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Oral history interview with Tom Blackwell, 2009 September 22-November 11

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Tom Blackwell on September 22, 2009. The interview took place in Andes, New York, and was conducted by Judith 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 RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Tom Blackwell in Andes, New York, on September 22, 2009 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

Tom, let's begin with you family background, if you can talk about your relatives—

TOM BLACKWELL: My family background, I was born in Chicago, 1938.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the exact date?

TOM BLACKWELL: March 9, and so I'm not quite a baby boomer, pre-baby boom.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did your grandparents come from?

TOM BLACKWELL: On my father's side, they were Irish so they came from Ireland. On my mother's side, English, and who had been in the country for a long time. I think they were fairly early English settlers. On my mother's side, their family name was Tankersly.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

TOM BLACKWELL: T-A-N-K-E-R-S-L-Y. Tankersly, and my grandfather on my mother's side was an amateur painter. Watercolors mostly and fairly good, actually. I saw one or two of his things and he had some talent, no question.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What did he do for a living?

TOM BLACKWELL: He was a sales rep for what was then a burgeoning industry in, I guess we call it telecommunications, then they called it the phone company or something you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did both your grandparents live in Chicago?

TOM BLACKWELL: At one time they did yes. I think on the mother's side, they lived somewhere, I think, in Champagne, Illinois.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's the Tankerslys?

TOM BLACKWELL: Tankersly side yeah. The Blackwell side of the family which is where I got my name, I mean, they were I guess what one would call lace-curtain Irish sort of—well, I mean what I've ascertained about them is that they were fairly, you know, really lower-class kind of. And my grandfather on Blackwell served in the Spanish American War. I remember a funeral I went to, I have a vague memory of playing with him as a very young child and he was like sort of Abe Lincoln to me.

He was tall and very sort of gaunt and forbidding looking man with dark hair and so on. His wife, my grandmother Blackwell who was I think the real business person in that family. What they did really was, I don't know what my grandfather Blackwell did for a living, but his wife seemed to have a talent for real estate and she bought sort of property and fix them up and then would sell them at some point for profit or rent them out.

I think she was a fairly astute business woman of a—you know not of any great note but apparently she kept the whole thing going.

JUDITH RICHARDS: She was the main bread winner?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, she was the smart one of the group. That's—I'm just extrapolating from little bits of information that I've gleaned over the years.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did your mother and father meet in Chicago?

TOM BLACKWELL: They met in Chicago at the 1933 World's Fair, which was a huge thing in Chicago. My mother was, she worked at the Coca-Cola Pavilion there and my father was employed as a guard at the Fair. And, the thing is, I mean, you know, we're out here talking about early childhood, well, I mean, on the Blackwell side of the family they were all alcoholics. I mean there's serious alcoholism in the family and my father was an alcoholic and my—

JUDITH RICHARDS: One of the reasons your mother was in charge?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, you're mixing generations. We're skipping ahead a generation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, yes, okay.

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay, so anyway, we were talking, I mean originally, we're talking about my grandparents on the Blackwell side, now we've skipped up to my parents and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So they met because they were both working at the World's Fair.

TOM BLACKWELL: They were working at the World's Fair and from what I've gathered my mother was not a terribly serious person, I think. And my father was, aside from his drinking, and so on not a—I mean there was no sort of aspiration or anything like aspiring to higher education or doing anything in the world.

I mean, they were basically people coming out of the Depression and just, you know, it was a hard time coming. Just getting by was their whole purpose in life, I guess, you know. But anyway, my mother had me; I think she must have been, I'm guessing about 22 or so at the time. She was born in 1914. The thing is that then of course, World War II came along and my father joined the Merchant Marines, not the army or navy so he was gone for the duration of the war.

My mother worked in a munitions plant making ball bearings and stuff and I had after that, I had two brothers, Pat and Jim, who are my younger brothers. And now we get to something a little more interesting because we had very little money or none practically. It was really a pretty marginal kind of existence.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was this in downtown Chicago that you lived in?

TOM BLACKWELL: This was—no, it was a neighborhood in Chicago called South Shore which was on the South Side of Chicago. Actually, now that I think about it, the South Shore must have been fairly close to where Grant Park is where of course, the [President Barack] Obama victory speech took place, that whole area, which I remember as a kid because we would a lot of times were able to walk to various museums. Like the Museum of Science and Industry and the Field Museum were there and various great museums were in that—or at least walkable for a kid, you know. So couldn't been too far.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said your grandfather was a watercolorer, your mother's father.

TOM BLACKWELL: Correct.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is it correct that is he is the only—?

TOM BLACKWELL: Artistic forebearer that I know about, yes

JUDITH RICHARDS: It seems unusual that you were going to museums—did you family encourage it? Did your mother and father take you there?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, I mean no, they never did. What happened was—and this is the great thing—so during the war, my mother, we were, you know, latchkey kids. My mother was working; my father was, of course, off in the Merchant Marines. So she had three kids, so of course they didn't have day care in those days—so what to do with the kids? Well, there was a private school in Chicago called the Ffoulkes School, F-F-O-U-L-K-E-S—Ffoulkes—it is pronounced Ffoulkes—which was a private school which was mostly you know, I mean, it was like the kids that went there were for the most part sort of upper-middle class Jewish kids who were very—you know, it was a kind of—I guess the equivalent today would be like a Montessori-type school, something like that.

And I was the oldest of three brothers and I had a wonderful teacher in both pre-school and I think first and second grade. A woman by the name of Ms. Greenwald, Wald, Greenwald, W-A-L-D, who saw early on artistic ability and sort of a kind of precocity that I had, which I didn't even know about, but, you know, she saw it.

One of the first really formative kind of things that I remember was we did a Hansel and Gretel play in which we had to act various parts and we had to make puppets for this and everybody got assigned a different character. I

got the witch, and I made a witch and I made the most horrifying witch you ever saw with a big bent nose with warts on it and whiskers coming out and kind of greenish pallor and scary looking eyes and a fright wig for hair and stuff and a big pointy hat. And I got to play the witch in the play.

