk up to the green stuff, and the green stuff was horrible. It was harsh and stiff and horrible. So it was not beautiful at all. And I had to swim right back and do that all by myself. Anyway, I did these things by myself. Now I had a brother, a younger brother. He was about a year and a half younger.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What is his name?

MAY STEVENS: Stacey, S-T-A-C-E-Y. Stacey Stevens. But he developed childhood diabetes when he was, I don't know, three or four, something like that. And we had this whole ceremony in our kitchen where we took his urine every morning. And put drops into a test tube with this blue, I think it was called Benedict solution. Drop these drops in. And then you heated it up, and if it stayed blue, he was healthy. If got green, he had a little bit of something bad. And then it went all the way down to get those other colors. And we had a graph [inaudible] broken up. And we had crayons. And so each day we had to put down the color of his urine in the Benedict solution. And my mother had to go to the hospital and learn how to take care of him. She had a scale to weight his food. And he only could eat certain things. And she spent the rest of his life taking care of him because he was not well. And he was like a normal child except that he would get these passages when he would become, you know, not normal. And then I don't know what she'd have to do at that point.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did it affect you emotionally as a child?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I was concerned about him. And he probably annoyed the hell out of me. But on the other hand, I was concerned about him. I was, you know, a year and a half older, and I had a lot of other things on my mind. But the thing that was terrible is that when I got to school, I loved it. And the teachers adored me. So, you know, in the back of maybe in the first grade, in the back of the first grade, there'd be three easels standing there with a bar with holes in which there'd be color. And there'd be a big pad. And if you finished your work, you could go out there and start painting. And that's what I did all the time. And I loved it.

Then when I went into the second grade, my brother came into the first grade. And the teachers said—which they always said to him—Oh, you're May Stevens's little brother. You'll be a great student. And he wasn't. He wasn't. He wasn't interested. He didn't care. And also even in the first grade, he brought with him a jar of orange juice that he was supposed to drink during the morning so that he would stay in good shape. And it spilled on the floor, and the teacher would accuse him of wetting his pants. And every time, it seems to me, as far as I understood, every time he got into a new class, the teacher would say, "Oh, you're May Stevens' little brother. You'll be a great student." And he wasn't. So he had a very difficult time. And then he wasn't a good student; he didn't care. Right? And they expected more of him than he could provide. And in the meantime I was happy as I could be in school, loving every bit of it.

Once I remember—I guess he was in the first grade, and I must have been in the second—I got to school late. I used to be late a lot. It was the only bad thing I did. Anyway, I came to the door, this huge door, and it was closed because everybody was upstairs in school. And I pulled it open, and I got it open, and I got one hand in there, and I'm pulled with the other one. And it slammed, and it closed on my hand, and I can't get it out. And I start screaming. And my brother is upstairs in the first room around the corner of the steps. And he said, "That's my sister!" So I got saved [laughs]. Anyway—But it was terrible. He never had, in a way, a chance. I don't think my father admired him or cared. He wasn't good in school, and he wasn't healthy. I don't think my father gave him very much. But my mother gave him everything.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So did that give you any sense of jealousy, sadness, not—

MAY STEVENS: No. My father was devoted to me. The teachers were devoted to me. I got admired everywhere. The third grade teacher, Miss Bowley, whom I remember very well—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How do you spell her name?

MAY STEVENS: B-O-W-L-E-Y, I think it was. She was young, she had a boyfriend, and she invited me to go to a movie with her and her boyfriend, which I did. And she was always very, very good to me. In fact, [laughs] she saw me masturbating under the desk.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In third grade?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. And she was so tactful, so kind. And she liked me very much. And she said, "May, I'd like you to go down the corridor, down, you know, a few doors down, and knock on Miss Powers's door." She's the assistant principal. "I would like you to knock on her door and see her." And I say, okay. You know I wasn't worried. Everybody treated me so well. So I went down there, and I saw Miss Powers. And I don't know what Miss Powers said to me. I don't remember how she brought it up or how she was able to talk about it. Because I didn't know how to talk about it, you know. I didn't know what she was talking about or whatever. But finally she said, "You know, May, what I want you to do is to promise you won't do it in school." I said, Okay. [Laughs.] Brilliant!

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You know what she was talking about.

MAY STEVENS: Of course I did. But such tact. She didn't punish me. She didn't criticize me. She said, "Don't do it in school." What could be more sensitive, more kind of wise? And more, understanding children. Right? Anyway, so—

MS. RICHARDS Did you excel in all your subjects?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. You know this was an elementary school.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: I don't think I liked math very much.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What did you think of your primary interest being art?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I painted all the time. One of the things we did, I remember I and another girl in the class, we decorated the windows in the classroom. And we would mix colors with something like Babbo and then water. And then you'd put on hollyhocks or whatever it was, whatever the season was, all over the windows, you know? And then when that season was over or it was time to put on a different design, we'd come up and clean the windows, just rub the stuff off, and the windows would be shining. So it was great. And in fact when I was in first grade—I think it was first grade—kids would bring me a little piece of yellow paper. I think we were given that paper, and then the teacher would tell us some numbers, and we'd get to add them up and get to the right answer. And so these little slips were all over the place. So some of the kids would bring me the yellow slips and ask me to make a drawing. And then make a drawing of a girl's face or something simple like that. So I was always doing that. That was very interesting to me. So that's that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And after elementary school then you found your way to—was it straight to high school or a middle school?

MAY STEVENS: Junior high school.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Junior high school.

MAY STEVENS: And then senior high school. And I was always a very good student, and I always got good marks. And I always got a lot of praise from teachers. So I was very, very happy in school. I loved reading. And I was good at the tests. I wasn't terribly good in math, but who cares? I didn't care. It wasn't my main interest.

And then when I graduated from high school—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So before you graduated, your brother passed away?

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did your brother pass away before you graduated?

MAY STEVENS: He died when he was 15. It was terrible. I came home—I think he got pneumonia—and he was in the hospital. And my mother had been in there with him. Then it's a Sunday morning, and my mother and father had gone to the Congregational Church in our neighborhood where I lived and I sang in the choir. Not because I have a voice, but because I knew people in the choir. And when I came home—or maybe I was coming home from church—my mother and father were standing at the doorstep, and the minister was there telling them that their son had died in the hospital. He had pneumonia, and he died. And it was such a blow to my mother because that's what she spent her life on. He was 15. And I was 16, so was already oriented towards outside. Of course in school I was very happy. So I didn't need a lot of support at home because I got a lot of support in school. And when I was 16, I must have been very interested in boys and social life and all kinds of stuff. So this was not a big blow to me. But to my mother it was the end of what she did in her life. It was a terrible loss because she spent all of her time with him, worrying about him, taking care of him. You'd know he'd go out and play with kids, and then he'd get some kind of insulin shot because insulin shots would mean that he was not behaving logically, you know. He'd be kind of silly or something like that. And she had to take care of that all the time. So anyway.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you know you'd go on to college—

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: —when you were in high school?

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I loved school, and I loved reading.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you have a sense of what you wanted to specialize—focus on in college?

MAY STEVENS: I sure did. I went to the Massachusetts College of Art..

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do in high school the teachers encouraged you?

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was there any special teacher in high school who was especially supportive of your artistic—?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember now, but they were very supportive always—always! And I had a good time and always loved school, all of it. But I chose the Massachusetts College of Art. And I thought, you know, maybe I'd be an art teacher or something. I didn't know. And my father and I went—At this point my mother didn't do anything outside of the home.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You'd say she was depressed?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. So my father and I went to see the president of the school. I think he was the acting president. And he was hopeless—hopeless! But anyway, you know, he said, "It's wonderful. We have this thing. The school has a great big thing with a lot of drawers on it. It's all about color. So any color you want to check, you can check the drawers. And go and find [inaudible] color. Boring! Boring! Boring! Right? I mean that's not what I think of as art. But anyway, he said, "We have this great thing. You know if you want to talk to people across the country about color, you tell them exactly what color you want, and you give them the number—" Stuff like that. So that was very boring. But—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why did your father go with you?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I was too young to go by myself. I didn't know. I needed help. I needed support. So—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What that a kind of entrance interview or was it just a visit to find if you wanted to go there?

MAY STEVENS: Yes, yes. Exactly. Now I wouldn't have had to be interviewed, I think. Anyway, after I talked with the president and my father—I think my father stayed there or did something else. And then I wanted to talk around the school and see what it was like. And school was not in session for some reason. I went into a

classroom. And in the classroom—which was a painting place, there were a lot of easels, and it was a place where people painted, as I said—and there were two girls there. And they were partly painting and partly talking and laughing and having a great time. And so it was great to see girls who didn't have to be there, they weren't working for the school or doing a job or anything. They were enjoying themselves and painting and talking and painting and talking. And they were having a great time. And I thought, wow! That looks good to me. And then I went upstairs to the dining hall, which was a huge room with tables and chairs and a counter way up there. And it wasn't functioning at that moment. But there was a huge piano, and there was a girl with a mane of great, beautiful I think it was red hair down her back. And she's playing the piano like mad [laughs]. Tossing her hair and playing the piano all by herself. And I think: This is heaven. There were two girls downstairs having a great conversation, painting a little bit and talking and enjoying themselves. And look at this girl all by herself, you know, alone, carried away by making the music. And I thought this is where I want to be. So I signed up right there. I went there for four years, and I think I loved every minute of it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you started, did you have a—you said you thought you might be an art teacher eventually? Or did you soon—

MAY STEVENS: I wanted to be an artist. Basically I wanted to get—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did they ask you to focus in some major in painting or sculpture at a certain point?

MAY STEVENS: There were three areas: fine art, advertising art, and I forget what the third one was, but even less interesting. So the fine art was the only thing I liked. And in fact I wanted to take silkscreen because I thought that was an interesting thing to do. Not that I wanted to be an advertising artist. But I thought silkscreen might be fun. And then I also wanted to take typing because I thought it would be useful to do the typing. But they wouldn't let me taking them because those weren't on the fine arts agenda. So I couldn't take them, but that's what I wanted to do, too. In addition to painting. And I had a wonderful time there. I was very much admired by my teachers. And one of them—his name was Kaufman.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: K—?

MAY STEVENS: K-A-U-F-M-A-N. Oh, a couple of stories about him. I walked into the painting class late one morning. [They laugh.] I was a great student, but I was late sometimes. So I walked in late, and he's sitting there talking to all the students. And he says, as I walk in, "Good morning, Miss Stevens. It's so nice of you to come." Something like that. And he said, "We're just talking about El Greco." And I said, "Oh, you mean Domenico Theotocopulos?" [Laughs.] I'd just been reading about him. And everybody roared because, you know, I was in a sense saying: You can't teach me anything about Domenico Theotocopulos. I already know. So that was good. But then one of the things that happened is that when I went to New York after graduating, I stayed home for a couple of years.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Let me ask you to just back—While you were in high school, did you go to museums in the Boston area with your family, on your own?

MAY STEVENS: Sure, sure.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were there any particular paintings or periods of art history that had the most impact on you?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember. I do know that I looked at art books, that I was crazy about art. I knew—And because even in the school I was studying art history.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In high school?

MAY STEVENS: No, at MassArt.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: At MassArt I was studying art history. I had a wonderful teacher named Miss Munsterburger, who was elderly, tall, skinny, gray-haired, and she was German-born, I believe. And she was very impressive. And I loved everything she gave us to do, and I was great at it. And so she was very good to me, and I was, you know, good to her. I was good in all of the work they had. It was all wonderful.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And when you went to, I guess, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston —

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

MRS. RICHARDS: —were you attracted to any particular collections or artists while you were at Mass College of

Art?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. I don't really remember. I know that I constantly look at art books, I constantly looked at art. I got a lot out of the school, you know, the MassArt because I was in the school. Of course in the school I fell in love. So that also distracted me a good deal [laughs]. This boyfriend and I used to walk by the river to get away from classes, by walking by the river and necking. It was great [laughs]. But I was really—What happened is that I was sent upstairs to the North Gallery, an empty little gallery on the top of the building, and I had a whole bunch of art done by the students that was to be put up on the wall. And I was going to select it and arrange it. And they gave me this big handsome young boy to help me do it. So I said, "Over there. No, no. Try it there." You know we did that. And so he kept lifting and putting. And I said, "No, no." And finally, at the end of that—he was a big, big handsome, strong guy—he picked me up and carried me. And that did it [laughs]. That was it. And then he was younger because he was a junior, whatever he was, and I was a senior. And I think everybody thought, What are you doing? This kid is not—You know. But he was so good-looking.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember what your work looked like?

MAY STEVENS: My work?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. Let's say when you were a senior at Mass College of Art. Ah! So that's—we're looking at a self-portrait?

MAY STEVENS: Self-portrait, right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is that on paper?

MAY STEVENS: As you may notice—as you may notice—I wasn't using a brush. I'm using a palette knife. And I think that I hadn't yet mastered the brush. Because the brush is much more flexible. The palette knife does that you do.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But a palette knife is much more challenging in many ways as well.

MAY STEVENS: I just—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were there art, particular artists—Of course there are many in history used palette knives that inspired you or made you [inaudible]?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember that. I just know that, you know, we had all these various things to use. And I found that the palette knife was very easy for me to use. And I loved it. And also it was solid and strong, you know. I was very happy with it. And the brush was a little more difficult. So it took me a longer time to get to use it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you—you were working from the model at times?

MAY STEVENS: Sure, we had models.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember if your work was—if you were involved with representation mostly, abstraction, a combination?

MAY STEVENS: I wasn't interested in abstraction. It didn't interest me. I was interested in technique, and I was interested in color, and I was interested in paint handling. And this was the media, this was the skills that I needed. And I was not interested in, you know, fooling around with it. I wanted to learn how to do it. And that was the main thing. We had models from time to time, and we had, I think, freedom to do whatever we wanted. But I think at this period and in Boston, which has probably always been quite conservative in a way, I was perfectly happy doing this kind of thing. I really loved it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember while you were at Mass College of Art how you envisioned a life as a professional artist? If you envisioned spending 100 percent of your time on your work? Did you envision teaching as well? How did you imagine it?

MAY STEVENS: I probably always had the knowledge that teaching is something that artists do. That's what I was doing. That's how you earn a living. So I don't think I worried about it. You know I had had such success in schools, I had had such confidence given to me by all the teachers, all these superiors, who were smarter or more educated than I. They always promoted me—promoted me, I didn't mean that in terms of the classes—but encouraged me in every way. So I wasn't worried. I wasn't worried! I had total success in school. I loved it. I read everything. I did everything. You know I was at ease. I was so at ease that I masturbated in class [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were in college, did you start thinking about traveling to see art, to go to

Europe, to go to New York?

MAY STEVENS: We went to the museums in Boston, which were very good.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But you weren't pining to go elsewhere.

MAY STEVENS: But you know what? We were reading these art history books in our art history classes. And you know what? I was always way ahead or reading in the wrong part, you know. I loved it! I loved it! And the teacher would say, "Read this." And I would read that. But I liked this part, and I was interested in this part. And I think I was always extremely independent. I did what the teachers asked me to because it wasn't a big problem for me. But I also knew what I liked and what I wanted. So I did what I liked and what I wanted. I mean using a palette knife, maybe the teacher wasn't happy with that; I don't remember. But maybe they said you should really learn to use a brush. And I said, "Oh, I'll get to that," or something. You know I had confidence that I was doing what I needed to do, and that I was going where I needed to go. I wasn't at all intimidated by art or even the future of art. Although I knew that it's not easy to earn a living as an artist. But, you know, people do. People do it. They figure out ways. So that's what I was going to do, and it was always very clear to me that I would be an artist. And my best friend, she lived in Boston, and I lived in Quincy. So I had a ten-mile trip every day to come in and out. But I would stay overnight with her sometimes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were living at home while you were going to Mass College?

MAY STEVENS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] But I would stay with Nancy, my friend, sometimes. And I think I might've gotten help from her. She was very interested in impressionism, and had really looked at it a lot. And I think I learned a little bit from her about the use of color or the use of paint or something, just because I sat next to her all the time. So we kind of worked together in a way.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did she pursue a career as an artist?

MAY STEVENS: No. When I came back—see, I got married and went to Paris. I spent three years in Paris. So when I came back to Boston and to Quincy to see my family, I forget where she was. But she was married, and I went to see her. And she showed me her work, and it was nothing. I mean it hadn't grown. And I lived three years in Paris. So it made a difference.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So going back. You graduated from Mass College, and what did you do next?

MAY STEVENS: I worked—I got a job at a publishing company illustrating a book.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you still living at home?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. And the book was called *Clothes for Girls*. So all I had to do was make little drawings of clothes for girls. And then they said, you could do this at home or you can work here. I thought I'll work here [laughs]. I don't want to do it at home. So I worked there. And I remember things about it that I liked a lot. I remember a girl—I don't know what her job was—but she tall and good-looking and nice figure and high heels. And she was constantly going up and down the corridors going places and doing things, you know. And you'd hear the clicking of her heels, you know. And she would say, "Life is too short. Life is too short." I mean that's wonderful! Because it means you have to do what you have to do. Life is too short. In other words, don't fool around [laughs]. And I loved that. And, you know, her body gesture, her movement, her clicking heels proved she felt that way. Life is too short. So I just worked there for about a year doing my book. And then that was the only thing they had for me.

Then I got a job in a department store in Quincy, and they said I could work on their advertising thing that they put ads in the paper. And they would give me ads of clothes that they had previously advertised. But this would be slightly different kind of clothes. And so I was supposed to alter it. Oh, it was so boring! Boring! Boring! You know. And I hated this job because there was nothing creative about it at all. So I got a call from Nancy, this best friend of mine from art school. She was in New York, living with her sister who was a nurse, and the nurse had a job. And Nancy was living with the nurse, and they lived on the third floor of an apartment building which was only a block away from the center of New York City. And there was one room above them, and it had, you know, a bed and a closet and a window. And you shared a bathroom with one other person who lived on that floor. And I could come and could get that room very cheaply. And then I could eat with them and live with them and sleep upstairs. So I came. And I told my parents I'm going to go to New York. I have to do that. So I left them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did they object?

MAY STEVENS: What could they do?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You don't remember if they were supportive or not?

MAY STEVENS: Well, my mother never said anything. And my father wouldn't try to stop me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember which street that apartment was on?

MAY STEVENS: It was about in the center.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean in the fifties?

MAY STEVENS: The fifties?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: West 50th Street, in the fifties or—?

MAY STEVENS: Something like that. Something like that. You know the main drag—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Fifth Avenue?

MAY STEVENS: —was very close by. But this was great. So I came. And what I did immediately was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So let me—

MAY STEVENS: Go ahead.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were born in 1924. You went to college when you were 18. Graduated when you were 22. So that would be 1946.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And then two years later you came to New York? Right? So was that the year 1948?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. I know that because that's when I got married.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Hmmm. Okay.

MAY STEVENS: I moved into that one room. And then the first thing I had to do was to get a place to paint because I couldn't paint in the one room. So I went to the Art Students League. Signed up. I would have a class from seven to ten Monday through Friday in the evening. And in the Art Students League nobody bothers you. A teacher comes by once during the week, looks at your work, and says: Keep going. Looks good. Whatever they say. I'm going to stop for coffee.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you want me to pause it?

[Audio Break.]

MAY STEVENS: So I knew I had to have a place to paint because I've got paints and canvases and all kinds of messy stuff, you know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You were using oil paint.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. At some point I switched to acrylic, but anyway—So I signed up. I took a teacher whose name I knew, but I knew it wasn't anybody that I was very interested in. But that would be okay because I knew what I wanted to do. I just needed a place to paint.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Could you say—

MAY STEVENS: His name?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No, what you wanted to do. Do you remember?

MAY STEVENS: I wanted to continue what I was doing. I knew what I wanted to do. I knew—I had already a kind of vision, which I can't even describe. But I had a direction I was going in. I think I was pretty confident, pretty self-confident. There were a lot of things I didn't know. But I knew that you never know those in the beginning. It takes time. And I knew that the way you get there is by working. And you go in the direction you feel you should go. And then if you see another direction that you think, oh, maybe I should try that—you know what I mean? I listened to me. I've always believed that you follow your own instinct. I'm not trying to be anybody else. I'm not trying to work like anyone else. I want to do what matters to me. And it was always like that. And you see I walked into that class, and the teacher said, "We're studying El Greco," and I said, "Domenico Theotocopulos." And I mean I wasn't trained to put anybody down. But I read about these things. I cared. I was constantly reading, studying, thinking, going to museums, looking at books, reading stuff. And this was my path; there was

no question ever that I would do anything. And I married a man who was an artist. Why not?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you had your apartment, that first apartment in New York, do you remember what kind of postcards or images you put on the wall? Is there any special—?

MAY STEVENS: It was [laughs]—You know what I had on the door—it's a tiny room; you there was a bureau and a mirror and a door to the outside, one bed, one window; it was nothing. So on the door, inside of the door, I put a map of New York City because I needed that. So then I met Rudolf [Baranik]. How did I meet him? Oh!

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were taking classes there at the Art Students League ever evening. What were you doing in the daytime?

MAY STEVENS: I got a job.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was that?

MAY STEVENS: Was that the *Clothes for Girls* thing? No, I had done that earlier. I think I got a job illustrating a book or something like that. Can't really remember. But I did get a job; I had to, to support myself. Anyway, I went to the Art Students' League at night, seven nights a week, from seven—I mean five nights a week—from seven to ten. And I walked into the class, and I needed a locker to put my paint equipment in so I don't carry it back and forth. And I said, "Well, how do I get a locker?" And they said, "You've got to find the person whose got keys to the lockers. And he's that guy over there." So I looked over there, and there was Rudolf. And I looked at him, and I thought, hmmm. He is not a kid. He's a grownup man. He's been in the army, he's wearing an army shirt with no insignia. But it's a dark khaki; it looks very good on him. I think he must have been an officer. And he looks so good, I'm sure he's taken. So I went over and I said, "I need a locker." And he said, "Well, you know, I'm sorry, but there aren't any lockers. But you can share mine." So I said, okay. And that was that.

And then we went out, and this was in January of 1948 that I met him. And I'd probably come just a couple of months before that. And so we went out, we went to a movie. We saw a lousy Bob Hope movie or something like that [laughs]. And I remember he tried to put my head down on his shoulder. And I said, "What are you doing?" Anyway, so we met in January. We went to bed in March. We got married in June. And we sailed for Paris in September, and we had a baby in December in 1948. Isn't that incredible? But I knew. I knew he was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: He was studying at the Art Students League or just working?

MAY STEVENS: No, he was studying at the Art Students League.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you have in your mind that you would marry an artist? That was something—

MAY STEVENS: I don't know that I thought it, but I think it would be normal, it would be expectable, you know. I don't know whether I thought about that. I mean if I'd met somebody who was wonderful and not an artist but was a writer or a thinker or something, it, you know, it doesn't have to be my field.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you decided—

MAY STEVENS: I sent my father a photograph.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Of Rudolf?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. And my father said, "He looks Jewish." And I said, "He is." [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was that disturbing for your father?

MAY STEVENS: He didn't make a fuss. But he was surprised. "He looks Jewish," he said. Well, so?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was it a bigger issue that he wasn't born American?

MAY STEVENS: No. I don't think so. He liked him. They liked each other. I mean I think my father could see that Rudolf was what I wanted and what I needed. It was clear that this was a good man for me. So we went to Paris, and Rudolf was born in Lithuania. And he always knew he was an artist. His family and he always knew he was an artist. And if you're an artist in Europe you have to go to Paris because that's where you get to be an artist. I mean that's where all the artists were, right? So we had to go to Paris because it was his destiny to go to Paris. So I said, okay. Fine. That's good. So we went to Paris.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What did your work look like at that point when you were at the Art Students' League? What you're pointing to is your self-portrait. Do you mean that you were doing figurative work?

MAY STEVENS: Probably. I can't really remember. But that is a—In a corner there, there's a bigger frame and a part of my mother; I did a portrait of my mother.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Ah!

MAY STEVENS: You can see her head and body in profile.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: So I did her. I mean she's sitting around the house all the time. So she's a perfect model for me. So I did her. I don't know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So you were working from the figure ordinarily.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you sailed—

MAY STEVENS: We did.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You sailed for Paris.

MAY STEVENS: I sailed for Paris on the *Queen Elizabeth*. And I was pregnant. And they told me that if I were one month further along, they wouldn't have taken me on the boat. But it was okay. So it was difficult because we both knew French but not fully. And so there'd be a lot of struggles trying to get—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did you find a place to live in Paris? Did you know people there who helped you?

MAY STEVENS: No.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: He didn't know anyone?

MAY STEVENS: We didn't know anybody. But we found something that wasn't bad. We lived near the Bois de Boulogne at one point. And I remember walking in the woods. I'm looking through the woods, and I see a tiger over there! "Oh, my God! There's a tiger in this woods! Help! Help!" [Laughs.] You know what? There was a huge ditch.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Moat.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. So the tiger was—But I didn't know that. All I saw was the tiger in the woods! Ha! So that was very exciting. And we both knew some French but not enough. So we were very anxious to learn it and use it, which we did. And Rudolf was there on the G.I. Bill. He was in the American Army. He volunteered because he was not a citizen at that point. But of course he became one when he spent three years in the American Army. So he fought with them. He was in Europe with them. And then he had three years of education, which is a wonderful thing. And he studied with Fernand Léger, who he didn't really—whose work—he didn't really like at all. Because he didn't like things that were supposed to be funny and things that were brightly colored and things that were cartoony, you know, like Léger. But this was the one he could get in, and he tried something else, and he didn't really like that one either. And there were a lot of other American soldiers, ex-soldiers, who were there. And every morning they'd come in, and roll call would be called.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At Léger's studio?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. To make sure they were there because they were getting paid to be there. So they'd all say, you know, Here! Here! Here! Here! Here! And then when the person doing the roll call would leave, they'd go home and work at home or whatever they would do. But that didn't mean they didn't want to do their work. But they didn't necessarily want to be in Léger's studio and listen to Léger. Who said, "Use these colors. Use this scene up here on the whatever." He would have two or three people up there with bicycles and striped jerseys and all kinds of things [laughs]. You know. And who wanted to learn that? I mean it was dated for them, I think, after coming back from the war, you know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you left New York in 1948, did you know about Abstract Expressionism and had seen that work?

MAY STEVENS: No. And in fact when we came back three years later, I was amazed. Because while we were away, Abstract Expressionism happened. You see you asked me about abstraction before. It hadn't happened, this kind of abstraction. And when I came home and saw all this stuff, I thought, "Oh, my God! Look what's happened?" And it was amazing and fascinating and beautiful. I was very, very excited about it. Both of us were.

But it happened when we were away learning French art [laughs]. But I was in major exhibitions. I was in an exhibition with [Pablo] Picasso. And I got newspaper things. One of them said: "May Stevens, *la jeune Americaine*." "Come to Paris to perfect herself." [Laughs.] Wow!

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you develop a circle of friends of artist friends in Paris just during those three years?

MAY STEVENS: You know we had a baby. We were new. Our French was not that good. And we were trying to make a life. And we'd just gotten married, you know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You weren't there at the same time as Leon and Nancy?

MAY STEVENS: Who?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Leon Golub and Nancy Spero. Were you there at the same time?

MAY STEVENS: No.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No.

MAY STEVENS: No, they were not there at that time. Because we would've known. So anyway, sometimes I was very lonely. I was wheeling the baby carriage by a little cemetery, and there was a little thing about a woman who had died. She was American, and she'd lived there in France, and then she died in France. And I thought, Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no! I don't want to die in France. I mean it's fine, but I don't want to die in France, you know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you feel that it was good for your work actually to have been there for three years?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I was learning. I was seeing. I was going to museums, talking to people, meeting people. But then when I found out what was happening in New York, I thought, Wow! This is where things were really happening. I mean I was looking at the past or the slow present. And the fast present was happening in New York. So it was okay. And then Rudolf in a way was behind me because I'd already graduated. I already had a degree. And he had not. He always knew he was an artist, and I think that's the reason he wanted to go to Paris. Because for him, to be an artist meant to go to Paris, you know. Anyway, we met American artists when we were over there, and we coalesced together.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember any of their names?

MAY STEVENS: I can even see them, and I sort of remember them. But I can't remember their names. They weren't people who were famous. You know we were all beginners. We were beginners.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So how did you decide after three years that it was time to come back?

MAY STEVENS: Because the pay ran out. Rudolf had three years in the army. So he had three years of art school. And then we came back because there was no money.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: So then we came back, and we had to get jobs. See, in Paris we didn't get jobs. He went to the art school, and I guess there was enough money for him and me and the baby to live on. So—I'm trying to think. Let me show you some of the work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Well, just a second.

[END OF AAA_steven09_1851.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing May Stevens in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on August 10, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

So we're talking about when you left Paris, you knew you wanted to come back to New York.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And how did that work?

MAY STEVENS: I'm trying to remember. I didn't think—what did we do? I can't even remember. Well, obviously we found a place to live and—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: For you to have a studio and for him to have a studio?

MAY STEVENS: Well, he worked in our home.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You mean carved out of your—

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I don't know whether Rudolf went to the Art Students League, but I went to the Art Students League.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Again, after you came back from Paris?

MAY STEVENS: I'm not sure that I did. But it would give me a place to paint. So that would be the main thing. Oh, I remember that I went to a gallery [Galerie Moderne, NY] because I came with some notices from the French newspapers about me. And I went to a gallery with a group of paintings that I had done in Paris. And it was a small gallery, but I thought I liked it. So I lined the paintings up, a few of them, you know, six of them or whatever there was. And I talked about them, and I explained them to the guy. And you know what he said? He said, "I don't know why a girl as good-looking as you are wants to be a painter anyway." Isn't that something?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Didn't that happen again and again? Or just that one time?

MAY STEVENS: I remember that time. I was so upset. I mean really so angry. But that happens.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you and Rudolf were first in New York, do you remember gradually meeting other artists?

MAY STEVENS: In New York, of course.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And do you remember who your friends were those early years in the fifties?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. What happened is that we became involved in the anti-war movement.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I'm talking about—in the fifties? Before the Vietnam War.

MAY STEVENS: Right. Well, maybe—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You came back to New York in '51, I think.

MAY STEVENS: And we'd been there—We went in '48.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: '48, 1951-'52.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]. And when did the war start?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Early '60s.

MAY STEVENS: In the '60s? Well, I can't remember what we did when we came. We looked for jobs, whatever. We had a baby.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: In fact, in the beginning, I think I went to my father's home in Quincy, and lived there while Rudolf went to New York to find a place for us to live. You know we had to work that out. So eventually he found something, and we went to New York. And we lived in Queens for a while. And Steven started school. It was interesting to see what happened to his language because he spoke French. And then he would speak English. He knew English, too. But he would somehow mix up the two languages; and he would use English, but he would say, "I decided I would want to do this *ou* that." *Ou* meaning or.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. So he would do—You know French?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: And so that was interesting. And then I remember once he did a drawing in school, and I went to school to see the drawings on the wall that the kids had done. And I saw Steven's, and I thought it looked very good. And I said, "Oh, I like that one, Steven. It's yours, isn't it?" And he said, "Yes. But you know," he said, "the teacher added that to it." I was so angry [laughs]! Can you imagine? The teacher thought it should be improved.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember in those early years how you juggled having a child and doing your work?

MAY STEVENS: In the beginning when you got there, the main thing was to make a livable world for yourself. We needed work, jobs. And we needed a place to live. And we needed it to be usable and sensible and have space for work and all. It was very hard, you know. I mean I would get a job. I would get a job because I was an American, Rudolf was a foreigner. And he was different, you know. He had a little bit of an accent or something. And I would get a job easily. I'd get a job in an office or whatever it was, whatever I could get. And then he would actually take the responsibility for the child and the home. But he also was looking for a job, and he would get whatever kind of job he could get. Eventually I think what he started to do is to teach art at home. So he would get to know people where we lived, in the neighborhood where we lived, and he would be painting at home, right? And he would get people who would like to have him teach them. And they would turn out to be housewives in the neighborhood, and some of them were very talented and very interested. And so he'd hang out with a group of women—and sometimes there'd be a man, one or two, but mainly it was women—who would come and study with him.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was this when you lived in Queens?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And so that was fine. He would do that. And then I would be working in boring jobs, and Steven would be going to school. And it was very ordinary. But that didn't mean that we didn't have our dreams about what we were going to do. And eventually—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you still painting figuratively, do you recall?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember what I was doing. But eventually we got a loft in New York.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In between Queens you lived in a couple of other places, I think. And then you moved to Riverside Drive you eventually—?

MAY STEVENS: Yes, we did. We lived on Riverside Drive. Right. That was very nice.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That was because of Steven's school?

MAY STEVENS: Maybe. But it was a beautiful view of the river. And you'd see a raft go down the river with a big bird seated on it, you know. It was quite beautiful. And in fact we would move our dining table into the room overlooking the river. And we met wonderful people in the building we lived in. We met Lou Gilbert who was an actor.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Lou?

MAY STEVENS: Lou, L-O-U. Gilbert, G-I-L-B-E-R-T. And his wife Martha and their two children, Francesca and Nick. And we became very close friends of theirs. And Lou was in Broadway plays a lot and in movies. And he knew a lot of people in the film world. And so that was very, very interesting. And he was hilariously funny. He was a little man with a white beard. And he was—he loved to tell stories, and he talked to everybody. He'd walk down the street, and he would start talking to somebody. And you were with him, and you were going somewhere. But he was busy talking to somebody because that was what he was like [laughs]. Actually he—I think there was something. His mother was ill and not well. And so—and his father went away. He grew up in an orphanage. He was Jewish. He'd been in a Jewish orphanage. And he was one of the most lovable and friendly and warm and exciting people we ever met. And he married this wonderful, big woman [laughs], and he was this little guy. And they were a wonderful couple. They were in the building we lived in. And they became very, very warm friends. And in fact Francesca, his daughter, who was called Francie at that time, lives in Gila, and she is a lawyer who was in the—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Gila, New Mexico?

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Gila, New Mexico.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. And she lives in Gila, and she was awarded Lawyer of the Year a couple of years ago. She's wonderful. She's very smart. She's very attractive, very lively, and she's married to a wonderful man, and she's got three children. And they're my best friends right now. And she's fantastic, Francesca.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were always continuing to do your work wherever you were living. And you said you got a loft. But let me back up for a second. In the '60s then, you were thinking about—In 1961, I think it was, you started teaching at SVA [School of Visual Arts, New York, NY].

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was that your first teaching job in New York?

MAY STEVENS: No, I don't think so. But I can't remember before that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And how did it come about that you started teaching at SVA?

MAY STEVENS: Maybe I knew people there. I don't know. Or it just worked. Look, I was an artist who'd just come back from Paris. Come on. And I'd had exhibitions in Paris and reviews in Paris. And mentioned in the French newspapers, you know. In the newspapers they said, "I came to Paris to perfect myself." They loved it, the fact that [laughs] I came to honor them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Do you remember if in the very, in your early work, what—? Well, in 1963 I think it was, you did the *Freedom Riders* paintings. So there was an evolution from your early work, the Art Students' League, doing figurative paintings, that at some point political action, political issues came into your work, do you remember—

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: —do you remember when and how that happened? Obviously before you ended up doing this important series.

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember the sequences. But I did become very—my husband was extremely political. He was Jewish. And his mother, father, and ten-year-old sister were killed by local fascists in Lithuania. When the Nazis were coming in from Germany, on the edge of Lithuania local fascists rose up and killed 4,000 Jews in Rudolf's hometown, including his mother, father, and ten-year-old sister. So he was Jewish. He was not religious. His grandfather was. But his father was not. The grandfather and the father didn't talk to each other for that reason. But anyway, his father worked in a bank as a teller. You know Jews cannot own property in Europe—could not own property in Europe. So they had to be in the little town and get a little job.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In Lithuania, yes.

MAY STEVENS: Exactly. So the father worked in the bank as a teller. And the mother had three children and was home. And Rudolf said that in his home, very often at night a group of friends—and they would be Jews of course in the village there—would sit around a table under the abazu and talk. And they'd talk about literature and politics. And they all knew Russian, German, Yiddish. You know they knew several languages, and they would talk and discuss. And Rudolf would be terrified of these very wise people sitting there talking all the time, you know? Because he didn't dare. But of course he learned from them nevertheless. And he has one story he talks about: Being with his brother. His brother lives here in New York now. He and his brother—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What is his brother's name?