So she was thrilled with both my puppet and my performance apparently and gave me a big kiss on the cheek—which I refused to wash that side of my face for a whole week, I think. It was sort of really—this was amazing to me and she seemed to recognize.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think she encouraged you to go to the museums?

TOM BLACKWELL: Absolutely. She encouraged me to do everything, I think. I actually credit her with giving a whole different direction to my life than wouldn't have been the case otherwise, you know. Wherever you are, Ms. Greenwald, thank you, if you're still alive out there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long did you stay in that school?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think we were there for about, I think about three years roughly. And then after that, I think it must have been like the end of the war and, I don't know, things changed and then I went to public schools which was quite a comedown after that first school, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At that point, did your father come home?

TOM BLACKWELL: Actually, he didn't show up for a long time. It turned out that even after the war ended, he stayed in the Merchant Marines. I think it suited his lifestyle which amounted to having no responsibility and lots of opportunities to go drinking and raising hell.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your mother was basically was your sole parent.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And then, how was that public school and did you find it—was art your main area?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, I mean, I was, of course I was—art was my passion but it turned out that, you know, I was pretty verbal; I could read; apparently, I was the head of my class in reading and verbal skills and so on. I think I was a smart kid in a dumb world, frankly. That's kind of my take on the whole thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: As you were showing this artistic bent, as you put it, did your mother support that? Was she excited about it?

TOM BLACKWELL: My mother was not—I think my mother was, in truth, jealous of Ms. Greenwald because my mother was overwhelmed with basically a kind of low-wage job and the responsibility of raising three kids on her own and I think she was just overwhelmed.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What did she do to support you?

TOM BLACKWELL: She was a—I think she did typing and stenos, you know the kind of sort of fairly low-skilled office work, stuff like that, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And where you living in the same place all through these years?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, what happened was oddly enough, the house we were living in originally was owned by my father's mother, the smart real estate lady. And I think my parents were living there, either paying low rent or possibly contributing to a mortgage, I'm not sure.

But for one reason or another, probably due to my father and his problems, they couldn't continue that. And so the house was sold and then later was made into a kind—it was cut up into little apartments. So we still in the same house but under different circumstances then—as renters of part of the house rather than owners.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you do anything special in the summers?

TOM BLACKWELL: At that early point, I don't remember much. I just remember kind of playing on the streets and stuff. Later on, we went to camps and so on. But at a certain point, you know this is really hard—I mean, this is looking back, you know, like—how many years now? I'm 71, so I'm looking back, you know, like 65 years or so; it's hard to recall everything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you went to public school, were you talking about elementary school or at that point junior high school, high school?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, I was talking about just elementary school which I remember it was a school on the South Side of Chicago called Kozminski. In Chicago, they named the schools rather than like New York where they give them numbers you know. I don't know, Kozminksi must have been some obscure Polish hero that I never heard of and they named a school after him I guess.

But anyway, I remember a lot of—it was kind of tough. The neighborhoods were sort of mixed race and, you know, it was—I remember a lot of fights in school and we had—our clothes weren't very good so we were often the butt of jokes and taunts and stuff so it was a pretty hard scrabble early childhood.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what about the next school, junior high, was that better?

TOM BLACKWELL: It is all a blur. I think in the course of my childhood in Chicago, I went to 14 different schools.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why is that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Because my mother was an idiot who just, every time she had a problem, she'd move and every time she'd move we'd go to another school.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you didn't stay in that house as a renter very long?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, no, we just kept moving, my mother just couldn't—I mean, she could maintain a job but she was just a fairly fragile person who couldn't seem to cope with life.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you moved far enough that you had to go to different schools?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, if you moved to a different neighborhood in Chicago, you entered a different school, so we went to all these different schools and then at some point, I'm trying to think—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Literally 14 before you graduated high school?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that is more than once a year.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, now, anyway. But it gets worse because at a certain point, my mother decided she couldn't deal with us anymore at all and put us in a home. So I—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You and your two younger brothers?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mean at kind of an orphanage?

TOM BLACKWELL: Like an orphanage it was called—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How old where you when you went there?

TOM BLACKWELL: I'm guessing about eight or nine. That's a guess.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, so your brothers were very young?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, they were younger than me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how long did you stay there?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, in that one, I was in two orphanages; the first one was called the Illinois Protestant Children's Home. And I think we were there about two years.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And this is in the '40s.

TOM BLACKWELL: The '40s. But by then it would have been mid-'40s, maybe late '40s. And I pleaded with her to get me out of there, you know, it was a tough place. It was really bad. And from the home, we went to a public school in that neighborhood which was a really tough school and it was—so Ms. Greenwald by now was far in the background. You know, I'm just struggling to survive in this pretty tough environment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel that you were the protector of your brothers?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So after being in that—

TOM BLACKWELL: Not only did I feel that, I was.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So after being in the one orphanage, you went to a second one.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, well, later. So we got out of the first one and we were out for a year or so and then—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Living with your mother.

TOM BLACKWELL: Living with my mother, same kind of thing. She couldn't cope. By then, we were a little bit older. You know, it was sort of—we could, I guess—we were more capable of taking care of ourselves after school after she got home. I guess she felt that way.

And then my mother was basically, I think, trying, looking for a man but she was not very smart about it because she didn't—the kind of men she would end up with were worse than none. I mean, you know, so at some point she met up with another man who became my stepfather, who was also a drunk and basically a batterer, abuser. I mean, he was really a piece of work, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: And is at that point you went to the second orphanage?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, and then—that was two months. And then we went to a second home, which was called the Uhlich, U-H-L-I-C-H, I think it was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: U-L.