MAY STEVENS: Joseph. And the name—the old name—is Baranickas, B-A-R-A-N-I-C-K-A-S. I think it's C-K. It might be just K. Anyway, so what happened is that Rudolf had been sent to America to avoid what might happen. He was 18, and he was sent to America. And he enlisted when he got here in the American Army. I don't know whether it was immediate. He was sent to a rich uncle in Chicago. And when he got into that rich uncle's rich home in Chicago—this guy was a real estate guy; he'd made a lot of money—and he said to Rudolf, "You know, Ruben—" Because he preferred the Jewish name. "You know, Ruben, there's no such thing as—" I forget the word. He said, "You know, Ruben, you have to forget about all that stuff you learned abroad. You have to become an American. We don't want you to be talking about all that other stuff. Forget it." And, oh, he said, "There's no such"—I know what he said. "There's no such thing as socialism in America." Rudolf looked at him: "Are you kidding?" He knew about Eugene Debs and everything. He walked out. This was the man who was going to house him and send him to college. And he walked out. So there were two other brothers, uncles of his, whom he'd never met. And they ran a garage.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In Chicago?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. So he went to them, and he lived with them. Then he found that there was a Lithuanian newspaper called *Laisve*, which I think means liberty. L-A-I-S-V-E. And he got a job there because he spoke—He went in and they said, "Do you speak Lithuanian?" And he talked to them in Lithuanian, and they were terribly impressed because his Lithuanian was beautiful. He was a wonderful student. [Cell phone ringing.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Sorry. [Audio pause.] He went to this newspaper.

MAY STEVENS: And he spoke Lithuanian to them, and they hired him immediately. And when he was in Paris, he was writing, you know, little articles for them and sending them. And he continued to write for them forever. But he didn't work there. He just would write articles and send them to them. And he wanted to do that. And he liked the language, Lithuanian, and he was very, very good at it. He loved languages. He was very good at that. So anyway, so where are we—?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you—I was talking about the transition from your figurative work to your more political content. And influences and how that turned about. Obviously you see its nature.

MAY STEVENS: So this man lost his mother, father, and ten-year-old sister to thugs who got drunk and went on a rampage and killed 4,000 Jews. And we went back to Lithuania twice together. And the first time we went—I get tears—the first time we went it was under the Soviets. And in that village, in the place where the 4,000 Jews were buried, there was a sign which said: "4,000 Soviet citizens were killed here." And it was so infuriating. And we came back two years later, and it was no longer Soviet. And there were two signs: One in Lithuanian and one in Hebrew, and they both said: "4,000 Jews were killed here." So it was mended a little tiny bit. Anyway.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So his interests and passions affected your work.

MAY STEVENS: Exactly, exactly. Well, but also what could be worse than the Vietnam War? I mean it was infuriating! Do you know Grace Paley.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: She was head of the Greenwich Village Peace Movement. And we worked with her. She was our boss, and we loved her, and she was wonderful. She's a poet, as you know. Yes. She was the boss, but, you know, she's not a person who does bossing. She never bosses. But everybody loved her and wanted to work with her, and we all worked together. So we were very, very much committed to working on that, the two of us. And lots of friends.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And you at one point, you formed—

MAY STEVENS: And maybe that's where we met Nancy and Leon. Leon? Leon, right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Early in the '60s you were involved in forming Artists and Writers Against the Vietnam War.

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And I wanted to—from that came the *Freedom Riders* series of paintings and works on paper?

MAY STEVENS: No doubt. No doubt. I always cared about this. For one thing I always knew that racism was disgusting. I knew that as a child. You know my father didn't care. But I knew that nothing could be stupider than racism. And I talked about it. I just knew. I don't know how I knew. But it seems to me very simple. Why do you hate somebody because they've got a different color skin or a different accent? What is that about? I knew that. And so I had no problem with any of this. And the fact that Rudolf was Jewish didn't bother me at all. I thought it was interesting, you know. He brings a different view to me that I didn't know about, that I didn't understand. And he wasn't Jewish in the sense of religion at all. But, you know, he said something, oh, this is so wonderful—or terrible. But before he died, he said—I've lost it. It'll come to me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At that point, how did you—did you have any conflict in your mind in those days, in the '60s, about the time that you wanted, you needed to spend in studio working and the time you wanted and needed to spend on political action?

MAY STEVENS: No. Because my political action was making art that would speak to these problems. If I'm an artist and I care about these things, then I have to make them mesh.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So it was a natural evolution in your work.

MAY STEVENS: Absolutely.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It wasn't a moment when you felt that you had to give something up?

MAY STEVENS: No. I mean it gave me a purpose and a subject. What could be better than working on something which was so important? And I'm not doing it for them. I'm going it for me. And for me, meaning me as a woman who has a Jewish husband and a man-child, a boy-child, you know, who you'd like to send to war? You know. I mean I cared about all of this. And I loved Grace Paley. She was Jewish. But that's not the point. But she cared, and she was a wonderful writer and wonderful poet. I mean it took a while to get to like her poetry because it's very simple. But that doesn't mean not deep, you know. So it was wonderful working with her. And the other people, all the other people—You were asking about Leon and Nancy. They were extremely dedicated to this. They were—I mean Leon and Rudolf were the leaders of this group that we were with. They constantly were working. Their life was devoted to working against the war and using their art and the art of other artists—Because whom they worked with were artists. And we all worked. We organized huge shows, great big shows

with everybody putting in. In fact, I think Leon Golub had gotten squares or rectangles of canvas-covered boards. And you could come in and get one because we were doing a huge show at one of the colleges that was there that had a huge auditorium. And so you could come in and get one and leave. You didn't make it in your own home, but you wanted one there. You'd go there, and you'd get it from him or you would have your own. And then you'd do something which was on this theme. This was not a chore. This was exciting, to use your vision, your talent, your passion in this. And it was not commercial. Nobody's going to give you anything for it. It's what you want to do and what you hope will have an effect. And we did this for years, all the time. And Nancy and Leon, particularly Leon, were extremely strong in doing this.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember other artists who you were friends with at that time?

MAY STEVENS: I can remember this guy, but I can't remember his name at the moment. He was a very good friend of Leon's.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: There was someone named Jack Sonnenberg? Was he—

MAY STEVENS: Yes, he was part of it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And he came to teach in New Mexico.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] No, Jack Sonenberg and his wife, whose name—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Phoebe?

MAY STEVENS: Phoebe Helman. No, they were part of it, both of them. It was interesting because Jack was very abstract in his work, which was a little more difficult for being in an artist in—But he did a book on people speaking against the war. And, you know, it would have to be a little more abstract, a little more difficult, but he did that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: No, he was very much interested in—I mean he cared, he really cared. But he was not—he had to be an abstract artist; that's what he was.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In those years, do you remember what contemporary art or historic art was influencing you?

MAY STEVENS: What contemporary art was influencing me?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Or museums—work you were seeing in the museums? During that period in the '60s.

MAY STEVENS: I really can't think about that. But I do suppose that if I was—probably was—but I would have been probably interested not so much by contemporary artists but by other artists who had responded to political situations throughout history, which is a true thing. I mean this happened before, and it's happened often. And so I cared a lot about those people. I did a—I'm going to show you. I'm going to bring it here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Okay. I'll pause this for a second.

[Audio break.]

We're looking at—May, would you say what we're looking at for the recording?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. This is a painting I did. As you can see, it's done in one color. It's monochrome. And I had done it years ago. And it reminded me—I didn't think about this—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And that was part of the *Freedom Riders* series.

MAY STEVENS: I don't know. But it reminded me a lot of [Honoré] Daumier's *Third Class Railway Carriage* [1863-1865]. And I thought, Wow! Look at this. And I loved Daumier, and I loved his *Third Class Railway Carriage*. But this is—in my painting this is black and white people heading to the South to join. Okay? That's what it's about. So I—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember why you did those paintings in black and white? Many of those works were in black and white.

MAY STEVENS: I love black and white. I really do.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is there a reason why you felt it wasn't appropriate to use color?

MAY STEVENS: No. But this is effective for this particular—It's not about color. It's about mood and light and dark, right?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: Okay. So I think it's the whole thing, although, you know, some of it's cut off. Oh, this is the whole thing down here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I see.

MAY STEVENS: So this group of people—I think somebody said I'm the only white person here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What we're looking at is a framed image of, a reproduction of the drawing—of the painting—and images of works by other artists—

MAY STEVENS: One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: We have text that says: "To form a more perfect union. Seeking equal rights for African-Americans."

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh, there's another one here. Anyway, most of these are black people, and they have Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence and people like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: And somebody looked it up and said that they think I'm the only white person there. But in any case, I walked into a post office one day—I've got to get a Kleenex. And they had this one the wall. I said, "What's that?" Because it's my picture. And somebody had done this. I guess the people who—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But wouldn't they have—We're talking about U.S. postage stamps, 37-cent stamps. Wouldn't they have had to get your permission to use it, your image, on a postage stamp?

MAY STEVENS: Is this a postage stamp?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. These are all 32-cent—37-cent—U.S. postage stamps. And this is the whole series of stamps.

MAY STEVENS: So I can't remember how that happened [laughs]. But in any case I just walked into a post office, and this is on the wall, and I think, Wow! What is happening here? So it was \$50 to buy, and I bought one. And I think it's—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It commemorates, yes.

MAY STEVENS: And I gave one to somebody else.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: But I was so pleased to have them choose that. And maybe they thought that because it dealt with black and white together—which maybe not the others do, I'm not sure, it's hard to tell.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: You know this is very much about blacks.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: But in any case I was so thrilled that this was being useful. You know I mean I want to make art for everything and everybody. But to have them want, to have this in the post office so that people might buy it —

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Does it say what the year is on the back?

MAY STEVENS: These are the names of each person.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Well, it says here 2004. But I think it's before that. I don't—oh, maybe postage was 37 cents in 2004. [Richards is meaning to say 2005.] [They laugh.]

MAY STEVENS: Anyway, I was very happy about that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Huge achievement.

[Audio break.]

MAY STEVENS: See, in making art, making art that's useful like that gives me great pleasure. And I don't—this was done not for the purpose. I just did this because I wanted to show black and white people going south to join in the movement. And then they wanted to choose it for that, which made me very happy.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: But you know, obviously, I chose a very honorable source [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. When you first came back from Paris and you saw the abstract expressionist's work being done, was there any particular abstract expressionist's work you most admired or were excited about.

MAY STEVENS: Some of the work. But it wouldn't be just so generalized. I mean I like some of them. I like some of the black and white of [Willem] de Kooning, especially a couple of black-and-white things that he did I loved. I like color, but I'm very fussy about it. I have to have a certain kind of color or a certain effect of color.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you aware of [Robert] Rauschenberg's work in the fifties?

MAY STEVENS: Not particularly.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Then after you did the *Freedom Riders*, you started the Big Daddy—what became Big Daddy [series, 1969-1975].

MAY STEVENS: Big Daddy. Probably.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you think of them as the Big Daddy paintings when you first started them? Or did that name get attached to those paintings toward the end?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I did perhaps—I did both my mother and my father. And my father was called "Big Daddy." I was furious at him. I really was very, very angry at my father, which is kind of stupid because he was always good to me, to the degree that he could, to the degree that he understood. He did not ever condemn me or put me away at all. But I condemned him and put him away. Because first of all he wasn't good to my mother. I mean he didn't do anything bad to her, but he didn't do anything to her. She lived in his house. She was fed and clothed.

But there was one scene, for example, which was so horrible that I can never forget it. And it's so simple. She was unhappy and not well, and she didn't have a life. And when she had a headache, she would tie a cotton stocking around her head and knot it because to make it tight and a little pressure would help the head, I guess. So can you imagine what it looks like? This cotton stocking and all which is flesh-colored, knotted here. And then the clothes she wore were terrible. She didn't care. And so this was very unpleasant for my father. And there wasn't much he could do about it. But one day I remember—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The idea of going to a psychiatrist seeing psychological help?

MAY STEVENS: Never occurred to us. We lived in a working-class district, and my father was pipe fitter. Not a plumber, but a pipe fitter at this huge—I forget what it's called—but this huge place where they built boots in Quincy. We lived close by. In the morning there'd be a sound come—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: A whistle.

MAY STEVENS: A whistle. And people—men—would start walking down to this place. And then at three o'clock in the afternoon, they'd come home, and another group would go, you know. And so my father—it did three shifts, and my father would have some of those shifts. He worked as a pipe fitter, and it didn't matter to him. That's what he worked at. He owned his house. The house was a two-family house. He got money from the people on the other side. And he was very respectable and took a—He was a teetotaler. He never drank—never. He had principles, you know. But anyway, so my mother didn't care how she looked. She didn't dress well. She wasn't interested at all.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You said she was depressed.

MAY STEVENS: She was depressed. So I remember standing in their bedroom—Well, at that point, she and I slept in the same bed. So she's standing there, and I come in, and I stand with her. And he's opening up the drawers to their bureau and pulling out her clothes. And he says, "This doesn't look good. This is no good. This is

old, full of runs. We don't want that." And he'd throw it away. And then he pulls out something else. "This is no good. This is too old, it's too shabby." He's throwing out all her clothes. Which doesn't mean that he doesn't want to get more. But he doesn't want her to wear such awful clothes. And she is at a total loss. She doesn't know what to do. She doesn't argue with him, she doesn't fight with him. She just stands there. And I'm watching, and I think, this is so cruel. This is so cruel. And there's nothing I can do about it. I'm too young to complain and to yell at him or something. But I'm watching him humiliate her. And I can't stand it. But I do. And I realize he's hurt by what has happened to the woman he loved. But he has no way to deal with it. No way. He doesn't know how to help, what to do. He sees that she's fed and clothed. And, you know, he takes care of her. But he has nothing to give. And I'm left to be the only—her son has died. And I'm left to be the only one who cares for her. So I spent my teenage years, after my brother died when he was 15 and I was 16, until I left, I spent my time taking care of my mother. I did my school. I did my work. I was a great student, had a great time at school. At home I took care of my mother. I took her for walks and bought her clothes. I took her to the movies. I sent away from embroidery stuff, and I taught her embroidery. I did all the things I could to make a life for my mother because no one else did anything for her but me. And then of course I left. After two years, after graduating, and getting jobs which I hated, and my girlfriend call me from New York and said, Come. I said, I have to come. I can't stay anymore. So.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you did the Big Daddy paintings—

MAY STEVENS: Yes. I was punishing my father.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: —you were upset at your father. Not necessarily mainly for his political views. But for the person.

MAY STEVENS: Well, of course, he agreed. We would never contradict the government or something. He was, you know—He had no—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But he wasn't particularly a racist or radically conservative.

MAY STEVENS: No. He wasn't a racist.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: He just was a conformist.

MAY STEVENS: He was like everybody else, and he never broke the pattern. He—I remember that when they were voting at the shipyard, they were voting on the union. My father voted for the company union. It was stupid! Stupid! But he probably through the other guys were radicals, you know, something like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Hmm. So how did you decide to do the Big Daddy paintings?

MAY STEVENS: Maybe because I was so angry at him. I was just so angry at him.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Their influence, though, their imagery is quite removed from tradition figuration. It's removed from abstraction. It's very influenced by what was going on.

MAY STEVENS: By what was going on?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In Pop Art.

MAY STEVENS: Oh.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The flat colors.

MAY STEVENS: Oh, probably. Sure. Probably. Yes. I mean that sounds logical to me. And I wanted to mock him. I wanted to mock him, and I wanted to ridicule him. So I did it. And I would set one figure in the middle and then have all these outfits. Because that kind of mentality can make you into people who do all kinds of awful things because you don't think for yourself. So I had this whole set of, you know, policemen and—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Obviously the power of those works is they transcended your relationship with your father.

MAY STEVENS: Oh, sure. No, it's a type—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Right. You were thinking about making—

MAY STEVENS: The mass of people who let it all happen and never protest.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: We're talking about the Vietnam War.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Right. But we do that all the time. The country goes to war, and we don't want to be against the country. Stupid. I mean of course you can be against the country, you know if you can gather together other people.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I believe—but correct me if I'm wrong—during that series you made the transition from oil to acrylic. Do you remember that happening and why?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. I don't know how much I remember, but I do remember that. When I was doing things like Big Daddy probably, because that's very hard edge, I would have to tape the edge, once it was dry, so that I could put in the next color. And then I realized, you know, what are you using oil paint for, you know? And I switched to acrylic. And I can do anything I want with acrylic. I use acrylic all the time. I can use it like oil paint. I can use it like anything. I can water it down. I can mix it with other things. I'm totally at ease with it. To me it's color.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You weren't sad to leave oil paints?

MAY STEVENS: I wasn't what?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You weren't sad to stop using oil paints?

MAY STEVENS: No. Actually I found acrylic easier. You can clean it up [laughs]. It's much easier.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It doesn't smell.

MAY STEVENS: Do you paint?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I did.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember how those images, which you did for a number of years, evolved? Do you remember how they were received in the art world?

MAY STEVENS: The *Big Daddies*? I think people loved them. They thought they were very funny. And also kind of angry or spiteful or something that had a little edge to them. They could see that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: There was a lot of positive critical reception to them?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. No, people loved them. I think mainly—you know people don't get in, most people perhaps, don't get into things very deeply. They look at it, and if they like the way it looks, if it's funny or if it's original or whatever it is, they think, Ah, it's great! Look at that! But they don't have to know that it's my father. They don't have to get into that. They don't have to know that it's against the war or anything like that. They can just look at it and think, Hah! She's making fun of all this stuff, of these ordinary things that people do. Whatever they want to, you know—They don't take it very far. But if I weren't taking it further, it wouldn't have been as good as it was. It was carried further than that to me. I mean it's nicely done and neat and all these good-looking uniforms and whatever. And to me it's about stupidity. About they want me to be a policeman, they want me to go to war. Whatever they want, you know, I'm going to do it. I'm not going to get in trouble. And, you know, I knew better than that. But I had a Jewish husband.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At the end of that series was about when you were one of the founders of *Heresies*.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, I was a great feminist.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And I wanted to pick that up right now and talk about your work as a feminist and founding of *Heresies*.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did that all evolve?

MAY STEVENS: Well, we've all liked that. We were so—everybody was talking about feminism at that time. And in fact when Rudolf and I would have a dinner party, which we did a lot, and we'd have a lot of artists and friends there, the thing that would drive me crazy is that Rudolf would talk about feminism all the time [laughs] and not give me a chance to speak. But he meant it. However, he wanted to talk about it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did it come to be that you were one of the founders of *Heresies*?

MAY STEVENS: My friends and I were doing it together. We very much wanted to do it. Lucy Lippard was a very important part of that. And lots of people.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It was, again, it was taking part of the time away from your studio practice, to write and to be involved in founding this magazine was—

MAY STEVENS: But for me it's not, and you're doing the same thing that you kind of did before. Political activity does not interfere with my work, it feeds it. It feeds it because I don't think of art as this sacred thing that you do in this sacred place that nobody else and no other thing can ever come in. It's part of the world. And if I'm interested in racism and fighting racism, then that should show up—will show up—in my work. If I care about it, at some point it'll be there. It may not be there forever. But at some point surely, if that's a significant part of my life, it'll show up in my work. And it should. And it has. Like in that thing which I just showed you.