TOM BLACKWELL: U-H-L-I-C-H, Uhlich, it's pronounced. It was called children's home or home or something like that and I was—mostly kids were a bit older at that point and this place was in a different neighborhood in Chicago and I basically—there were a lot of problem kids there, too. I mean, I was sort of indoctrinated into what looked like was going to be a life of crime, you know, frankly. In fact, by then I was so angry and alienated, I really thought, I think I'll be a criminal because these people are out to kill me, you know or something, you know? I mean, that's really—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how long were you there?

TOM BLACKWELL: About two years.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you—and what was the circumstances of you getting out of there?

TOM BLACKWELL: My mother hooked up with my stepfather, a man by the name of Harold Finn [ph].

JUDITH RICHARDS: The bad one? Or another stepfather?

TOM BLACKWELL: They were all bad. This guy was bad, too. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: And he got you out?

TOM BLACKWELL: He didn't get us out, but he and my mother got married and I guess she thought between the two of them, they could handle us or something. But then he was a—kind of low-wage earner, borrower and brawler type, real piece of work, you know and—I was, by this time—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you got home, that wasn't—

TOM BLACKWELL: Wasn't much better than the home except that we weren't locked up there. It's pretty much the same thing, you know? I mean, I was thoroughly alienated. I mean, I was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And this is starting to be during high school.

TOM BLACKWELL: Junior high—getting to be toward high school. But she didn't stay together with him too long because it was impossible. Of course, he was violent and you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But luckily she did get rid of him.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And then was life more peaceful?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, because then what happened was—the odd thing was, one day, I was coming home from

school. By then, I was just this kind of punk teenage kid looking for trouble at that point, you know?

And suddenly, this—there was a kind of doorway, and this man said something weird, and I looked at him and I didn't know who it was. And finally he said, "Do you know who I am?" And I said, "No, I have no idea, who are you?" And he was quite offended.

Turned out, it was my father. I had no idea he'd come back from one of his sojourns or whatever, you know. And I think I must've been about 13 or close to 14 years old by then. So anyway, he identified himself finally and I didn't want to believe him but I looked at him and I could see that he did look a bit familiar, although older than I, you know.

And so it turned out he wanted to go for a Coke or something and talk to me and so I went and he told me, he said he wanted to reconcile with my mother. So I said, well, I'll tell her, you know. So I did, and she was quite upset at the idea. But on the other hand, he claimed to have reformed his ways and given up drinking.

And apparently, his mother—the smart real estate lady who had some modest money stashed away. He made some of sort of deathbed vow to her that he would give up his drinking and take a step up and be a responsible, take care of his kids, and you know.

And she apparently gave him some money before she died. And he took this little bit of money and bought a house, not in Chicago but all the way in California in—right outside of Yosemite National Park of all things. So he wanted to get the family back together. He had a job there and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What sort of job, did you know?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, he was the night kitchen man at the Ahwahnee Hotel. The Ahwahnee Hotel was this huge, fabulous place. I mean, it was not any great shakes as a job, but it's certainly probably better than he had before. So anyway, my mother agreed and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You all lived happily ever after?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not quite. So she agreed but she was very hesitant about the whole thing. So he made a deal, like the following summer after school let out, we would go to California, see this house and spend a little time with him and kind of just get the lay of the land, you know, which we did. So that was my introduction to Yosemite National Park and nature and getting out of Chicago, thank God. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: And so how old were you that summer? Do you recall?

TOM BLACKWELL: Fourteen.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Fourteen.

TOM BLACKWELL: Fourteen.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And did you live there? Go to school?

TOM BLACKWELL: We moved there, we did move there, yes. And with my father, it's true, he gave up drinking but he was—he was not a pleasant man, you know? I hated him frankly, you know, I really did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you went to high school in that area?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what was that high school experience?

TOM BLACKWELL: It was called Mariposa County High School, which was the county in the area around the Yosemite Park and the surrounding area.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How were you as a student, what were your strengths?

TOM BLACKWELL: The funny thing was, I mean, I was precocious academically. I was way ahead of the other kids in spite of my rotten upbringing. I always read. I mean, I was an avid reader from early on.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what about your art making? Did that keep going after Ms. Greenwald?

TOM BLACKWELL: Ms. Greenwald—well, what happened was—let's see 14, we moved. That was the summer and then 15—oh I know, I wanted to get a summer job, but I was—in order to get a summer job, you had to be 16 to get a work permit and I was not old enough yet.

So at that point, somebody, I think for a birthday, had given me some—either watercolors or as I recall it, I used Easter egg dye or something. Anyway, I started making watercolor paintings and selling them in the local gas station and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the subject matter?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yosemite, of course. [Laughs.] What else? So I'd paint the waterfalls and you know, whatever.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you successful at selling?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, if it's more successful than I was not having a job, yeah. [Laughs.] Sure. So anyway, my dad tried to get me a job at the Ahwahnee doing anything but I— because of my age—I couldn't do it. So he said, well, how'd you like to be the shoeshine boy at the barber shop? It's not a paid job, it's a concession. You can make some money there.

So I did. I became the Ahwahnee barbershop shoeshine boy and I also had some of my watercolors there, which I would sell on the side. From these humble beginnings, this is true.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And then in high school—

TOM BLACKWELL: I was in high school and I was already—I mean, I had not embarked on a life of art. It's just that I enjoyed it and I knew I had a talent and it was a way to make some money.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were there art classes in high school that you took?

TOM BLACKWELL: They had a little, you know, but I mean, it was, to me, laughable. What they had was just a joke, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel that you were going to be an artist while you were still in school?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not at that point, no. But I had given up the idea of being a criminal by then. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you—while you were in high school, did you get to take a trip to any museums that might have been, maybe all the way to San Francisco or anywhere?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, but no—but—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or see art books?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I had the most amazing experience there. It happened that Ansel Adams, the great photographer, lived in Yosemite Valley. And he ran a photo and art supplies store in the valley. I met him! He was a wonderful old man—I mean, to me, old man. I mean—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you show him your watercolors?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, and we talked about stuff. He used to sell me art supplies, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What kind of art supplies did you buy? So you went from the dye to real art supplies?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, watercolors and brushes and papers and stuff, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you make paintings, standing, looking at the falls as you were painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: En plein air painting.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Well, the thing about Ansel Adams was—of course, I knew that he was a—but I, you know, I knew he was a famous photographer but I had no idea what that meant or anything. I just knew him as this sort of nice old man who, you know, who had a shop there.

Well, one day, he said, "I want to show you something." He took me in the back room; he said, you know, "I used to be a painter before I was a photographer." And he showed me some paintings that he did. They were pretty good. I mean, they were, you know, I would say now sort of like 19th century-looking paintings, sort of classical themes and a lot of, you know, glazing and stuff but very accomplished painting. I was totally impressed, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about your two brothers? Were you close to them?

TOM BLACKWELL: I'm still close to them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What are their names? Sorry, you told me that.

TOM BLACKWELL: Pat.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh yeah, Pat and—

TOM BLACKWELL: The other one is Jim. They didn't go my way though. I mean, they—my brother Pat has maintained a sort of an interest in art but not really—I mean, as kids, whatever I did, he would imitate. So if I painted, he'd paint, you know? I was the older brother and—but Pat, I think, probably had some talent if he had elected to pursue that, you know? Anyway, I'm getting off the point.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you finished high school—were there any other important activities or experiences while you were in high school that pointed you in the direction you would take?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not really, well, I remember a woman—oh, I know—in high school, they would give you these sort of aptitude test to, sort of, career guidance sort of things, you know and find out what particular aptitudes you had for whatever, you know? And they tested me for lots of things and I did fairly well, although in truth and here's the—since this is—we're on the official record now, I can tell you I did not actually graduate high school.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why was that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Because I couldn't stand being there anymore. It was awful—living with my father was horrible.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it was more because of your home life than hating school?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. I mean, I was ahead of everybody in school but I wouldn't attend, you know? I was playing hooky all the time. In fact, it was a joke, they'd see me, the school bus would come and they'd say, "There goes Tom," and they'd see me going up the hills with my watercolor pad and stuff, you know? I would just ditch school. And whenever they had tests, I would always do very well.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you didn't feel there was a way for you to graduate high school and still—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, the whole thing was this, that my father—once he gave up alcohol, he did not give up being a tyrant, you know. So finally, he said—you know, we were fighting almost daily and it was awful, you know—finally he said at some point, well, if you're going to live here beyond the age of 17, you're going to pay rent. I said, oh, yeah? If I'm going to pay rent, my understanding is renters get a choice as to where they live, so I'm out of here, you know. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did he give your brothers a hard time too?

TOM BLACKWELL: Sure did. So the whole—my ticket out of there was join the service. I joined the Navy and they had a thing then called—and which I guess they still may have—called the minority enlistment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You know, you were talking about the aptitude test in high school.

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Forgot to go back to that.

TOM BLACKWELL: So I did pretty well at math and English and various things. They tested artistic ability and they said you're off the charts. We have no—we can't measure this. It's like completely beyond our—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you recall that that was something that reinforced a feeling you already had?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, but I had not yet decided that. My big decision was getting out of the miserable home life. That was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So how did you decide what service to join?

TOM BLACKWELL: My father talked a lot about the navy. Of course, he was in the merchant marines. And then I think later, he was in the navy or something because somehow—I don't know why I would pick the navy especially, but I thought well, that could be good; you get to travel around, go other places, you know.

But I had no interest in the navy, per se. But I had some—really, I was so naïve. You know, I had some idea that with artistic ability that I had, I thought maybe I could do recruiting posters—[laughs]—or something like that.

And so I had not graduated high school. So my dad accompanied me when we went to the recruiting office and they—

JUDITH RICHARDS: He was supportive of this idea?

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh yeah, he wanted me out of there as well as I did. One less mouth to feed and one less person to give him any resistance, you know? So yeah, he wanted me out. And I'll never forget this—so they gave me a—what they called a GED—a General Educational Development Test—and the guy, the recruiter said wow, your son has done very well on this. My dad said, you mean he's smart?! And the recruiter said, yeah, he's testing at a sophomore college level here. Big surprise to my dad who thought I was just a stupid malingerer or something—problem kid, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you went into the navy?

TOM BLACKWELL: I sure did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was your experience in the navy?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I was a minority enlisted so it was like 3 years and about seven months. In the first few months, I gained about 30 pounds of weight. I was under—they almost didn't take me, I was underweight apparently, we didn't get enough to eat, you know, and so I gained—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where were you based at first, those first few months?

TOM BLACKWELL: San Diego and then later Long Beach. And then I was in Japan; I was stationed. I was in a—what in the navy they called them the CTs which was communications technicians. Our job was basically spying on the Russians and the Chinese at that point. It was all Morse code and they picked people with particular skills to do this and it turned out I was an ace at Morse code and so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So what was—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well the job was just basically nothing—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But did you enjoy the freedom?

TOM BLACKWELL: Actually I enjoyed it, I enjoyed the freedom, I enjoyed a great deal getting away from home and I enjoyed the job in a way. I enjoyed the fact that I had a lot of skill at it and that I was good at something and people could recognize that I was good at something, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you doing any art while you were in the navy?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, I did a lot of art, what I would do, my big thing was I would supplement my meager—and I do mean meager—income, by doing little pencil sketches of the other guys would have their girlfriends at home and have little wallet sized pictures and I'd copy it. So I mean, you know in a way, I was doing Photorealism then.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you'd do these sketches and it became known that you were the person to go to.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, I did them, and I could get a good likeness, you know. So I supplemented my navy income with doing portraits of these—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said you were in San Diego, Long Beach and Japan?