And in the war, I guess my father was part of my fighting the war. And then *Freedom Riders* and all of that. And the thing that makes it, I think, good or can make it good, or should make it good, is when it comes from deep inside. And it's now just I should be doing this. You know I want to make an effect here. It's not that. It's like I care. And therefore it will be interesting and important if it comes from my view, my experience, my sense of this. Not just this is the way it is. But I want it to be genuine because I deeply care about these things. Otherwise I wouldn't do them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: As part of your work with *Heresies*, you were also writing.

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And that's been an important—

MAY STEVENS: Same thing, same thing, right. So my father—I don't know whether he saw these things, but I didn't care. You know he was always good to me [laughs]. I don't think—I think he spanked me when I was a child, but he never touched me afterwards.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did he realize that when you did this series, that in fact you achieved great recognition as an artist, that he could be proud of your accomplishment.

MAY STEVENS: You know what he would say. He would say, "How are you doing in your art." And I'd say, "I'm doing fine." And he would say, "Well, you're selling?" And I said, "Selling! That's nothing to do with anything!" You know. Come on! It's not about selling! And I would say to him, "I want to be Michelangelo!" [Laughs.] Because, you know, he had a low view of this.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: A limited view.

MAY STEVENS: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Well, it's whatever a parent would say.

MAY STEVENS: Yes, of course.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Are you surprised?

MAY STEVENS: Are you making money? You're supporting yourself, right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, that was the gauge for achievement.

MAY STEVENS: yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: After you finished the Big Daddy series, you worked on a number of life-size portraits of artists?

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You worked on a number of life-size portraits of artists and writers?

MAY STEVENS: I did.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: There was something called the *Artist's Studio* [1973].

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: A huge painting you did in '74.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you thinking consciously of responding to [Gustave] Courbet's painting [*The Artist's Studio*, 1855].

MAY STEVENS: I did. I knew about that painting, and I did look at that a lot. And I wanted to sort of repeat that or be part of that. No, I liked Courbet a lot.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Those paintings were very large.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And since then your work has been very large I think mostly. Larger than the Big Daddy paintings.

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Larger than the Big Daddy paintings.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Well, the Big Daddies are horizontal, you know. It's not high.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. Do you remember your thinking about painting large, I mean, as a separate issue, scale, and size, at that point?

MAY STEVENS: No. I just enjoyed very much filling the canvas, you know. I mean a row is one thing, and that's so simple. You know a row of Big Daddy costumes or whatever they are, within a room.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But this an engagement with narrative.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And a whole group of people with different—And I loved Courbet's work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Storytelling.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. And I really studied him a lot and was very fond of what he did in every way. I thought he was a very good painter. And unique. I don't think there are many people really like him—at least not on that level.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Unique. And then you did a painting *SoHo Women Artists* [1978].

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, I was wondering if it was difficult, challenging, tense to decide who would be in that painting and who wouldn't be in that painting.

MAY STEVENS: No. Because I had a circle of friends.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And they knew who they were.

MAY STEVENS: People I knew and cared about. And some of them were closer and some of them were less close. But that's okay. They were—You know I also chose them for the fact that I knew them and cared about them and knew what they were like and what they meant, what their feeling was, you know. So some of them were closer to me and more interesting. But others might have been—could have been—chosen because they looked good or they fit into that place. They sat there in the right way.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How important is it for viewers today to know about who each person you depicted is, in the *Artist's Studio* and in *SoHo Women Artists*, to know that piece of history, to understand why each of those artists and other friends of yours were in that painting?

MAY STEVENS: But I believe that everything changes. So I did the painting at a certain time with certain feeling for these people. And as I just said to you, some of them were important to me as individuals. Others seemed to me, well, they fit right or their appearance or whatever. Or even much—maybe some part of their character, which wasn't present in anybody else, it would bring that flavor in by putting them in. But that was how I felt at that time. Now, the painting, you know, I hardly remember it. But I remember working on it and remember enjoying it very much. And of course it was fun working on something where all the people who are in it are dying to see it and criticize.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you did that painting, did you paint from life, from photographs, from a

combination?

MAY STEVENS: Both, both. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So people sat for you?

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But largely they were—I'd ask for photographs because that's much easier for them and me. But then I knew them, you know. I knew the flavor of their personality, right?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And you also did some wonderful graphite on paper studies for the *Artist's Studio*. Which brings me to ask you what part those preliminary drawings and drawing in general was playing—maybe continues to play—but just thinking about that period, what part drawing played in your developing those big paintings?

MAY STEVENS: It's very important to me. I love to draw, and I always draw. And I think that my paintings actually drawing in them, no matter what they turn out to be. So that I just love—I love drawing.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was there somebody in school or later from whom you developed this love, or just naturally evolved?

MAY STEVENS: No, I just loved it. I always loved to draw. And I think I told you that when they'd bring me these little pieces of yellow paper, and I would draw profiles of girls for them or whatever. But drawing was very much my field. And that's probably why I never got to be very abstract. Because I like to draw.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Well, [inaudible]. Just skipping for a second to your working methods. When you—this can cover whatever period of time you want—did you always do preparatory drawings for the paintings, all your paintings? Or just during periods?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I don't that they should be called preparatory drawings because I would probably make a sketch, you know, but it could be like something here and something over there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: A rough sketch.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. But I wouldn't go into it. Unless I really got somehow involved and wanted to make a drawing out of it; I could do that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And you did drawings as independent works of art.

MAY STEVENS: Sure. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were studying painting in school, did you begin with the building up painting with an undercoat?

MAY STEVENS: No.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You just worked directly.

MAY STEVENS: I did. I worked very, very directly. But if I decided that it should have an under painting that would enhance it, I might do that, too. You know I wouldn't count it out and say, no, you couldn't do that. But if I thought it would help or be interesting, I might experiment. I was interested in experimenting, trying new things.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you did the Big Daddy series, did you make a preliminary drawing to plan out the image and the—

MAY STEVENS: Probably. Probably. If I'm doing, you know, three costumes on the left and three costumes on the right, and Big Daddy in the middle, I'd probably lay it out and sketch in costumes or something.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Have you always or sometimes kept sketchbooks as kind of visual diaries?

MAY STEVENS: I don't think so. There may be some around somewhere. But I can't think of having saved all that stuff. I mean there's so much stuff you do on the way, you know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, yes, yes. Do you recall if you've always or sometimes worked on many paintings at once or just one at a time: Developed it, concluded it, then started another?

MAY STEVENS: Well, it depends because sometimes you do—I do—a painting which is very important to me but doesn't come easily. And I have to think about it. I have to live with it. And I know that I want to do this painting, and I don't know what the next step should be or whether this should be a major change or a major addition or

subtraction or something. I don't know. So that painting I might have to leave and kind of live with. And then I'll do another one instead. But I constantly have the other one up, and I'm looking at it all the time, thinking about it. And so I'll come in, and I'll think, well, I could do this. I could move this over or take this out, you know. And then I will do that at some point.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At some point do you think is a painting a failure and you give up?

MAY STEVENS: No, I don't give up. But I could change it. So I'm not giving it up, but I'm thinking, it has this which I really like, and I really want to go for. But I think this isn't helping. And it's not that I'm condemning that. I'm just thinking that doesn't work here. Try something else here. Or just remove that. You know I have an idea for a painting which I can tell you. I want to do a painting of myself as an 85-year-old naked woman. And I've taken—I've had photographs taken over the years when I wasn't 85. So that's my dream, that I should do because it's a challenge, it's a tremendous challenge. Because it is hurting me—it'll hurt me to do it. But I want to cure that because there's no reason for shame. I despise shame. And it's hard not to have shame sometimes, right? And I really want to do myself naked. And I have these photographs, and some of them are good, and some of them are awful. But the thing is I cannot make them more acceptable or more beautiful than they are because that would be ridiculous and contemptible and shameful [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I'm going to change the tape.

[END OF AAA_steven09_1852.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards with May Stevens on August 10, 2009, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

We were talking about technique, and I was asking if you work on more than one piece at a time. Is it equally important to keep works in the studio to think about and look at as you're starting new one even though they're completely resolved and finished? Or do you just as soon they leave the studio?

MAY STEVENS: I think it might depend. If there's still something in this particular painting which you call—which you indicated would be—finished, I still like to look at it. Which might mean that I'm not even sure that it's finished. Or it might be that it's different from what I've done before. And therefore I'm still—it's still new to me. So it's kind of interesting to have it there to look at.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you ever grapple with the question of whether a painting is finished or not? Or is it that's not an issue at all?

MAY STEVENS: No. I think one always wonders if it's finished, and it's one of the crucial decisions because it has to do with whether—Sometimes it can be there's something new happening in the painting that you haven't had before. And the question is do you want that, and is that good? Is it good for you? Is it good in the painting? And so then I think you have to, as you've kind of indicated, let it hang for a while and live with it for a while. Until you either get used to it or you decide, no, no, I don't like that. So that's kind of an interesting part of it. It's almost like having a living being in the room with you, and you're getting used to this creature. And then you finally think, Oh! I do like it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What about your studio routine. Have you always maintained a kind of consistent go into the studio at a certain time of the day? I mean after Steven was grown up or you didn't have issues of having a child in the house. But did you have a routine? Or is it always very flexible, the time in the studio?

MAY STEVENS: It varies a great deal. And it depends upon my schedule and what I'm doing the painting for, when it needs to be ready. If it's for a show and, you know. So it depends. And sometimes I might stay up all night and do it because if that's what I have to do, then that's what I have to do. Or I could go to bed at night, but get up very early in the morning and try to finish it off because I know it's going out in the morning.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you're not always a morning person or a night owl [laughs].

MAY STEVENS: No. The main thing is to get the painting done and to respond to its need. It's almost like having another child. Do you have children?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Two, yes. What about music, the atmosphere in the studio? Light? Did you always want to paint in daylight or a kind of artificial light? Did you need it to be consistent? What about light and sound?

MAY STEVENS: I sometimes work at night, with night light. I work in the daytime. You know if I need the light to be different, I may have to bring in a light, arrange it that way.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: Whatever has to be done, because it's not a rigid thing.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you're working with particular ranges of color, obviously the color will look different in different lighting.

MAY STEVENS: But I have to bring in more light or take out a light or something to get it different.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But it isn't that you always like to work in a certain kind of light.

MAY STEVENS: No, no. It depends. And it depends upon what the color is that you're using, how much light it needs. I mean—I don't believe, I don't think so, I don't believe in a kind of rigid formula. It depends upon the particular mood—my mood. But the particular need of a particular moment and the particular painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: So you respond. I mean it's almost like another human being, another living thing.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What about music? Do you always, never—?

MAY STEVENS: I used to play a lot of music, and I used to play—I used to play, oh God, and opera, the most passionate opera in the world. What is that? The most passionate opera in the world? With everybody doing [inaudible]. I used to play that all the time.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: An Italian opera?

MAY STEVENS: I think it's probably German.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: [Richard] Wagner?

MAY STEVENS: Yes, I think so. It was fantastic! It was so passionate, you know! And I'd be painting away. But of course at a certain point I wouldn't even hear it anymore because I'm in the painting. But it was great to hear it! So I would do that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And what about assistants? Have you ever wanted to, and if you have had assistants, what role have they played?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I would have somebody who works for me around the house or does work for me. I have a young man who works for me now. He's an artist, and he's great.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What does he do?

MAY STEVENS: He's a painter.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No, I mean for you.

MAY STEVENS: Everything. Anything. He's absolutely great. And because of that, because he's so good and smart—he's 38 and he's got two kids and a wife—so I talk to him. We sit here and talk. And he's really smart. And I talk to him about my paintings, and I talk to him about ideas I have. And he says he comes here because he gets an education [laughs]. So that's nice.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So it's really a two-way.

MAY STEVENS: Yes, yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Your assistants give you a lot more than just—

MAY STEVENS: Absolutely.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you give them a lot more.

MAY STEVENS: Absolutely. Well, you know, I don't like this rigid thing: He's my assistant. You know levels, different levels? Come on, he's a smart young man, very intelligent, and a very good artist. So I try to give him advice about how to work on his career, which is what he wants to do.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Does he do things like stretch canvases or [inaudible]?

MAY STEVENS: Anything I ask—anything I ask. He paints my room.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What part—you started making prints many, many years ago. And we'll get back to the other paintings here, but this is a shorter topic. Why did you start making prints, May? Was it because the imagery could reach a wider audience, a kind of—that aspect of prints. Or was it something about working in a particular medium to create images that you couldn't—or that you wanted to explore using that?

MAY STEVENS: Well, my gallery [Mary Ryan Gallery, New York, NY] very much wanted me to make prints, which I don't mind at all. I mean I just make a drawing, you know, and then—Well, I do make prints, but also I send them to a person who makes them for me. I mean I make the drawing, and then they make the print.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You're not involved in the print shop?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I might be. I might be—look at the print and criticize it or make suggestions, you know. But if you know the printmaker and they know you, then you can really trust them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Are you thinking about—are you talking about lithography?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Right. Well, that's a lithograph over there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Has printmaking informed your painting?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know. I suppose everything—everything.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. Well, we'll get back to that later. Many, many—early in your career you started going to the MacDowell Colony [Peterborough, NH].

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I think it was really early that you went for the first time. And you went many, many times.

MAY STEVENS: Right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What part did that experience play to you as an artist in the development of your work?

MAY STEVENS: It provides you with—it takes away distraction because you have all day alone in a studio. Now there are people who think, oh, we can go on a trip this way or that way. But I want to work. That's why I'm there. And then there are pools where you can go and swim late in the afternoon, which is fine, and I like to do that. But to have a place where you go every day, including Sundays and Saturdays and whatever, and work on your work is wonderful. It's just wonderful. There's no distraction. And then you can get to know people, and you get to see what they're doing, and you have them come to your place. And, you know, there's some kind of socializing that goes on. And it's very interesting. I went in the wintertime once, which was lovely. Snow came, it was great to see out the window nothing but snow all over the place. And then when I invited people to come to my studio, some of them had to come on all fours, the snow was so deep [laughs]. It was quite wonderful.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you feel then—you talked about distraction, lack of distraction, that was an issue working at home. And what about being away from the city and away from the art world? Was that also—

MAY STEVENS: I had plenty of that when I was there. I went to see the shows. Rudolf and I would go, and then we'd talk about it. We'd go to openings and parties. Sure, you know, in New York. But then you don't need that all the time. And even in MacDowell, there would be groups and things happening, evenings where some people would talk or show things and whatever. So there was some social life.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you feel that you made any major breakthroughs when you went to MacDowell? Or was it to continue on work that you had started before you got there?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know. I can't pinpoint anything specific. Certainly I saw work of people's, and I saw work in process, which is interesting, to see the work, the way people proceed along the track that brings them to what they want to do. So it's good. I mean you're with a bunch of other artists. Then you learn something about their different techniques. Get to know them and—And it can be very different from you, which is always good.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you open there and always to the idea of people visiting your studio and seeing work in progress? Or was that a difficult—would you rather them not see it in the middle?

MAY STEVENS: It generally doesn't bother me. I don't hide things. Because it seems to me that everybody's work goes through stages. And in some stages it's not worth looking at, or it's confusing, or whatever. And that's okay. That's the way it works, you know. It's like cooking a something or other, and at some point it's nothing but, you know, a bowl of shmush, you know. That's the way it goes. "Nobody can look at my work until it's perfect?" Come on! It's not real, it's not right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] When you came to New York, you mentioned that one experience at a gallery when the gallerist—

MAY STEVENS: When I came from Paris?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. Said, "Why do you want to be an artist?"

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Since then you've had many relationships with galleries. What have been your best relationships and why? And what has been important to you to look for and to get from a relationship with a gallery?

MAY STEVENS: Interesting. I'm with the Mary Ryan Gallery in New York, and I've been with them for a long time. And I think that she accepts whatever I do. She doesn't discuss it, which is interesting. Which is probably a good idea. She doesn't get into it and talk about—we don't talk about the art. But she hangs it, does a good job of hanging it. She sells it. She sold a very large painting, larger than this wall, maybe this wall and a half or something or other, in my last big show. She sold that painting to Morgan Stanley, and they paid \$75,000, of which I get half. And I haven't been to see it in their lobby on Fifth Avenue or wherever it is. But other people have. So that's nice. But, you know, she can do that? Let her do it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In the past, other dealers—have you had a sense that you did better with women dealers? Was that an issue?

MAY STEVENS: No. I don't believe that, although I suppose it could be. Or some people would feel that way. I don't believe that at all. I do think it's interesting that she doesn't—but maybe they never do—she doesn't talk about the art.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Some dealers do.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. But she doesn't. And gallery people that I've had before have not. But I think probably it's better not to in a way because they're not trying to tell you what to do. So, you know, look, she puts what I do up on the wall and hangs it well and sells it. That's fine.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In the past did you find that being with a gallery gave you a community, that you became friends with the other artists in the gallery, that that was something that was a positive element of being with a gallery?

MAY STEVENS: Well, actually in some of the galleries I was with, friends of mine joined it. So it happened that way. You know like I think Harmony [Hammond] joined one of the galleries I was in. And other people that I knew joined the gallery, which was fine. And I liked that. But Mary, Mary Ryan, she's interesting. She never takes recommendations, so she says. I said, "Well, how do you get new people?" So she says she follows all the galleries' activity. She goes to all the shows that are significant. And she watches them over years to see what's happening with these various artists. And when she likes an artist, thinks that this is an interesting artist that she might be able to handle, she calls them up. Which is what she did to me. When she called me up, I'd never heard of her. She called me up, and she said, "Can I visit you in your studio?" And I said, sure. She came, and she looked at the work, and then she said, "Can I see more of your work?"

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At that point you were showing in a different gallery. Was that when you were showing at Lerner-Heller [New York, NY] or—?

MAY STEVENS: Probably. Probably Lerner-Heller. So then she said, "Can I see more of your work? Can I see your studio and, you know, what work you have going?" So I said, sure. So we went, and I showed her the work there. And then I showed her—She wanted to see everything. So I showed her everything I had around. And then she said that she's going a show on—I forget the title, but it's on nature; it's on earth, water, sky, something or other. So I said—She said, "I'd like to put you in that show. And I would like this painting, this big brown painting. Is that okay? Would you like to do that? See how that goes?" And I said, sure. So she put that painting on the main wall. And as you even just opened the door to the gallery, you saw that painting. It was up on this main wall. It covered that wall that you faced.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: And she sold it. So that sealed the whole thing. I then became a member of the gallery. So that was fine. I didn't have to have her comment on it. She obviously liked it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were there times when you were looking for a gallery, and it was a frustrating experience? It was a positive? That you had that situation of not being represented and wanting to be?

MAY STEVENS: Well, probably early on it might have been like that. But then, like it was with Lerner-Heller and then I was with something else. I can't remember them all. But then Mary Ryan chose me. The only thing I always felt is that I don't necessarily—I'm not necessarily crazy about the other people in her gallery, however [laughs]. That's not my business. That's her business.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Have you always kept your own records and archives? Or have you depended on the gallery to do that?

MAY STEVENS: I don't keep them, so I guess she does. She took me to see—this was great—she took me to see that painting she sold in my first show with her. And we drove up to a very beautiful home on the river in New York State. Way, way up. The house is extremely beautiful. The man who owned it wasn't living there; he lives in New York mainly. But this is his other home. And so we got the person who's in charge of it, takes care of it, and she opened it up, and we went in. And it was so beautiful. It was a huge dining hall, and on this big, big wall at one end was my painting in the middle. And then there was this long, long dining table with these wooden chairs on both sides. So the wood—it was interesting because my painting was brown, all different golds and browns. And there's a wooden brown floor, a wooden table, wooden chairs, beautiful woods on everything. Wood all over the place. And then my painting, which was like the same color. And then along the river side, which was the length of the whole thing, there were these windows which gave onto the river. And it was the most beautiful situation. And my painting was like radiant: brown and gold. It was so beautiful. And it's the right place. No wonder she hired me—I mean took me on. So that was great.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Have you sought out meetings with collectors and people who own your paintings?

MAY STEVENS: No. I'm busy making the paintings. I don't want to court them or butter them up. It's up to them. They like the painting, they want to come back again. I'm not selling myself.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And the dealer—

MAY STEVENS: I'm not selling my work. She is.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And have dealers ever wanted to discuss with you ever—or that you wanted them to discuss—whether they should sell it to this person or that person?

MAY STEVENS: You mean the gallery? No. That's her business, not mine. I've enough to do, to do my paintings. That's my job. And I don't want to get into the material part of it, the financial part of it. It's not my business.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: Look, she sold this painting for either seventy-four or seventy-five thousand dollars. I should talk with her and argue with her? Come on! Let her do it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Right. Well, I think this is a good moment to end today.

[END OF AAA_steven09_1853.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing May Stevens on August 11, 2009, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

May, I wanted to start out where we left off in terms of your work. We had come to talking about the large—the life-size portraits of artists and writers, the paintings you did in the late '70s, early '80s. But I wanted to start talking about the series you did picturing your mother, Alice Stevens, and Rosa Luxemburg. I think you called it the Ordinary/Extraordinary series [1976-1992] of paintings.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Of course I wanted both terms to go to both persons.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: But of course my mother was extraordinary to me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. So tell me how that whole body of work began, if you recall.

MAY STEVENS: Somehow I got interested in Rosa Luxemburg—I don't remember how. But I was very impressed with her. She was Jewish, which wasn't important to her. In other words, I don't think she was religious or anything like that. And she came from, I think, Poland. She was born in Poland. Could have been Russia; I think it was Poland. And she was political and passionate about justice and fighting for human rights. And when she got to Germany—At first she went to—she went to Switzerland where she got a degree. She studied there. And she fell in love with a man there, who was also in the university, whatever it was. And they were very close. But then

he was still there. And in fact when she left to go to Germany, they communicated all the time, and he kept, you know, checking what she was doing and who she was seeing and things like that. He wanted to be with her, and she, I think, liked that idea, too. But she was committed to where she wanted to go intellectually and politically and out in the world.

So when she went to Germany, she joined a party, a political party—I forget which one; I don't remember now what it was called—but anyway, she joined this party. And they were very happy to have her. Oh, they wanted to [laughs] have her in the women's group in the party. And she said, "Are you kidding? No way! Uh-uh. No." I mean not that she didn't care about women and want women to have their fair whatever. But she was for the whole thing. So she began to work in that. You know it's been a long time since I, you know, studied about her. And she just went ahead and went ahead. The man she had loved in Switzerland never came, never got out of school, never finished whatever he was doing. And eventually that whole thing fell apart.

At some point I think she had a love affair. This was with a friend of hers. She had a close woman friend there. And that woman had a son, an attractive grown-up son. So she had an affair with him. And the woman friend said, "Nobody could be better than you for him." [Laughs.] So that was kind of interesting. So working with the political people in Germany, they very much wanted her to do certain things. And she said, "No way! You're not boxing me in any way. I'm doing what I think is the stronger and right thing to do." So she became a very powerful spokesperson and a very powerful person. So I had great admiration for her confidence, her self-confidence, her intelligence, for the way she was putting people down who tried to box her and say, You're a woman, you should do this, and you should do that. And we'll give you this job. And she said, No way! No way! No way! So she became extremely powerful. And in fact, was hated and in effect killed eventually because of her extreme effectiveness.

So my mother had no politics at all—ever. And so I took these people who were—these two women who were totally different from each other: So ordinary and extraordinary, right? And I wanted to elevate my mother and to make Rosa accessible and understandable and likable. And that's what I did.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you ever talk to your mother about this project?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know if she was alive at this point. I can't remember when she died. But before she died, she had—she actually ended up in an institution. So I would visit with her and see her and so on.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, your mother died—your mother was alive.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: She died in '86 it says here.

MAY STEVENS: But she was in an institution then.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So she wouldn't have comprehended what you were doing.

MAY STEVENS: No, not at all. Not at all.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And when you were doing these, you were combining photographic images—

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: —painting. So how did you, how did that series evolve? Did you envision portraying your mother and Rosa Luxemburg together in the same painting? Was that—how did this series evolve? I know that you did some paintings just of Rosa depicting moments in her life and her death. And those came first.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And some of those were black and white.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Often. The black and white I've always loved, which doesn't mean I don't love color. But black and white would seem to me, I think, always effective for political—and even for tragic. Because I'm dealing with two women whose lives were not necessarily cheerful and happy. And I knew that they were totally opposite to each other. But that wasn't a reason for me not to put them together. Also I wanted to expand the view of women, so that a housewife and a woman who was a leader are still women, and they still have a great deal in common, and they respect, both of them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You depicted your mother I guess using photographs that you took of her seated. And this big expanse of grass, green. How did the green in your mind connect with your mother and Rosa, putting those together? Why was that the dominating color?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Well, the painting in which my mother is a tiny figure in the middle of the grass—this is it [laughs]. It was part of the series, and it was the central image. It's a long painting, maybe this long. And I had a photograph of my mother standing there with her cane and her hat on. So I drew her in the center. And she's not very big; I think like she's this big in the painting, something like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: About two feet.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. And it was interesting to try to make it and make it real and effective, you know. And as you can see, I've—I kind of shadowed it a bit, making it stand out from the background, not just blend in and disappear. And while it's flat, more or less, because it's a silhouette, I actually worked on it a lot in order to give it some dimension in some sense of texture. Because I knew it was going to be a flat silhouette. But I also wanted it to be more than that. And so I really worked to give it change, difference. And it's kind of blue-green it seems to me, right? And then I made it stand out from the background by casting a little bit of a shadow. And I wanted it to be not just a flat thing. And I wanted it to have a sense of dimension and a sense of vitality. So it's my mother in my mind here posed to go. She's leaving. She's going to die. She's old, she's got a cane, she's not strong and young. And she's got a hat on; she's ready to go. And so she's ready to move on. And then since she's, in my mind, dying in this photograph, all ready to die, I've given her this gorgeous green field. So I think what I did here is to cover the canvas with yellow to give it to life and vitality underneath. And then a lighter green. And then all kinds of different greens and making it extremely lively and rich and beautiful for her parting. So that's what I did. And I liked it. I thought it worked very, very well. She never saw it, I don't think.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And then there's another painting called *Go Gentle* [1983].

MAY STEVENS: Oh, yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: A very long painting with—

MAY STEVENS: There's more than one figure in that?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. Maybe we could find it in the book.

MAY STEVENS: Let's see if you can find it. Is that it?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Part of it. Here we go.

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: We can talk about that painting. And you there—Why don't you talk about what is in this painting. It's a very wide, horizontal painting.

MAY STEVENS: This is her as a child with her sister and brother. So that's memory. And this is her as a young woman. And probably she looked like that when she met my father. And this is her as an old woman. And it's like looking—being puzzled, I think, again, at what she's looking at. And then in these two images, which are photographs—it's all from photographs—she's gesticulating in both of them. She's going through whatever she's going through, and I'm not sure what it is. But it is about her dying. It's *Go Gentle*. Go gentle into that good night

—
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the fading of the light.

Do not go gentle into that good night.

Rage, rage against the fading of the light.

I forget who wrote that, but it's a poem [*Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night*, Dylan Thomas, 1951], and that's the beginning of it: "Do not go gentle." So I think I thought about calling it *Do Not Go Gentle*. And Rudolf is always very gentle. He said, "Call it *Go Gentle*." So I said okay. It's like I could say, "Do not go gentle," which would mean I approve of her anger and of her pain and I understand it. And he said, "Call it *Go Gentle*." So I did. So that's it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: There's this painting. Let's see what it's called: *Forming the Fifth International* [1985].

MAY STEVENS: [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: 1985. See here you combine Rosa and Alice together.

MAY STEVENS: And their forming the Fifth International because, again, it goes back to my position, my strong conviction, that you need people like Rosa, who's very educated and very committed and very passionate about politics; but not about politics in general, but about making the world a better place. She's going to make it as good as she can. She's going to go and join a party, a political party, because that's the place where she can get into connection with all kinds of things. And she's going to do that, and she's going to spend her life on it. I mean she had a boyfriend, you know, the son of her girlfriend [laughs]. But all of that was just incidental. She was committed to making her life a valuable thing. So here's my mother looking at her and thinking, Who is this? What is she doing? You know. But I want to bring my mother and ordinary women into this because she fights the horror, and my mother's impressed with her [laughs]. And my mother is a very gentle, good person. She's not educated. But she is very, very fine in her way.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you think of it at all as a way of reconciling yourself and your mother and identifying somewhat with Rosa and trying to bridge the gap between your reality and your mother's reality?

MAY STEVENS: I didn't conceive of it that way. But obviously I am the connection. I mean I put them together, and I care about them both. And I want people—You know I hate people to categorize people and say, Oh, she's this, and she's that. Or he's this, and he's that. Because every human being is a human being. And, you know, I think I mentioned to you that my Aunt Mary, my mother's sister, was absolutely brilliant. She's the one who said about my mother when my mother was in this photograph, that I mentioned to you that was on the wall. She was standing there with her sister Mary. And somebody said, "What's the matter with Alice?" Because she looked very depressed and messy and horrible, you know. And Mary said, "She wasn't herself." This is my Aunt Mary, my mother's sister, at age 100? And she says, "She wasn't herself." Because Mary never left what she had in her head, and she loved her sister and cared about her. And she looked at her, and she said she wasn't herself there. And I thought that was such a wonderful thing to say. So sensitive. And smart. So there they are.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were painting this, you're painting both of those figures from photographs. It might be obvious, but why did you paint Rosa in black and white and your mother in color?

MAY STEVENS: I don't think I thought about a reason. Just because of the difference between them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Just because you had a black-and-white photograph of Rosa, and you had a color photograph of your mother?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know. But I think it works very well because this is a memory and a what? An image of something that one aims at or she's more of a goal or someone who's achieved something which makes her already special and out of ordinary. And here's my mother who's ordinary, and she's got pink legs and a little white dress and gray hair, and she's looking at this creature: Who are you? You know. But she's interested. I like the way her hands are holding her legs, you know, one hand on the knee and the other holding this—It looks like she's satisfied with herself [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were painting this portrait of your mother and all of the others, were you thinking of achieving a certain level of technical, finished technical expertise, in a way; to render your mother the way you wanted it? Was it a struggle? Was it easy? You had done so many other portraits. Were you continually trying to refine your technique?

MAY STEVENS: No. I was trying to make my mother real to me. And to capture what she had, which is a kind of interest in the world, a kind of—she's fascinated. She's really—Look at her. She's saying, Hmm. What's that? Interesting, you know. And also just—and I don't think I ever thought before about the way she's holding her legs. But it almost suggests a kind of satisfaction with herself. You know it's like she's okay—I'm okay [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And how about the *Sea of Green* [1999]? You have a relatively abstract background.

MAY STEVENS: This.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: Well, you see—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Very rich color.

MAY STEVENS: Actually it isn't so much planned. I mean the idea of Rosa being black and white makes a lot of sense to me because she's gone, and she's from a photograph, and she's also—she's an image with a certain strength, and she's become part of history. So I think that's very suitable. My mother is not. My mother's an absolutely ordinary person, sitting in a green field, and it seems to me more sensible that she should be surrounded with more life and light because she is a live, and she does feel, and her skin is fresh and pink. And she's, you know, suddenly this creature has appeared to her, and she's looking at her. Who are you? What are

you doing here? You know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] When you were doing this series, there's one particular painting that's installed—Hold on. There's an original in this Patricia Hill's book [*May Stevens*, 2005] of installation of your *Alice in the Garden* [1988-1989]. And it comprises several panels. Did you plan that all at the beginning that it would be that many panels to have that kind of cinematic almost sweep? Or did you do one and decide to do a second and then you realized you wanted to do a third?

MAY STEVENS: I think I planned it all together. And this show was in my gallery in New York. And prior to that—I don't know where it was before that—but it was supposed to be in one line. It wasn't supposed to be curved like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It says it's in your studio. So your studio maybe didn't have a wall long enough.

MAY STEVENS: No, this is in the gallery.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It says—

MAY STEVENS: What does it say?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It says in Stevens's Brooklyn studio.

MAY STEVENS: I think the gallery put it up like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Ah!

MAY STEVENS: Because I didn't. To me it was one line. Because it was like a history, a story. So I wouldn't have done it in a corner. So they did it in a corner. So I think it's the Brooklyn studio, although certainly the top looks like it. But this was the guy who worked for the studio, too. And I just wanted a sequence, a story, you know. So here she is. This is empty. It needed more space.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The first left panel is empty. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: And then she's, you know, and she's got a flower in her hand or something. You know like she's pulling off the petals from a flower or something. And that keeps going. And then here I think I'm putting the flower in her collar.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. So you've introduced a figure that—

MAY STEVENS: That's me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That's you.

MAY STEVENS: Just putting a flower. You know I think she's pulling a flower apart, like you do, you know. You pick up something, and then you start pulling off the petals. And I put it into her collar.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And the color is gradually becoming darker.

MAY STEVENS: Darker.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And darker.

MAY STEVENS: Well, that helps to show her. You know it doesn't necessarily—what I do doesn't necessarily have significance and I choose it for that. Very often I do it because I don't want it all the same green. It would be boring. And also as Alice becomes closer to you, and you get more involved with her, this is a way of giving her more resonance, more strength, more presence. And it makes the whole thing move. You go from the pale to the deeper. As you go from Alice being smaller to getting bigger and closer. And, you know, these were all done from photographs which I took. And we had a good time together. I would take her out in the garden and photograph her. There's no chair [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You didn't paint the chair.

MAY STEVENS: No, that would be kind of boring. I mean she sits, right? She needs to—What is he doing there? Get out of there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I'm sure there's other photographs. So you continued that series. And I think there's a painting—you continue to paint Alice, even up to, I think, a later painting called *Alice Goes to the Movies*.

MAY STEVENS: *Alice Goes to the Movies?* I don't remember that one.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Okay.

MAY STEVENS: Oh, I think I've got—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So let's talk about this one for a moment.

MAY STEVENS: Yes, yes. Yes, yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: *Alice Goes to the Movies* from 1990.

MAY STEVENS: Yes, yes. So I have Alice in the front. She's lively here, she's doing something with her hands. And then I surround her with the famous, important women of the world [laughs]. Here's Rosa. And this is the woman who marched in the revolution in France, whatever, you know. And I don't even—maybe I've just made this all up here. So I wanted to give her a lively relationship to all the great women of the world.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And this is painted after she passed away. Well, so was this.

MAY STEVENS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: But maybe I'd started it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And this is on un-stretched canvas.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At what point do you recall—or why did you—start creating some of these large paintings on un-stretched canvas.

MAY STEVENS: I don't know. I had stretched canvases, and then I was painting hugely. So after a while I didn't do it. And I liked it hanging like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was it intended to always remain un-stretched?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. As far as I thought. I mean I liked it. The hanging of the canvas meant that it would feel kind of alive. It moved a little bit, you know. It has a kind of lively presence. And I've done that ever since, and Rudolf began to do it, too.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At one point you did an exhibition at the New Museum.

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At one point you did an exhibition I think in 1988, an exhibition at the New Museum called "One Plus or Minus One."

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At which you had large blowups of paintings of the *Fifth International*, of Rosa, of Alice, *Death Squad* [1986]. And you included text describing for visitors what was going on in these historical moments.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did you feel about making the blowups? Why did you do it that way? Why did you do these explanatory panels about the images?

MAY STEVENS: Why did I what?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The explanatory panels, the text about what's going on.

MAY STEVENS: Well, you know, this was in the New Museum, which was very interested in new work. And interested in provocative work. And so I wanted to be sure that using my mother could be understood as something which was beyond my personal relationship with my mother. That I was using my mother for a particular purpose, both giving not just her but a woman like that a place in the world where she could be significant.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And what about making these giant blowups of your paintings?

MAY STEVENS: That made it more effective in this big gallery. It worked better there. It was for that space.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And you felt that the texts were important to inform the audience.

MAY STEVENS: Absolutely, absolutely. You know you think about your audience. You think about the space. And you think about the place where you're doing and the significance of that place and the role that that place has. And when you put the work in there, you want it to use that place effectively.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were very much involved in the planning of that installation.

MAY STEVENS: Absolutely. Absolutely. Right. I mean, you know, painting your mother can be very what? cliché or whatever it is. But I was trying to make my mother actually political, and I was trying to speak about women in general. I was very much a feminist. Women in general. And I had a mother who was ineffective, un-effective, out in the world. She wasn't even effective later on in her life with the family. And in fact before she was hospitalized, I was the only one who took care of her or who loved her or was interested in her. So she was very important to me always. And even when she had to be hospitalized, I still cared a great deal about her and saw her all the time. And she mattered to me. And for my father she was, I think, a burden at some point. I know that they loved each other in the beginning. And then she lost it. I think she lost it when her son died.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You created a series in the late '80s or early '90s called the *Burning Horse* [1990-1991].