TOM BLACKWELL: Then Japan for two years or so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you see e anything interesting at that time in Japan that related to art?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, there was and it was this amazing thing. I mean, Japan, aside from my job and everything—and of course the usual sort of thing that sailors do on leave with their liberty which is go out and drink a lot and try to have as much sex as they possibly can—that is what I did you know; we all did. [Laughs.] Japan, and around Tokyo, it was a fairly cultural place in a way and I was very interested in lots of things. I mean, jazz was very big, American jazz and classical music and music and various things.

And then there was a—I'd heard about some big art exhibit that was coming to—an international show that was

coming to I guess their national gallery there in Tokyo and I thought, I'm going to take a train up to Tokyo and see this thing you know. It was supposed to be, I don't know 50 or 20 different countries, and see all this art from all over the world. Contemporary—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have a buddy who wanted to go with you?

TOM BLACKWELL: I had some friends and we talked about books and various things but my real focus was on art so I went to the show. I was blown away. Larry Rivers, Jasper Johns—all the Abstract Expressionists—[James] Rosenquist, [Robert] Rauschenberg.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Pop artists. [Willem] de Kooning and [Jackson] Pollock?

TOM BLACKWELL: de Kooning and Pollock.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it was really a contemporary American art show.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, yes, well it just—whew!

JUDITH RICHARDS: Before that happened, either in the navy, or when you were living in near Yosemite, did you in fact get to see the Old Masters through reproduction or through museum visits?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, but what I did—oddly enough, in the Yosemite at that time there was a small museum. It was mostly devoted to kind of semi-historical things like the early photographs of Yosemite and various things. At one point, they had a show of a great landscape painter, Thomas Moran, who was part of the Hudson River School, who later traveled out there and did some Yosemite paintings and drawings, and I saw him.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you saw that exhibition in Tokyo then, did that affect you?

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, totally.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the effect? Do you remember what you were thinking? Did you immediately start working in a different way or decide that you were going to take a different direction after the navy?

TOM BLACKWELL: That was it, yeah, for sure.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember how long it was after you saw that show that you got out of the navy?

TOM BLACKWELL: Probably a year and a half or two years.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Long time.

TOM BLACKWELL: Something like that. But I was—in my off time there in the navy I had a little house that I rented. I say little—a Japanese house is probably not too much bigger than this room and that room. And I made a little studio there and I started doing some pastels and trying to work and, you know, thinking very seriously about—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you think at that time, when I get out of the navy, I'm going to go to art school?

TOM BLACKWELL: I did, but then, here we go—one more. This is a beautiful thing. I mean, while I was in the navy, the idea was that when I got out I thought I'd go to college, which of course, to my parents, seemed totally—this is beyond the pale to them. I mean, I talked to my mother one time about going to college and she said, "Oh, well, we can't afford anything like that, you know." It's just sort of a total—this is for fancy people, this is way above your station in life. That was the message that I was getting.

But I had this idea, so I sent home money every month that they were supposed to save for me so I'd have a little money when I got discharged. Turned out they spent the money. These were the parents from hell.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You couldn't have saved it on your own, put it in your own account?

TOM BLACKWELL: I could have I guess, but I didn't think about it. At that point, I guess I still had some residual trust that you want to, you know, your parents—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Being a good son.

TOM BLACKWELL: Sure, so I'd send the money home. And also during this period of time, see this was a time, after the Korean War, before the Vietnam conflict, they passed a bill somewhere in there, rescinding the GI Bill of rights for people who had actually not served in combat in Korea. So I fell into that so I didn't get the GI Bill.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now you were born in '38 so '58—so it was after—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah so about the time I was ready to be discharged I learned about this, that I didn't have any GI Bill benefits. And I thought, well I'll get my savings, and then I found out my dear old folks had squandered the money and too bad, you know. So no college, no nothing, you know.

So I was stationed—by then, I was in Long Beach, California, and I'd heard or read about some place on the California coast, south of Long Beach, south of L.A. called Laguna Beach, and reportedly it was an artist colony, whatever that was. So I thought well, I'll check that out too, we'll see.

So I took a bus down to Laguna Beach and I was not in my navy uniform so I was dressed like a normal person and walked around and I saw this place that said, Contemporary Art, and it was a sign and it was made like a mosaic sort of stylized letters so I said, that looks sort of interesting, let's check that out, so I went in. Sure enough it was contemporary art so I met the people in there and struck up a friendship with and started going down there every chance I got.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What gallery was it? Do you remember?

TOM BLACKWELL: It was just called Contemporary Art—that was the whole thing. Anyway, upon my discharge which came shortly after that, I moved to Laguna Beach and started doing—I couldn't, I didn't know how to paint then, but I was pretty good at drawing so I was sort of doing a lot of drawings. And people liked me a lot and I think basically people just thought, well, here is a talented young guy; let's maybe give him some work or something and whatever. So that was the beginning of the whole thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel, you know, I need to learn some techniques?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, well the whole place was full of artists so I would just apprentice myself to anybody, you know. Sweep up or stretch canvas or do anything just to learn kind of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who specifically, what specifically did you learn?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, you know the thing is, Laguna Beach was, I mean there were artists all right, I mean there were a lot of skilled crafts people, but not really what we would consider serious artists. You could learn a lot of the craft of painting without really encountering any of the larger ideas that might be associated with that, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel that wasn't what you wanted to—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I thought at the very least I could learn how to do it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you do that?

TOM BLACKWELL: By just doing it, just by doing it and doing it and doing it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you get out books from the library?

TOM BLACKWELL: Absolutely. I combed the library. I haunted museums in Los Angeles, I just—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You got a car or you took the bus?