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And I wanted to ask you how the horse—

MAY STEVENS: It's probably in the book.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: —imagery entered. How the imagery of horses entered your work? Here we go. They hadn't been there before as far as I know.

MAY STEVENS: Well, I like these. They look good [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Looking at images in the book.

MAY STEVENS: Actually Steven did it, and they did come from him.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Your son?

MAY STEVENS: Yes, yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: He was working with images of horses?

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I see.

MAY STEVENS: See, he made a book.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: And this is a page in his book. So the horses were—well, I don't know where he got them. But these are photographs he had of horses. And he burned them. They must have been toys. See here, this is this.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: These are works that are partly collage. So the collage elements are the pages from his book—were actually original photographs?

MAY STEVENS: I used pages from his book. Because we did the book for him. He made the book, and we did it for him. And it shows the horses and the fire. And that's what he did. See, here's a horse.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: So he made these, and I was enchanted by them. It's a wonderful book. All of these again are great simplifications of the horse.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And then you collaged it and painted.

MAY STEVENS: Right. And they're here, too. The Hopi women with the fallen horses. So he did a book, and he did it all by himself. And we just thought it was fantastic. And we had no idea why he wanted to do that. But he did it. And then I used some of it to paint with. I love this, acrylic on canvas, [inaudible].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And these are mostly black and white.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. And it was his own idea. It was totally his idea. Is there anything on the next page that has to do with that? No.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No, this is the beginning of that series. Okay. And you exhibited these, do you recall?

MAY STEVENS: I can't even remember. I like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. You then started a series, a wonderful series, *Sea of Words*.

MAY STEVENS: I what?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The *Sea of Words* [1990-1991].

MAY STEVENS: Show me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Texts. We'll come back to this.

MAY STEVENS: *Sea of Words*.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: Oh.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you look at these paintings, how did your images evolve to being including, as a very important element, all these words? Some that can be read, some not, on water. The women, the words, the water.

MAY STEVENS: I've always written, you know. I've always written, and I've written poetry. And I just loved using words. And I don't know. Eventually I put them in the painting [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And the focus on water, on filling the canvas with water.

MAY STEVENS: And I grew up—you know I told you I grew up on water. I spent every day of my childhood—we moved to Quincy near the river, which was only a block away when I was four. And I stayed there until I moved to New York, and I was 24. So I stayed there for 20 years. And I swam all the time, and I loved the water. And it was like where I spent most of my time. But then I was in school. And of course I spent a lot of time *for* school, working on things for school.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The previous series were—oh, there's some water, right, were more—

MAY STEVENS: Here is water right in here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. In a closer kind of space. Even though the grass is an outdoor feeling, it's abstracted; it's a closer kind. These images of Rosa are all—And then gradually opens up in the late '80s, and you start looking at a much broader vista.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I love this.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. That's *The Canal* [1988].

MAY STEVENS: I love that [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is a very abstracted image.

MAY STEVENS: Oh, I love it! Because this opens up. You know I think I had a division at some point. And then I took it away, and it opened it so beautifully to take it away. Just whew!

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you think of this as an imaginary space or as a depiction of an actual place?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know. And I don't know if I had anything to go by. I didn't really need anything to go by, did I? I think I just wanted to do a river, and it was probably close to what else I was doing. I don't know. But I know that when I got rid of the brink—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The horizon line, you mean.

MAY STEVENS: Yes, that's what I mean. And when I got rid of it, it was so open, and it was so exciting to me. So I just loved it. But that didn't mean that I was going to go in that direction. It was one thing that I loved. But there were lots of other things that I loved. See, I mean I liked the openness. Look it here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, the expanse. Maybe we could talk about these paintings for a second.

MAY STEVENS: See, I'm already using words.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: In the painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. This is—but that was in *Another Country* [1990].

MAY STEVENS: This is the death of Rosa. I don't think she was drowned or anything. But I wanted to do her death for some reason. So that's supposed to be her skirt as she drowns in the water, and it spreads out. And then, you know, I'm thinking, well, who knows that Rosa died or how she died or what do they care? But that was in another country.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And this, what does it say? *Women's History: Live Girls* [1992]. Talk about this painting?

MAY STEVENS: Well, it's really about prostitutes. And this young girl, who may be not quite naked, but sort of, I think she's got a little bit on, she's walking, this one girl. And she's walking. And she's walking—she's a prostitute. She's very, very young and attractive in a way. And she's walking next to a car because she wants to get picked up by the guy driving the car. And then behind her is a circle of women, and these were women that were prisoners. I had a little photograph from way, way back somewhere. And these women were in jail. And actually there's a woman standing in the center who is probably the guard. The woman standing in the center in the circle of these women in the same old clothes that they had as prisoners going around them. So it's about women. So this is women historically in jail. I think it was in a German jail—I can't remember where I got the photograph. And this is live girls. I mean an ad: You want live girls? Here they are, right? And so it's about the history of women and the problem that women have, the problems that women have. This is a young girl, and she's attractive. And the best she can do is show her body and make some money. The light coming over.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: So it's about history in a way, too, because it's women's condition over many, many centuries; where if you couldn't make out in the regular way, then there were always things you could do with your body. And, you know, here there's a woman who has died, who's thrown herself in the water for whatever reason.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And then we moved on to the words. The paintings, when you think back from the Big Daddy series, these paintings are lyrical, poetic, mysterious. When you look back at that tremendous evolution, were you thinking about it? Had you, when you got to this point, did you consciously say I'm not going to deal with these political issues so directly anymore? I'm going to—

MAY STEVENS: No. I wasn't planning a career. I wasn't thinking of the evolution of my work. In each case I was involved with what I was doing. And also people change. So I am not the person who I was. And I'm not the person whomever—I never made a plan for my life, how I was going to plan my career, how it would be good to do this and better to do that. And this is a good step. And then you go to this step. No way! I was deeply involved in what I was doing. And what I was doing was appropriate for who I was at that moment. I believe that—I'm sure that I'm still the same as I always was in some sense. But I also knew that I grew and changed.

I lived in different countries. I had a very, very interesting husband with a very rich experience. Being political became stronger in me because he was so political, which he had to be because he was Jewish, and his family was killed by, you know, local fascists who got out there and killed 4,000 people. And then said, you know, they were only Jews. Whatever it was. So he affected me, and of course I was deeply affected because of what he'd had to go through. He had no family.

He had a brother who had escaped to Russia and was in a brigade or whatever it was, of people who joined the Russian Army and fought the Germans. And he said most of the people in that brigade or whatever it was that he was in were also Jews who had escaped and gone to Russia so they wouldn't be killed by the Germans. And he's alive now. He's in New York, and he's really old, and he's still perfectly normal [laughs] in the head. Anyway, these no doubt have to do with the fact that I spent my childhood in the water, and that I loved the water always. And it was always part of my life. Water was it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And the images of the boats in the water, where do they come from?

MAY STEVENS: If you're going to do water, then you need something in it sometime. So here's a boat, and then there are boats [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you think of what words you were going to use for a painting before you painted it? Or did the application and thinking of the words come after the painting was in progress?

MAY STEVENS: It didn't really matter because it could be a poem or it could be just words I thought. And in many of these works, it's totally unreadable. In some of them you can read a little bit of it. But they were not necessarily to be read. They were to give texture. And also just the meaning of having words in it I think is important—important to me. Words are very important. I like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So the words became an abstract element?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. It's true. They did. But it was also fun for me to do them, you know. And also to figure out, you know, the pattern that they would make. And then where they'd stop. They became abstract for me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] We're talking about *Missing Persons*, 1990-93.

MAY STEVENS: Because you're seeing [inaudible] [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No. And how did you feel—did you enjoy the very laborious process?

MAY STEVENS: Oh, yes, because I was probably thinking about the words. And also constantly watching, you know, moving back and looking back them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Maintaining the consistency.

MAY STEVENS: Absolutely. And wanting—You know it's you don't just do it automatically because you want to have the variations, and you want to see how it's working, you know. So you've constantly moving and looking and squinting—or moving it to a different wall.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you do this from a photograph, from life, from imagination? You know the effect of the light on the water.

MAY STEVENS: I don't think so. I don't remember anything like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You don't remember using photographs?

MAY STEVENS: No, I don't.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So it was from imagination.

MAY STEVENS: Probably. Pretty easy to do that without any photograph [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I was thinking of the light on the water.

MAY STEVENS: Oh, that. No, no, I would've invented that because, you know, how would you know where that goes? Or why is it there. And well, who knows?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Correct.

MAY STEVENS: I think that this color was not as good as it should be.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, the in the book.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And this is looking at *Sea of Words*.

MAY STEVENS: *Sea of Words*, Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is a woman in a boat, and this is a progression, the same person.

MAY STEVENS: Exactly. It means she moves through the water like that. That's my idea. But also it almost could be something flying, you know, like little figures or what have you. And it's a huge painting. So people loved them. I think I sold them all. I love this.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: They're very beautiful. And this is *River Run* [1994].

MAY STEVENS: And I made prints of these, too. And they sold very well.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were there particular texts you used over and over again by particular authors?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know. I might have put in—Anything I could put in wouldn't really matter because nobody would ever read it [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I read that you used some text from Virginia Woolf.

MAY STEVENS: Oh, I love Virginia Woolf. So if I was reading her, then I'd put her in here. Sure.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And also *Julia Kristeva*.

MAY STEVENS: Oh, yes, yes, yes. I love them. And I was reading all the time. So constantly I would have words at my disposal.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Let's see.

MAY STEVENS: It's good we have a book here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Sure. Now this is a little bit—*Her Boats* [1996].

MAY STEVENS: It's called *Her Boats*?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Could you talk about this composition and this color?

MAY STEVENS: No. [They laugh.] I don't know why it looks like that. But I like it. It's almost like they were in the sky. That this is the land and this is the sky. That's a good idea. [They laugh.]. Actually, I've seen this in the home of the man who bought it. And it is fantastic.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, this is the painting you were talking about yesterday.

MAY STEVENS: Yes, in this place that's all gorgeous wood. And it's all the color of this. Or it could be that one.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: *Fear and Desire* [1996-97].

MAY STEVENS: It could be that one. Because they're both big, brown pieces.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No. This says it's in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

MAY STEVENS: Okay. So then this is the one that Mary sold to a friend of hers or relative of hers, I think. It's fabulous. But this is beautiful, isn't it?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: I think I like that one even better.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is this a bridge?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. You know what? It's like upside down in the water. It's a reflection of something in the water. But where is it [laughs]? It's wonderful to think of the water underneath.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It looks like you're using a kind of a very washy watercolor-like—

MAY STEVENS: I am. But I'm layering it. So it could have several layers on it which gives all these variations, you know. But this could be even much the same boats. But who knows? I like that one. This is good, too, because it's rich.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And these are lithographs.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I like that. I think that we were—what happens with the silver is beautiful.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is *Wading Free*, 1998.

MAY STEVENS: Right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Going back, you did at somewhat the same time, you did a series called the Tick-Tac-Toe series [1996]. And I wanted to ask you about that. I think, now, what was the—

MAY STEVENS: Which is what—? Which is that? *Tick-Tack-Toe*.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: All of these.

MAY STEVENS: They're all called *Tick-Tack-Toe*, all of them. No, now that one.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Well, this is part of it: *All- all-y in-free*. [1996]

MAY STEVENS: Well, this is kids.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. Well, these are all kids. Something about child abuse? Something about—do you recall?

MAY STEVENS: Well, this is very much about child abuse. These kids are running. And in fact you see that this is collage. And that is a purse. It's a little tiny purse, which is like as big as this, you know. And it's like pinkish, I think; it shouldn't be brown like that. And I had opened it up. And it's about rape of little girls. That's what it's about. And I must have read something about that. So here we have this little tiny pink purse, which could be a vagina of a child—pink. And that's the central image. And in the rest of it you see these little girls, and they're running and playing. And it's about rape of children, rape of little girls. That's what it's about. So I don't know why I got into that. But here's a girl, she's a black girl. And here is an upside-down child, girl child, right? And here are little—they're black children playing. And they're being burned with a cigarette here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: And the same thing. This is burned with a cigarette with children run. So it's about the molestation of children and the hurt of children. That was very important to me. All these children and making it. You see, this child has got like burnt eyes or something. And the whole thing is torn because it's about what's done to children. It drove me crazy, you know. So these were like studies and so on, and then I did it—did that and put that there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This was a—but then you stopped.

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you recall why you didn't continue that body of work?

MAY STEVENS: No, I did these, and that was it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In 1997, I wanted to ask you. You took a trip to Vilnius, Lithuania, for Rudolf's retrospective. What was that experience like for you as an artist? And for you as his wife.

MAY STEVENS: It was fascinating, you know. And it was interesting to see him go back to his home, or the home that he had had.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did people know his work there?

MAY STEVENS: They were so impressed. He was a famous American artist. And he came and had a show.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember how that show happened to come about?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know. I guess he must have known people there, and they knew about him, and they wanted him to have a show. And the woman who was the curator for his show in the main museum in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, she came later to New York. She lives in New York now.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember her name?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Her name is Sandra Skurvida. I think in Lithuanian it's [inaudible]. It's S-K-U-R-V-I-D-A. Skurvida. I think that's the way it's spelled. Sylvia?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, Sylvia, not Sandra.

MAY STEVENS: What did I say?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Sandra? Did I write that?

MAY STEVENS: No, it's Sandra.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It's Sandra.

MAY STEVENS: Sandra, Sandra.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Okay.

MAY STEVENS: It's Sandra Skurvida. I think so. And she lives in New York, and she's going work in art whatever.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And it was a memorable experience?

MAY STEVENS: He was raved about there, you know. A great American artist who came back.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did you feel about being the artist's wife in that moment?

MAY STEVENS: It was fine. I was very happy for him. You know he grew up there. And he was forced out. I mean he was sent out by his parents when he was 18, so he would avoid the problems that were coming. And his brother had already gone. I don't know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You had a major exhibition—I wanted to ask you about that—at the MFA in Boston, 1997. "Images of Women Near and Far."

MAY STEVENS: Which was what?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It was called "Images of Women Near and Far." It wasn't a retrospective, but it was—

MAY STEVENS: "Images of Women—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: "Images of Women Near and Far."

MAY STEVENS: "—Near and Far."

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was the title. Do you recall what that show meant to you at that point? How involved you were in the curatorial process, if at all, in the installation?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember. I was very pleased to have a show there. And people—Oh, people whom I'd known in art school and so forth came to see it. All my friends from art school came. And they were jealous [laughs] of course. So it was great. It was fun. It was really fun. And I think they did a very, very good job. And I had a lot of favorable reviews and a lot of critics and so forth. It was very, very successful, I think. And they bought a big painting. So that was great.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mentioned favorable response critically to that exhibition. Have you had—has it been an issue to you getting critical negative reviews, positive reviews? How much have reviews affected your life? Have they been important either way—either as an inspiration or as something you have to—

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Like for the Boston show, there was a lot of very good response.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I'm going to change the disc. Sorry.

[END OF AAA_steven09_1854.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing May Stevens on August 11, 2009, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

MAY STEVENS: This is by another artist friend of mine. Isn't that a riot? It's an angel. I don't know if it's a boy or a girl [laughs]. I can't tell.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Have there been criticisms of your work that you felt—that you've continued to think about and you felt were wrong—wrong interpretations, wrong analysis—and you'd want to set the record straight in some way at this moment? Where you felt that your work was misunderstood?

MAY STEVENS: I can't remember anything like that. I remember reviews that didn't interest me. It seemed to me, you know, like flat or mediocre or things like that. But I also remember—and I don't even remember, but I know that there were reviews that I liked a lot. So, you know, it's up and down. But I don't remember bad reviews.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] That's fortunate. [They laugh.]

MAY STEVENS: Or negative ones.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Has there been a difference in the critical response to your work by writers in the U.S. versus writers elsewhere in the world?

MAY STEVENS: Well, when I show—when I was in France, in Paris, which was immediately after I was married, so that was in '48, and I was unknown—but I remember that there were, I think I told you this, there were newspaper things which said that I'd come to France to perfect myself [laughs]. And I showed there a little bit, and I was in big shows. But the big shows were so big, that I think, you know, I was in a show with Picasso. So they talked about Picasso [laughs]. Things like that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, yes, yes. Have you been labeled a figurative painter, landscape painter? Have you been labeled in any way you felt—you were uncomfortable with? Or was there a label or a designation that seemed right to you, describing your work in general?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember anything that was particularly annoying, nor do I remember anything that was terribly thrilling. But, you know, over all these years, there have been so many different kinds of things. None of them has really stuck with me. I mean I have all that stuff. I have it all in scrapbooks and so forth. But I don't even remember it now.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So it wasn't a negative to be, for you, in the sense of being a conventional portrait or a figurative painter?

MAY STEVENS: No.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Something you were comfortable with?

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Have you ever wanted to—your work has been included in many group shows, thematic exhibitions. Have you ever felt that you wanted to approve the inclusion of your work in certain thematic contexts, and would be upset if it were seen in the wrong context, or were you completely hands-off in that regard?

MAY STEVENS: I was hands-off. And the other thing is that moving to Santa Fe took me out of New York.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: Obviously. So in Santa Fe I did not expect Santa Fe to be an addition to my career at all. But we had to get out of New York. It was necessary.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. This is moving to—so why did you pick Santa Fe?

MAY STEVENS: We'd been here. Actually I had called the—what's the name of this? There's a place in Taos which has a place where writers and artists can come and stay. So I had heard about this, and I knew friends who had been here to Taos and stayed. So it's like going to MacDowell from New York or something. And we'd been to MacDowell, both Rudolf and I had been there together or separately. So I heard about the one in Taos. And we had come to Taos for something or other or just for a visit. And I thought, well, this would be a great place. I like this. I like this atmosphere. So when it was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was it about the atmosphere that you liked?

MAY STEVENS: It was right in the city of Taos, which is not a big place. But it was close to—it was in the city. And it was like a place where there were little cabins where you lived. And they were located apart from each other. And I thought we could get two cabins. He would have one, and I would have the other, and they could be nearby but still there's a lot of place between them. And then there's this, you know, Taos and museums and art goes on there. We liked it. So I called them up, and I said, "I would like two residencies for three months for myself and my husband, two artists. And we would live there for three months in this area, in this thing. And I want to put my name and Rudolf's name in for a three-month stay. I wonder whether you can give it to us." So they said we are all lined up. But we'll put you down for three years from now, and we'll let you know. I said, okay, great. You know. Thanks. And I thought, well, we'll never hear from them. So three years later they called [laughs]. So we came.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Ah! So you didn't come before that?

MAY STEVENS: No. Because we wanted to be staying there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So after you—

MAY STEVENS: And we stayed there for no money, you know; you just stay there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So is that what gave you the idea to move here permanently?

MAY STEVENS: No. Because we needed to be there, see it, and feel it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: After that three months residency, you went back to New York?

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And I wanted to ask you at this moment, before we continue about Santa Fe, in New York you had a loft right in SoHo for many, many years. And you saw the whole art world change, the SoHo art world change. What was it like when you first moved there? Was there a close community of artists with whom you were friendly? And how did it change in there?

MAY STEVENS: When we moved in, it was when other people were moving in. It was changing. It was moving—There were empty lofts where they had been small business where people would work there, you know. Women would work at the tables doing whatever it was they were supposed to be doing. And in fact when we moved in, I could look across the street to a loft on the same level, and there were women working at tables. They were often immigrant women who were working at tables doing whatever—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was your address in SoHo? Do you recall that?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember right now.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What street it was?

MAY STEVENS: No, don't remember. I mean I know where it was, but I can't remember the name right now. Anyway, so we got a loft. And we got a loft—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I think actually I've seen it's 97 Wooster Street.

MAY STEVENS: That's it! That's it! So we got one loft.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In 1967?

MAY STEVENS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And then there was a loft—we were on the sixth floor together. Rudolf and I, and then on the seventh floor, there was a woman who was married to—I think she was a black, she was a black woman. And she was married to an Italian man. Then he kind of moved out. I don't know what he was doing. And when he moved out, we thought maybe she won't stay, and then we could get that loft.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In addition to or instead of the sixth floor.

MAY STEVENS: Also. Two lofts. So we kept waiting for her to move out [laughs]. And we thought she'd move because she was alone with a child. And we were counting on her moving. And we asked her, you know, when are you going to move—or are you planning to move? [Inaudible.] And she said, "You try to move me out, and I will sue you!" Or something. So we let her alone. And eventually she did move out. So then I moved to the top floor.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is this an A.I.R. building, and Artists In Residence building that you rented in?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. But it was seven floors, and there were three people in it who bought the building together, and we were one of them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, I see.

MAY STEVENS: It was our idea to buy it. So there were three people owned the building. And I think we paid 60,000, the three of us, divided it up. Each one of us owned two floors, and we owned six and seven. So that was absolutely great. I was upstairs in my loft. Rudolf said, "You can buy your loft for yourself, and you can paint up there. But you have to sleep downstairs with me." I said, "Okay." [They laugh.] So that was what we did.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And did you see—how did you feel about the changes that were happening in SoHo for those years as it became—

MAY STEVENS: Well, it was slow, and when we were there it didn't do that. But more and more artists were moving in, and more and more artists moved in. So it became a life for artists. It was very, very good. And we stayed there for a very long time. And lived there. And I think what happened or what began to happen is there

was a store on the ground level. And the store actually supported the building. The rent they paid, paid for the building. But the store failed, and they stayed, but they weren't paying the rent. So we had to get them out. And so we eventually got them out. But in the meantime we were having a lot of trouble because we weren't getting the money. So we got a new person in, a new company in. Then they failed. So we had trouble because things were changing. And the people who would rent the floor, the first floor, a couple of them failed. And we had to support the building without their contributing money. So eventually that got fixed up.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But you moved from there in 1996?

MAY STEVENS: To where?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you—

MAY STEVENS: Oh, in 1996.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You moved from the loft in 1996.

MAY STEVENS: Okay.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And did you decide when you moved, it was the right time to sell? And how did you decide—why did you decide to move to Santa Fe?

MAY STEVENS: We were having trouble because the place was changing, the whole area was changing. And we were finding that the—we maybe had two or three people live in that. I mean used that ground floor and failed and not paid their rent. So eventually we moved out.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You sold your part.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. And we moved farther down in the area.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Tribeca?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. And we had a loft there, a second-floor loft with huge windows on the street. And what we did—it was interesting—we built a large thing, which had long walls on two sides. And then it was mounted on wheels, and it was like a wall. And we could have two walls to paint on. His wall and my wall, you know. And this was—it had also a center, you know. And in the center you could even put canvases, store things. And then it's on wheels, and you can move it around. And it's long, it's a whole long wall, so you could do a big painting on it. And you could move it around and do whatever you wanted with it. Because we had a huge wall on one wall, and then the other wall, you know, was like where all our furniture was or whatever. So we built this great thing.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you don't remember how long you stayed there and then you moved here?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember how long, no.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You moved here in part because of Rudolf's health?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. He was not feeling great, and he was having some problems. So we moved here, yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you feel when you moved—you moved here at the El Dorado, part of Santa Fe. Was it difficult to become part of this community here, the artists' community. Was that easy? Did you know a lot of people?

MAY STEVENS: We did not expect to find an artists' community here. Or an artists' community that we would be interested in. We didn't know who was here. There weren't any people whose names we know. There wasn't any art that we knew that was here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you know Lucy Lippard was here in Santa Fe?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Harmony Hammond and Lucy Lippard and Nancy Holt were already here. And I had come out, and Lucy was away one summer, and we suggested that I could come and stay in her house. So I think we did that. We came, and we lived in her house for a summer. So we got to know the place.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was that near here?

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was that near here?

MAY STEVENS: Was it what?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was her house near this house?

MAY STEVENS: No, it's in Galisteo, which is about ten miles from here. And I stayed there, and it was great.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: So that enabled us to adjust to this. But I wasn't looking for artists here. Artists are in New York. Santa Fe? I didn't know anybody in art here. I mean Lucy was from New York, Harmony was from New York, and Nancy was from New York, and these are the people I knew. And there wasn't anybody here that I knew or cared to know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So when you came here you—

MAY STEVENS: I'm not a snob.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: —envisioned having a quiet life that's very different than New York.

MAY STEVENS: I came to live and paint. That's all. And so did he. And we had each other, and we had these friends. And really we got to know other people. It's fine. But I wasn't looking for artists. You don't go to a little town somewhere to look for artists [laughs]. I mean it's not being snobbish; it's just that—I mean I know people here that I like and talk to and have friends. That's fine.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Going back to your writing and how important writing was for you. You wrote a major essay that was published in the book *Working It Out*, "My Work and My Working-Class Father" [ed. Sara Ruddick and Pamela Daniels. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977]. It was a first major essay. Did you find the same kind of gratification in that writing and have it published and having people read it as you do in your painting?

MAY STEVENS: I don't even remember the article. But I have always written, and always loved to write. I have read all my life. I draw, and I read. I've done that all my life. And I've read everything I ever get my hands. I still constantly read. And I write all the time, and I love to write. And I'm crazy about all kinds of different writers. And I write all the time.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you write poetry?

MAY STEVENS: I have. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Of course you wrote some wonderful poems. Do you find poetry, would you say, is more satisfying than the essays, or is it very equal?

MAY STEVENS: I don't make much difference between them. And I don't think that my writing poetry—I don't think it's very—I mean I know I do, and I like what I write and all of that. And I've published things and so on. But it's not a specialty. It's just part of my writing. You know what I mean? It's not that I make a big difference between it and non-poetry. I can write a poem, or I can write a story or whatever it is. And I think there's nothing distinctive about my writing. It's not a particular style. I just write whatever I, you know, feel like writing, whatever I want to do. So I don't specialize in it, but I have written poetry, and I like to write poetry, and I like to read it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You and Rudolf had a show together at Exit Art in 1994 ["Existential/Political: Rudolf Baranik and May Stevens," Exit Art, New York, NY], and you did a book together called *In Words* [New York, Exit Art. 1994].

MAY STEVENS: Called what?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: *In Words*. It's a book—

MAY STEVENS: *In Words*.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Your writing and his writing and your collaborative writing.

MAY STEVENS: Oh!

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember how that came about? Was it the first collaborative text that you had written?

MAY STEVENS: We did stuff together often. And probably somebody suggested that, and we did it. And

especially when we were showing together. But I remember that we had an evening at that show, an evening event. And we were both going to speak. And I thought we could be very entertaining. And I thought that we could take different positions and argue about it. That would be great fun. And I thought [laughs]—I remember that once when I was a child—a girl, a teenager or something—I was having an argument with my father, and I thought—I was mad at him for something or other. So I was telling him off. I guess I was very rude to him. I was sometimes very rude to my father. And you know what? He was drinking but he was a teetotaler so he was drinking a glass of milk. And I said something very fresh to him, and you know what he did? He threw the milk in my face. So I thought, wow, I must have said something awful. And I wasn't terribly upset because I thought, whoa, I must have been awful. So I said to Rudolf, let's have a glass of milk [laughs] on this thing we're in front of here. Whatever it is. We'll have a glass of milk, and I will say something so rude to you, that you'll throw milk at me [laughs]. And he said, "Are you kidding!?" And I said, "It would be very exciting." And he said, "No way." And I said, "Look, we'll have a glass of milk or a carton of milk and a glass, and we can put a little bit in, and I'll say something awful, and you can throw a little." No way. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: He didn't appreciate your theatrics?

MAY STEVENS: He wouldn't do it [laughs]. So I thought it would be dramatic if we'd have an argument. But he wouldn't do it. He was very proper, and I wanted to be outrageous.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you find that show especially interesting, gratifying, exciting to do that collaborative?

MAY STEVENS: It was wonderful. Yes. We had a great time.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I wanted to talk to you now more about Rudolf.

MAY STEVENS: He was fantastic. He was so good. You know the best thing about him, and I tell everybody this, the thing about Rudolf that was so special is that whenever I had a problem in my mind, something was bothering me and I didn't know what to do about it or couldn't solve it or it was worrying me all the time, I would go to Rudolf—And we had two floors; I was on the seventh, he was on the sixth. And I would go to Rudolf, and I would say, "I have to talk to you." And he'd be painting. And I would have left my painting, and I'd come down, and I would say, "I want to talk to you. I've something I need to talk to you about." And he'd say, okay. So he'd sit down, and he'd listen. And I'd tell him my problem, whatever it was. And he'd listen.

Then when I'd finished, he would tell me the truth. His truth. He would tell me what he thought about the problem that I had. And I would listen, and I would be so grateful that I know he listened, I know he cared, and I know he thought about it, and he'd think about it immediately because he was quick, you know. He'd think about it immediately, and he'd tell me what he thought. And he would tell me that he thinks I should do this or maybe I should do that. Or I should think about it. Whatever he'd say. And I'd go away feeling so relieved. Not that I would do what he said. But he was telling me—he was very intelligent, and he cared a lot—and he was telling me what he thought was the truth for himself and what could be useful for me. And so I would be very, very happy. I would leave him, and I would think, okay. He's helped me. And I would not necessarily do it. But I would consider something which he gave me that was the best he could do. And he was good. And it was the best he could do at that moment, and it was really the best of him. So it was wonderful. He'd always do—he would stop whatever he was doing, and he would listen. And he would say, okay. I think you should try this or think about this.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What kinds of difficulties would you go to him with?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know what. I couldn't make up my mind, or I was worried about this. Whatever it was. Anything.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were they questions about your painting?

MAY STEVENS: It could be. It could be anything. Anything at all.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean working with a dealer, what furniture to buy, any kind of personal—

MAY STEVENS: Anything, but it would have to be something serious because I wouldn't be—I mean what furniture to buy wouldn't be a big worry for me. I could say, What do you think? Do you want this or this? You know. But something that mattered to me a great deal, and that would have to be about my career or I don't know, whatever it was. But the important things. The little things wouldn't bother me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did it go the other way? Did he come to you for his advice—for advice from you?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know whether it was like response. You know I mean similar, similar. But certainly we talked about everything. We talked about everything all the time. We shared everything. But I think that as a

man, he probably felt that he needed to solve his own problems, which doesn't mean he wouldn't share them. But I think he probably wasn't as clearly dependent on my advice as I was on his. But again, I didn't do it unless it felt right to me. And he knew that it was up to me because I was independent always. But I also wanted the advice of the smartest person I knew. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you have regular times when you talked about each other's work, or he would come to your studio—

MAY STEVENS: Constantly! Constantly!

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: —you'd go to his studio?

MAY STEVENS: Constantly! All the time.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was it a very open door? Or did you feel you needed wait to be invited by Rudolf so you wouldn't interrupt him?

MAY STEVENS: No. I don't think we protected it like that. I mean if he'd give me an idea or make a comment which I didn't like, I would say, Go! Come back later! Come back when I invite you! [Laughs.] Because sometimes I would try something new that was different. And I mean he walked into my studio once, and he saw something—Oh, it was when I started Big Daddy. When I started Big Daddy, he, you know, it was like a cartoon. So here I am making a cartoon? He walks in, and he says, "Are you nuts?" I said, "Leave!" Because I knew that I was doing something different from anything I'd ever done before. And I knew that I was going to be mocking my father. And I knew that it was a ridiculous thing to make a cartoon, but I wanted to do it. So I said, "Go! Don't come back 'til I invite you." And then when he came back, he saw what I had done, and he liked it. But first he said, "What!"

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And what about you critiquing his work and your response to his work. How did he involve you in that?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember anything specific. But I always saw it, and I always talked about it. And I'm sure that I said things which were very honest, and sometimes I didn't like it that much. Or, you know, whatever. But he was pretty totally confident. He really had—he always knew he was an artist, and he always knew what he wanted. And he was not somebody who was I'm not sure. He wasn't like that. He knew what he liked, and he did what he wanted.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you ever encounter times with critics or visiting curators where you felt that they were paying more attention to his work than yours because he was a man?

MAY STEVENS: Sure. Especially when I would have people from Europe. They would love seeing Rudolf and his work because he was European. And also people from Europe had a European sensibility, and he had a European sensibility. So they were very pleased with Rudolf [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And how did you deal with that kind of—

MAY STEVENS: Well what am I going to do, shoot them? [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did he say something to them about why don't you come in May's studio?

MAY STEVENS: Oh, he would always. He would say, "You have to see May's work, too." No, he was always good to me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you feel that there was any kind of cross fertilization of ideas between your work?

MAY STEVENS: I think so. I don't know specifically what I gave him. I think his—he was more refined than I. His work was perhaps more refined. It was more abstract and probably more refined. It did not have bright color, which I've used. And so he had these much more abstract and very subtle—Well, you'll see when we walk around. He had very subtle color and very subtle form. He was extremely refined and subtle in his work. And he always knew he was an artist, and that was going to be his whole life. And I would comment on them, and I would tell him what I liked and what I didn't like and so on. But I didn't try to change him at all, to have him use brighter or a different color, you know. Because he did what he did beautifully, and I was very impressed with it. And he liked my work a lot.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you find it exciting to go to museums together and galleries together and see other people's work and talk about it?

MAY STEVENS: Sure, sure.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is that something you liked to do separately?

MAY STEVENS: No, no. We did it together. Or separately. Both, both ways.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you have any great differences of opinion about contemporary art?

MAY STEVENS: We would. We would. No, we would. We would. But I would be more what? Sort of off the walls. You know. I mean I like that one! And he would say, Hah! You know. Because I was more like more adventurous, and he was more—he knew what he liked. And I would think, Oh, that's interesting. So that was okay.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was it frustrating—You seem to be—then you were more open-minded, you'd say?

MAY STEVENS: But also I liked to be shocking—a little. I like to be adventurous.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you feel competitive in terms of your work or your careers?

MAY STEVENS: No. We were very different in a way. What we did was very different. I mean I was doing Big Daddy. What would he want with that? You know. But he appreciated it. He liked it. He had a broad sense. But I don't know if he would've liked it if it was by somebody else [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you—Who were some of your closest artist—or friends, artist friends, at this time when you were living in the loft in SoHo, who you talked to about—besides the political friends, in addition to the people we talked about yesterday.

MAY STEVENS: But actually our friends were the political friends. Our life was making art, and it was working in the political activities with other artists.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Who were some of the other artists who, let's say, were living in SoHo when you were?

MAY STEVENS: Lucy and—Well, Lucy, of course, was one of them. She's not an artist but a critic. Lucy, Harmony, Nancy. Well, Nancy wasn't much of an artist at that point. She was married to Robert Smithson who died. So we didn't know much about her art at all. And she wasn't very active politically either. But Harmony and Lucy, particularly Lucy—Lucy was very active. I was very close to Lucy. We lived nearby, and we were both very close to Lucy and very fond of her. And then—who were the ones that we talked about yesterday? Leon and Nancy, Nancy Spero and Leon. They were close friends, and we worked with them politically. I mean it was the same, the friends were the people you liked what you liked and did what you do, people that we saw. The meetings we went to, the activities we were engaged in. And whoever else was in that group.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: During the years you were in SoHo, '67 to '96, that's almost 30 years, did you regularly go someplace on vacations, to someplace outside the city in the summer or the winter or—Was there some other place?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I do remember going to Taos because I was very shocked when I called them and I said we'd like to come and stay for three months, and they said, Well, we can do it in three years. I said, Great! You know. And then they called three years later.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Before that?

MAY STEVENS: I don't quite remember. I went to someplace in—We went to the MacDowell Colony and sometimes together or sometimes separate.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about your teaching career, which was so long and important. I know you started teaching at SVA in 1961 and taught there 'til 1996, so that's 35 years. That's amazing dedication. I think you talked about how you got to SVA, through people you knew. How did you feel about teaching?

MAY STEVENS: Loved it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was it just a way to make money? No, you loved it.

MAY STEVENS: I loved it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why did you love it?

MAY STEVENS: Because I think I was good at it [laughs]. I loved it. And what could be better than talking to young people who want to be artists? You know. And encouraging them; or if they were having trouble, trying to help them in a different direction in some way.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What did you teach?

MAY STEVENS: Painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Different—Always painting. Was it undergraduate or graduate, both?

MAY STEVENS: I think it was undergraduate.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you prefer that?

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you prefer to teach the younger—

MAY STEVENS: Sorry.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you prefer to teach the undergraduate students?

MAY STEVENS: I think at SVA when I started, there wasn't a graduate program.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh.

MAY STEVENS: So I just did what they gave me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was your approach to teaching? What kinds of lessons and—how did you approach the students?