TOM BLACKWELL: At that point, I think I'd probably—going back, I probably had a car or at least knew people who had a car or something.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you went to Los Angeles to museums?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, a lot, yeah, and galleries. There were contemporary galleries in Los Angeles and La Cienega [Blvd]which I would go to. I saw an early Warhol exhibit there. I saw a lot of—

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JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Tom Blackwell at Lou [Louis] Meisel Gallery in New York City on Prince Street on November 11, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This disc takes the place of disc number two, which was corrupt, that was recorded on September 22, 2009, in Andes, New York. That fits between disc one and disc three that were also recorded that day. So we're going to start where we left off at the end of disc one now, Tom, and that's when you were just coming to Laguna Beach.

MR. BLACKWELL: Okay, I had been discharged from the Navy. I'd heard about this place. I was stationed in Long

Beach before my discharge. I'd heard about this place called Laguna Beach, which was—I don't know what that is.

JUDITH RICHARDS: All right, we'll forget that noise.

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay, well anyway, so I'd heard that this place had a lot of artists living there. It was a so-called art colony, whatever that was. It sounded like a leper colony to me.

But in any case, I took a bus down there and met some people and I met a bunch of artists and ran into a fellow who ran a contemporary art gallery in Laguna called Contemporary Art. So after discharge, I moved there and began, you know, working and they had a lot of—they were doing—the artists would hire models and we'd do a lot of life drawing.

I was a pretty precocious draftsman. I was pretty good at drawing but had never really painted at that time. So I was sort of apprenticing myself to various artists there. The thing about the artists in Laguna, they were not what one would call serious artists. A lot of them were good craftspeople. They had a firm grasp of the craft of painting but it was a pretty commercial sort of place, you know.

However, it was cheap, it was on the beach and I could get work and people were encouraging and supporting of me in that way. So I stayed there on and off for quite a few years, I think six or seven years. Early on, I had an opportunity to meet this fellow, Hal Ashby, who was a major American film director who had a weekend place in Laguna. I met him through his wife, Mickey, or Malloy was her real name.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Malloy?

TOM BLACKWELL: M-A-L-L-O-Y, who was an artist, and through her I met Hal. Now, Hal was someone who went on to direct major motion pictures like *Going Home* with Jane Fonda and Jon Voight and he also directed the last Peter Sellers movie. This was a really big time guy who at that point was a film editor. He had not really emerged as a director.

But he was—yeah, he was like eight or nine years older than me but saw a lot of promise and we became very good friends and he was a kind of mentor of me artistically or at least not as an artist but as someone who could kind of refine my ideas about how to think about aesthetic issues.

Now, the thing is later on in life I became known as a Photorealist and Photorealism was influenced by photography. In my case, I really think I was influenced by cinematography, which makes me a little different than a lot of people in that regard, and recently there was a book published about Hal's life.

He had unfortunately died young and it talks in the book about the early days in Laguna and mentions me and some of the things we did together and so on, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember the title of that book?

TOM BLACKWELL: It's called *Being Hal Ashby: Life of a Hollywood Rebel* was the name of the book.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At what point did you start going to Los Angeles to look at galleries and museums?

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, probably '61 or '62.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you go by yourself or with Hal or other artists?

TOM BLACKWELL: Sometimes I'd go by myself, sometimes with other people, but—and you know there was a fairly active, somewhat sophisticated art scene in L.A. at that time, nothing like New York of course. It was still provincial compared to New York. But they had aspirations and you could see really first-rate people in shows there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You had a show in 1961 there.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes, I did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Parsons Gallery, Roy Parsons.

TOM BLACKWELL: A small gallery on Sunset. Yeah, it was my first show.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you get that show and what did you show?

TOM BLACKWELL: I showed drawings and I got the show through a mutual friend that I met through Hal who ran

a gallery there whose name was Roy Parsons and so I got a show and also a job offer to run the gallery. So it was a kind of a twofer for me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you move to Los Angeles to do that?

TOM BLACKWELL: For a while, yes. So I was sort of back and forth. I was living in L.A. for a year or so and then back to Laguna. Laguna was my sort of comfort zone, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said you showed drawings. What were they drawings of?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, they were—at that time the drawings were—I would describe them as Surrealist influenced sort of biomorphic things, having a lot with figures, some figures, a lot of kind of plant/sexual sort of referenced imagery, you know.

An early influence at that point would be the sort of Russian Surrealist [Pavel] Tchelitchew who showed a great painting in the Museum of Modern Art called *Hide and Seek* [1940-42], which was later destroyed.

That was a huge influence on me and also [Rene] Magritte had a big, big play in my life. I think I was struggling with the whole issue of realism versus abstraction and sort of trying to see some way to reconcile these two opposing, or seemingly opposing, impulses in myself, and it seemed like these guys had a way of approaching it which could kind of address that issue.

So I was greatly influenced by them and then a few years later, of course, Rauschenberg I think had a show in L.A. which I saw which made a huge impression on me. So the pop artists, never Warhol particularly, but Rauschenberg and Jim Rosenquist were very big in my development I think.

Although, Warhol had a great show there which consisted of I think the big Andy Warhol blowups of Elvis in a cowboy outfit with a gun and the whole gallery was filled with these sort of helium metallic pillows and it was just a really kind of—I liked the wildness of it.

I mean, I was a wild young man at that point and very much taken with all that sort of thing, you know. At some point I screwed up my courage and thought, well you know, if I have to go to New York, this Laguna is a lot wonderful and L.A. is sort of fun. But the real action is New York. So I went to New York and it was a disaster. I almost starved to death.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Tell me about that.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I rented—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And in what year was that? Do you recall?

TOM BLACKWELL: I would say '63 or '64 or somewhere in there. I had a small—I mean, basically I was renting a small room midtown and I ran out of money and they locked up the room and all my belongings were locked in and I spent a short period of time homeless and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you get out there by bus?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you know which galleries to approach?

TOM BLACKWELL: I didn't know. All I knew was what I read in the art magazines, which that was there was a—there was something called the 10th Street galleries downtown. So I thought, well I'm going to go look at those guys because I knew the Abstract Expressionists were showing there and I read about the Cedar Bar.

I thought, well, this is a good place. I can meet people. Of course I met nobody and nobody wanted to know me or anything, you know. So it was a pretty rough—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you brought paintings or drawings?

TOM BLACKWELL: I brought drawings. I couldn't transport any paintings. I was a penniless—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you never ended up showing those drawings to any gallery dealer?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, not really. Mostly what I did was try and survive.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long did you spend in New York?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think several months. I managed finally to get a kind of survival job in some restaurant, bussing tables or something, and then I could see that this was a dead end and I had to get out and I figured that at some point I would come back to New York better prepared, you know.

So I left and went back to Laguna and still no money or anything and by this time, people in Laguna—when I had first arrived there, everyone saw me as this really promising young artist.

By now, a few years had gone by and maybe my promise had faded a bit, you know, and so it wasn't so easy. So I was, again, unemployed, looking for work and couldn't find a job and I ran into a fellow that I knew, another artist, a young guy my age who was really a commercial artist.

I mean, he did stuff. He had a contract with a man in Los Angeles who was kind of a broker for hotel art. I mean, a hotel would—they'd build a new hotel and need 500 paintings, two for each room sort of thing.

So he would buy paintings literally by the hundreds, you know. But they all had to sort of match and you had color swatches you had to sort of match the colors and all that, you know.

So anyway, I ran into Ken. He said, "You're stupid. You don't have to get a job." He said, "Why don't you throw in with me. We'll make a lot of money, you know." So I did and he was doing these really—just junk. I mean, it was like still lives, you know, and what we did, it was a funny story.

We would take a sheet of four by eight Masonite, paint it black with a roller and then kind of with a pencil rule off either 8 by 10 or 16 by 20 inch rectangles and each one would be a painting and we would cut out stencil shapes, like a pear, a pear shape, an orange or an apple or something, and we'd just put the stencil on and spray it whatever the basic color was. If it was an apple, it got red. If it was a pear, it got yellow and so forth.

And then when they'd dry, we'd go and oil paint, round off the forms and throw a little cast shadow on the right and highlights on the left and then come along and whack in some dew drops to make the fruit look fresh.

It was sheer trash. I mean, but at that point, I mean—and I had—at first I thought I can't do this. I was struggling over these things and Ken said, "What are you doing man? You're getting aesthetic. You're only getting five bucks a piece, like get to work, you know, so."

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long did you do that?

TOM BLACKWELL: I did that for a couple of years. I mean, basically that became my day job. Excuse me; I have a lump in my throat. The odd thing about it was that this was not making art. This was sheer, you know, hack work. But it was great—it would be like a musician doing scales or something. I mean, I got so I could render forms like nobody's business.

I mean, it proved later in my Photorealist career to be very, very useful because just developed those modeling skills with paint. It was a tremendous kind of mindless—not an aesthetic sort of thing, but a kind of mechanical. How do you depict a form?

JUDITH RICHARDS: As you were doing that, you said a day job, you were actually—

TOM BLACKWELL: I was doing other work, of course, my other stuff.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How was that developing from what you said you showed in 1961, to the mid-'60s?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, it was developing. I think I—and maybe on a later tape—I showed you a book that came out in '64 I believe. It was called *Psychedelic Art* [Robert E. L. Masters and Jean Houston. New York: Grove Press, 1968] which had some of those paintings.

By this time, I had developed a sort of style, I guess you could call it, a kind of—it had basically—it was the same sort of direction that I had done in the drawings but by this time I was painting and this being the '60s, I was also taking a lot of drugs. So you know, the colors were—color was extremely important.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You talked about when you went to a museum in Los Angeles.

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Am I skipping ahead or when was that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, it's about the same period of time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you would go regularly to a museum in L.A. You were living there at that point, in Los

Angeles?

TOM BLACKWELL: Both, both. I was either—I spent months at a time in L.A. Then I'd go back to Laguna. So I was sort of back and forth and this one particular time, I'll never forget it. It was a Sunday afternoon and I went to the museum with—I had gotten married by that time, my first.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who did you marry?

TOM BLACKWELL: A woman named Rosalie [ph] Cohen, C-O-H-E-N. Unfortunately, she died in the meantime. But anyway, we went to the museum and I believe that I had taken some peyote or something at that time. Rosalie went off somewhere.

She wasn't as entranced with—I was sitting in the large galleries where there were Old Master paintings. I think there were some—you know, there were some [Peter Paul] Rubens, some Rembrandts [van Rijn], a Caravaggio, various people, and I was just sitting there and looking at these paintings.

And of course, obviously I was in an altered state. But the interesting thing was that the more I looked at the paintings, it was like something happened. I had a kind of revelation. I said, "I know how they do this with color," and I was like looking at the paintings I could sort of deconstruct the paintings in my mind. I could see how they had built up the color layer by layer by layer, and it was a great revelation to me.

And I thought, okay, I get it now. I'm going to apply this. So I went home and I started making what I called glazing charts, which amounted to taking some board or something and painting. I'd go through the whole color spectrum from yellow to orange, to orange to red, violet, violet to blue to green, back out, all the way through, and paint vertical stripes.

Then when that would dry, I would run horizontal transparent glazing colors across all of these and see what would happen to each one as it was glazed.

Then I started overlapping them and seeing what happens if you put this over this over this and two or three and getting very, very rich layerings of color, the idea being the way I saw it, or at least the way I constructed it in my mind, was that ambient light within the room or wherever goes onto the surface of a painting, goes and strikes the ground, whatever the ground color is, is refracted back and if it goes through all of these transparency colors, it's altered by each subsequent color until you get a very rich combination of these things.

It's much like taking a musical note and building a complex chord around that note, that sort of idea, and I thought, okay, here's a great way to really approach this color. Now, if I take these transparent layerings of color and then if I try and mix an equivalent color with opaque paint and put the two together, what happens. So I mean, all by myself, without any instruction, I was sort of working out a way to approach color which was completely my own thing I think.