MAY STEVENS: I tried to make it as simple and direct. And I tried working with the students. I tried to encourage whatever particular qualities I saw in them. So that if this was a person who liked this, or this was a person who had a feeling for that, and I found that or I could see that, I would encourage them to do that. I was not in any way trying to make them all alike or let them feel that the only way to proceed was to follow a certain rule or something. I didn't do that at all. Because nobody ever did that to me. I did what I wanted to do. And they would point out—the teachers—would point out the things that they felt were coming along nicely, and so I would proceed with that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What would you do if you encountered a student you thought was hopeless.

MAY STEVENS: No good? I was kind [laughs]. I was kind. You know this was at the beginning of their careers in art. So at a different point you might have wanted to be more frank. But when they were beginning—Being very bad at the beginning is pretty common. So I mean they could be hoping for something but not yet knowing how to get there. So I would never discourage someone who's starting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you have any memorable students—memorable in the sense of very promising?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. I mean I don't remember anybody now. But I would see them later as they go on to future teachers and other schools and so on. And they'd come and show me their work and so on. But I don't remember anybody who became famous. I mean it could be, but I don't really remember.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: While you were teaching at SVA, you sometimes had teaching residencies in other places?

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were those—why did you do that?

MAY STEVENS: I was invited, and it was fun to do, to have a change and move around. Other people did that, too, at school. So you weren't always in the same place. It was so interesting to try other places and other students in different situations.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you find that it was enjoyable to come to SVA and teach because of the other teachers involved and who you would have relationships with?

MAY STEVENS: Yes. But, you know, I had a child, and I had a husband. And I had my work, and I had school. It was full. That was a lot. And we had a life, you know. We had a life. We had many friends who were artists. And we constantly had dinner parties and went to dinner parties.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you the cook, or was Rudolf the cook?

MAY STEVENS: He claimed he was a cook [laughs]. I was mainly the cook, but he also cooked. And he would do

whatever was necessary. He'd help me. He'd do the dishes. And then sometimes he would do the cooking, and I would do the dishes. Whatever. We had a great time. We were very good to each other. He had different tastes, you know. When we began to live together, he would—I would make the meal, and then he would say at the end, he would say, "Would you mind if I take what's left? And I will use it as the center or part of for tomorrow night's supper. I will take what you cooked, and I will add to it or change it a little. And I said, "Go ahead." So he would take it, he would spice it, he would cook it, he would overdo it [laughs]. And then we ate his version of it. But it was what he wanted to do.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was his cooking like?

MAY STEVENS: Well, it was overcooked and over-spiced.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What kind of spices was he—?

MAY STEVENS: I don't even remember. But I ate it [laughs]. You know he was European.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You had a year, a year residency besides the MacDowell, at the Bunting Institute in Cambridge [Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA, 1988-1989]. It was very important, I believe, that you did *Alice in the Garden*.

MAY STEVENS: I did what?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The painting *Alice in the Garden*.

MAY STEVENS: Oh.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And is there anything about that residency that was particularly important to the evolution of your work?

MAY STEVENS: About that particular painting?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And was it hard to be away from Rudolf? That was a long residency. It was—

MAY STEVENS: Was it a year?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Almost, I think, nine months maybe.

MAY STEVENS: But you see I knew people in the area because I'd grown up there. So I had close friends: Pat Hills who wrote the book; she was there. I saw her all the time. In fact she would drive me around everywhere, and she would feed me and so on. So she's very important in my life. And we speak every week on the phone. Every Sunday she calls. So I knew her and her husband and their children. And that was important. And in fact she almost made herself my driver. She would take me because I didn't have a car there. So she would take me around. She'd come pick me up and take me places and feed me and all of that. And she had family and friends, and so I was part of her life actually, which I think filled in the spaces for me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And connected to that, I wanted to ask you how this book, *May Stevens* by Patricia Hills came about. You were talking about that a little bit yesterday.

MAY STEVENS: She just wanted to do it. Now, and I think I told you it's very simple: Over the years that I've known her—because I knew her long before any of this happened. I knew her when we were living in New York, and we were in our lofts and so forth. I think I remember her coming to the loft. And in fact, when we moved from 97 Wooster, as you mentioned it, to this other place which was second floor and on a main driveway—or big highway, which had a lot of traffic—and when we moved there, she came and helped us move. And I think she's the one—we had these I said were second floor with huge windows on this big busy street. And our bathroom was there with this huge window on the busy street, you know. And I thought, oh God! And she said, "Bubble Wrap." So we put in Bubble Wrap on that window, which meant we had the light. And she came and helped. So she was very much a part of our life always. And her family, her husband, her children. Her son, Andy—Andrew—he is a singer and a conductor and a pianist, the whole works. And he's absolutely wonderful. He's beautiful, he's gay. But he's gorgeous. So they were a very important family in our lives.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So that made that whole residency—

MAY STEVENS: Well, she took care of me. She would drive me wherever I wanted to go.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What other kind of distant travel? I wanted to ask you: You took a trip to Cuba in 1982.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And then you were involved with a group in 1986 that sent American art to Cuba. Do you recall any experiences of that, the original trip and the exhibition and how that related to your—?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I do recall a lot about the Cuban exhibition. When we got back from our first visit, I think Rudolf had the idea that we should see whether the American artists that we knew would like to exhibit in Cuba. So he asked everybody, and everybody was delighted. So we organized a show of work in Cuba, American art in Cuba. And it was Rudolf's idea, and he got all that work. And then we had a friend who was—he lived in Mexico. He was an American, but he had lived a long time in Mexico, and he was an artist. And he said he thought he could get the Cuban airline or whatever it was—or the Mexican airline, the Mexican airline—to fly the work to Cuba. And he did it. He got the Mexican airline that he knew, he knew people there, and they took all this art to Cuba. And the Cubans loved the art. And actually the American artists decided to give the art to the Cuban people. So instead of flying it back, we left it there. So it was quite a wonderful thing we did. And it was wonderful. Everybody loved it. They became, you know, artists with work in Cuba. And Rudolf was the one who, you know, organized it all.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you know what's happened to that work since then?

MAY STEVENS: No, it's part of Cuban arts.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The last body—the most recent body of work, I think, that you've done that was started in around 2000, I think it's called *Rivers and Other Bodies of Work*.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Relates to I believe Rudolf's death.

MAY STEVENS: Rudolf's death.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And the ashes and your—Do you want to talk about that and those paintings and the bodies of water that—

MAY STEVENS: Oh, Well, what I did is when Rudolf died, I took his ashes to all the bodies of water we had visited together.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was that something that he talked to you about beforehand?

MAY STEVENS: No. No, no. But I just—he died, and I had his ashes. I took them to the local Santa Fe Creek by the river, you know, by the, you know, where that—there's no water in most of that. But there was some somewhere. And then I went to the Galisteo Creek, and I did I think a wonderful painting, a wonderful painting here at the Galisteo—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Called *Galisteo Creek* [2001].

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I was there with Lucy and Harmony, who live one on either side of the creek. And so the three of us, before having dinner at Lucy's house, went down to the creek and Lucy bent down and put his ashes in. I photographed this. And then Harmony bent down, and she put Rudolf's ashes in. And then I bent down, and I put Rudolf's ashes down. And it made a kind of line in the water. It's a very shallow creek. And I photographed all of that, and then I made a painting of that creek with that line. So that was very nice. We did that together, the three of us.

And then I went to Ireland where we had been many times. And I went to the river near where my friends lived. And the family went with me, and the little girl and all the kids. And I told them that Rudolf had died. And their mother said, He went to heaven where Uncle Somebody is. You know. [Laughs.] And they're up together. And the kids said, Oh! You know. So then the little girl holds out her hand, and I pour in the ashes. And she said, "That's not ashes, that's sand." And I said, "Well, it looks like sand, but it's ashes." So the kids put the stuff in there. So that was lovely.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you did a painting [*Connemara, Rock Pool, Ireland, 1999-2001*] of that as well.

MAY STEVENS: I did?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And the Hudson [*Hudson I, Night Swim, 2000* and *Hudson II, Eddy, 1998-2000*]?

MAY STEVENS: I did it everywhere.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: These were places that you had been to together.

MAY STEVENS: Sure. Absolutely.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The paintings that came out of that, let's just take a look for a moment.

MAY STEVENS: That's his ashes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] *Water's Edge, Charles River, Cambridge* [2002]. You did it there as well.

MAY STEVENS: Pat Hills was with me when I did that, and her son Andy.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Here's another one. The *Headlands* [2002]. Did you—Was that another location?

MAY STEVENS: Where is it?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In Marin County north of San Francisco—Marin County.

MAY STEVENS: Oh. I was there for a while painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The Napa River [*Oxbow, Napa River*, 2002].

MAY STEVENS: Oh, this is the one. That's the one here in Galisteo.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Galisteo, yes.

MAY STEVENS: That's the line of Rudolf's ashes. And I wrote her in gold a little bit.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And this, too, *Atlantic* [2001]. Now is this Rudolf's ashes, the text?

MAY STEVENS: I don't remember. I can't remember.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were there new texts that you introduced in these paintings?

MAY STEVENS: New texts?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That were different than the ones you had used earlier?

MAY STEVENS: I don't know. I probably said things about Rudolf.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That you wrote.

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you're thinking about the future now, you talked yesterday about—I don't know if we recorded it—about your desire to do a nude painting of yourself.

MAY STEVENS: Oh, yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you, what do you see doing in the future?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I have this plan for a huge painting with several different views of myself naked. Because I think this is the worst thing I can do [laughs]. But it's also the most daring, to do myself naked. I'm 85 years old. And by the time I finish a painting like this, I may be 86 or 87 or even 90. Who knows? And I think it's a real challenge. And the point of it is I cannot make it beautiful. I cannot make it gorgeous or exquisite in any way. But they can be very good. But they can't be flattering.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: There are other artists who have painted other women: Alice Neel, others.

MAY STEVENS: But have they done of themselves?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: Who?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I think Alice Neel did a self-portrait.

MAY STEVENS: Oh, Alice Neel, sure. But she was fat anyway [laughs]. Alice Neel was very—what. Did you see the movie about her?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No, not yet.

MAY STEVENS: It was really good. And she was flattered. All the photographs of her, like real, like contemporary women, made the movie which was done by her son, one of her sons. Her hair was blowing in the wind, you know. All this gray hair was blowing around her. And she was wearing a pretty bluish dress. And she looked absolutely gorgeous. [They laugh.] Because her son did it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But you're implying that she staged it in a way, she purposely wanted to look—

MAY STEVENS: Or he did, they both did or whatever.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So what do you think what continues to drive you to work, to keep painting?

MAY STEVENS: I still have the same joy in it. I love what I did. It's very exciting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you talked about doing the nude as a great challenge.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Well, the challenge is—it's not that it's hard to do a nude. But the challenge is the moral kind of thing. Like—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The emotional.

MAY STEVENS: Yes, the emotional and also the point that I have to be truthful, but I can't be ugly [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Balancing the ego—

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: —with the honesty.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Right. Yes. Exactly. I mean I have to be truthful. But I have to be able to do it. I mean I have to be able to put up with it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you imagine starting that painting, you said you've already started it in the sense you've had photographs taken.

MAY STEVENS: I have photographs, many photographs.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What's the next step after you've—

MAY STEVENS: Drawing.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Picking the photographs that seem—

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Picking the photographs that seem—

MAY STEVENS: Yes, picking the photographs and then making the sketch, and trying different photographs, and planning the layout.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: On paper?

MAY STEVENS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right. That's what I would do. Plan the outcome. And like who's closer or are they all the same closeness. You know, whatever. I mean there are some things here which show several views of my mother, for example.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: For example, Alice; that's right.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. So I have to plan that. And then what about the background. What situation am I in? Are there windows? Is there furniture? What's going on here? I don't know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you'll use acrylic.

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Acrylic, acrylic paint.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Of course. That's the way it is.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Would you be doing that painting with canvas tacked on the wall or on a stretched canvas?

MAY STEVENS: On the wall tacked on. I prefer that. I like it hanging. It seems to me more fresh, you know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MAY STEVENS: You know the painting that the Museum of Modern Art has in Boston, which is of my mother, it's huge. And they bought it unframed. But they framed it with a huge brown frame. Which upset me when I saw it. But then I got used to it. It really looks very good.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You got used to it?

MAY STEVENS: Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That's good.

[END OF AAA_steven09_1855.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing May Stevens on August 11, 2009, in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

How do you think—can you describe how the art world has changed in all the years that you have been working in terms of—?

MAY STEVENS: Well, I think that the art that I read about in magazines and newspapers is often—it's about being shocking and bizarre. And working in a way that nobody else ever worked. And often I think it's boring and not really very interesting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean it really isn't new.

MAY STEVENS: Well, it's different. But it's—I mean I think the purpose of all of it is to be so unusual that it will be noticed and everybody will talk about it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is that a different approach than you think existed in the past?

MAY STEVENS: It's more extreme. It's more extreme, I think. I don't see any particular style. Different things happen, and probably they fit into some category. But generally I don't think that they're very serious about anything. It's like being outrageous. And so I find it not very interesting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How do you feel the art world has changed in terms of its relationship—how a woman artist is treated and exhibited and how your experience may have changed?

MAY STEVENS: I don't think it matters too much anymore. It seems that there are many very well-known woman artists who are really very, very good. Like this one who lives here—I can't remember her name now. But she's married to a very famous man artist. But I can't remember their names right now.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Has your career and your work as an artist been deeply affected by the struggle to gain visibility because you're a woman?

MAY STEVENS: No. I don't think that plays much—I don't think that matters much anymore.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did it affect you when you were—

MAY STEVENS: There are many, many well-known women. Some of the best artists around are women now. And I think everybody knows that. There's nothing to worry about anymore. The magazine—is it this one here? Should be in here. It must be later on. [Inaudible.] But there's one, a picture here of *Heresies*, with a whole bunch of women.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: Okay.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: We're looking at the photograph from 1976.

MAY STEVENS: She's very well known.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mary Miss.

MAY STEVENS: She's very well known.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And what's her name?

MAY STEVENS: Joyce Kozloff. Her name is—what the hell is it?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Snyder, Joan Snyder.

MAY STEVENS: Yes. Exactly. May Stevens. Harmony Hammond. What's her name? Do you know her name? I can't remember it. She's a good artist, she's a good artist. She has written a book on *Heresies*, which is coming out shortly. This is Lucy Lippard. This is Mary Beth Edelson, whom you've interviewed.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

MAY STEVENS: And this is Miriam Schapiro. So those are very well-known artists. Some of them aren't well known. She's not well known. I don't even remember her name. She's not well known. She's not an artist, and she's not an artist, and she's not an artist. They might be artists, but they're not well known. And she—they're not well known.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How have you thought about preserving your legacy? I know that this is of course important, this book. Your—

MAY STEVENS: I told you she's [Pat Hill] thinking of writing a book of my writings.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, yes!

MAY STEVENS: I just do my work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is the gallery involved in thinking about that?

MAY STEVENS: Yes, of course. Of course. They're waiting for me to produce an—You know because I had my left knee operated on. I mean I got a new knee this past year, which took me out of action for a while. First of all, I had a metal plate in my left femur because I broke the femur just about here. So they put in a metal plate to hold the femur together. So before they could give me a new knee, they had to take out the plate. So that took six weeks to recover from. And then they did the knee, and that took six more weeks to recover from. So that kind of put me out of commission for a while, and I couldn't stand and paint. So I was not producing anything. And so it was very hard on the gallery because usually I show every year. And so I didn't show, and I wasn't making paintings.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Do you have your next show planned?

MAY STEVENS: Sorry?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is your next show planned?

MAY STEVENS: Well, but I wasn't working either. So I wasn't producing work. So I'll get the show as soon as I'm ready.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you want your work to be remembered in a certain way? What do you feel has been your most important contribution over these years? I know it's a huge question. What do you think your most important contribution has been as an artist, so far?

MAY STEVENS: It's hard for me to tell. It's hard for me to assess that. It's hard for me to look at the work from outside my doing it. So I have my own prejudices and my own likings and dislikings even within my own work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The work that you're doing next, is that the self-portrait? Or is it another body of the water—the paintings of the water and the words for Mary Ryan Gallery?

MAY STEVENS: You know it's easy to do the paintings in the water. I've done them forever, you know. And I want to do something more exciting and more difficult, which would be exactly what I've been thinking about.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So that's your next project.

MAY STEVENS: Exactly.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is that—I was going to ask you, is there something you've never gotten to do that you've

wanted to do?

MAY STEVENS: Yes, this [laughs]. Exactly. I want to do—because it's so difficult, and it's challenging. It's very exciting to do myself naked.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you envision this as a whole cycle of paintings?

MAY STEVENS: No. I think of one painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: One painting.

MAY STEVENS: But who knows? There may be things that contribute to it. And in fact maybe in order to do this painting I'll do sketches or small paintings or things where I try it out. But I don't have a lot of time left. I've got to get going on it [laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Right. Do you still find it important to leave here and go to New York or elsewhere to see—go to museums or see exhibitions?

MAY STEVENS: I don't have a lot of time and energy. I think I have to protect my time and energy and use it very sparingly and very intelligently. You know I've got—you know how many years am I going to live? I'm 85. I'm not going to live ten years, I don't think [laughs]. Actually my mother lived to be 89. I think I told you that. And her sister lived to be 101.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you're healthier than your mother.

MAY STEVENS: [Laughs.] But you know you're healthy doesn't necessarily mean you still have a lot of energy.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: True, true.

MAY STEVENS: How old are you, 71?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No.

MAY STEVENS: Sixty-five.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No. Before we end, I wanted to know if there was anything else that you wanted to talk about, your thoughts or your ideas about anything, that we hadn't yet touched on, about your life as an artist.

MAY STEVENS: One of the things I felt about your questions is that it seems to me that you asked me things which put me outside myself. In other words, it's like what do I think about being an artist or being this kind of an artist or doing these kinds of things? But I'm not outside myself. And I don't see myself from any kind of distance. It's all—everything I do is something which comes from who I am. And it's all based upon the things which seem to me right for me. And I think I have always been extremely independent. Which means I don't care what style is popular now. I don't care what people are doing, what's in or out. It doesn't—I don't give a shit because I need to respond to who I am. And I am not adjusting to all this other stuff that goes on. There's too much stuff that goes on. And I don't pay attention to it. Unless something strikes me, "Ah hah! Look at that. Maybe that could be useful." You know what I mean? So it seems to me essential, especially if you're an artist of any kind, that you find out who you are and how you can most realize the breadth and depth of what you have inside you, and not be looking for other stuff. That's it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Thank you very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]