And this was totally flying in the face of any kind of contemporary painting that I could see that was going on at all. This was purely my own thing. But I felt, being an autodidact as I was, I felt, well, okay, so this is not contemporary.

But I'm getting it from the masters. These guys knew how to do it, you know. I'm just basically recycling what they already did and I don't have to go back in that culture or that time to really understand it.

I'm just approaching it in my own very personal way. So and that's really my whole approach to color in painting, very different than many people.

So I continued on with these sort of color experiments then too, like okay mixing an opaque equivalent color and then going variations on it, like graying the color out in various ways or manipulating it by—manipulating the proportions of complementary colors together to get various grays and experimenting with sort of painting into these very rich glazed areas with other colors.

And basically what I try and do in the painting and what I was attempting to do is to get a kind of optical mix, to not mix the color so much as to put colors down in a way that the eye would blend them from a certain distance.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did that affect that newfound knowledge? How did you apply that to your paintings at that point and how did it change your subject matter?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not the subject matter, just that my color—I mean, I went from somebody who was a pretty good draftsman but had no particular distinction as a colorist to somebody who could really start to use color in a very personal and interesting way. I started to get good, in other words.

JUDITH RICHARDS: We talked about a show at Roy Parsons in '61 and then there was Rex Evans Gallery in L.A.

also.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —in '62, and then there was also a show at Orange Coast College Museum in '64. That's quite a nice series of shows. Was it after that Orange Coast show that you went to New York?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think the Orange Coast show was probably between the first and the second trip to New York, somewhere in there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: After you had that experience with color and were applying that to your work, how did your work evolve?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think gradually what started to happen was that I got more away from the kind of surrealist thing and much more into a contemporary use of imagery, much more influenced by Rauschenberg and Johns and Jim Rosenquist, started trying to figure out ways to integrate what was then a growing or at least hopefully a growing mastery of paint and trying to integrate it some way into the modern world, the world in which I lived, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were there artists whom you were friends with in L.A. at that point?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not really in L.A. no. I met one artist who became quite prominent later in L.A., Paul Sarkisian, who was living there. But I never got to know him very well. I knew him but only in a very vague way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your friends were not artists?

TOM BLACKWELL: Mostly, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or were they what you would you call commercial artists, in Laguna?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah and some of them were—they were not all commercial artists. There were some people who were aspiring but it was a—you just couldn't take the place too seriously.

I mean, there were people—it was truly provincial and it was very insular and people there were supportive of each other in a way. So people who had aspirations didn't have—they didn't have my aspirations. They had local aspirations. I had big aspirations and big ideas, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where do you think that ambition came from?

TOM BLACKWELL: I don't want to give a glib answer and say fear, terror, but probably some of that, but a combination of things. I mean, I remember as a very young kid going to a [Vincent] van Gogh exhibition at the Art Institute in Chicago and they didn't have video at that time.

They had a film presentation. They talked about van Gogh's ambitions to—he went out and did all the drawings of the peasants and all and he had these ambitions to somehow change the world or make the world a better place or something.

I think this idea that somehow through art one could really affect things in the world, this was—it seems naïve now but at that point it seemed like something—a very, very appealing idea.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At what point did you decide that you really needed to leave Southern California and go east?

TOM BLACKWELL: I had outgrown the place, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was never in your mind that you would stay in Los Angeles?

TOM BLACKWELL: Had I stayed, I would have been basically capitulating or admitting failure. I thought you're either going to go out there and test yourself against the real people of your generation and find your way or you're going to fail doing it. But you're not going to stay here and give up. I mean, that's—

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were in L.A., you mentioned that you looked at art magazines. Were there certain artists working in New York whom you hoped to meet or to be able to look at their work, who were doing work that really intrigued you?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes, many, but in particular I would say the biggest one is Rosenquist, James Rosenquist, and I think, one, I loved the way he was able to in such a bold and unexpected way combine imagery and also I liked

the fact that basically he was a kind of street guy too.

He came up hard doing billboards and stuff, no ivory tower for him. So I thought, well, this is my kind of a person.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Thinking about his early work where he attached actual objects to the canvas, was that something that you ever did or wanted—

TOM BLACKWELL: I did. At some point I did that. I don't think they were very successful but I certainly did that. I mean, I was very taken up with that sort of idea and the Rauschenberg combines were really, really—I thought that combine with a goat, I thought, and the tire, forget the name of it, the famous Rauschenberg—you know the one I mean.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: Anyway, I just thought that was a life-changing piece of work. I was totally enthralled to their —

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have friends who felt the same way as you did, whom you could share this excitement with or was your wife equally excited?

TOM BLACKWELL: She was not. She wanted me to succeed but I don't think she really understood what the issues were for me and we kind of split up around that time anyways.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the late '60s you mean?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At what point did you leave California and go to New York?

TOM BLACKWELL: I believe it was late '67 or somewhere in there, but I did not go directly to New York. I moved to Woodstock because I had a friend—actually a Laguna friend who had moved there and thought there would be a good place.

The thing about Woodstock was that this was of course before the festival. Woodstock was just a place which was close enough to New York without being in New York and after my first experience, I was a bit cautious.

The difference was by now I had a viable trade. I mean, I could paint these commercial paintings. So I knew that one way or another I could make a living, not a good living, but a, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's the name of that person you said recommended Woodstock to you?

TOM BLACKWELL: A sculptor friend of mine named Dion Wright, D-I-O-N, Wright, W-R-I-G-H-T, very good metal sculptor, good friend.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you just moved everything from—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, it wasn't—everything didn't amount to a lot at that point.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And did Dion have a place in Woodstock where you could live?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, it was sort of a—this being the '60s, it was a kind of group or sort of communal kind of place, you know, a lot of people just sort of coming in and out.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You shared in the rent and you had a space to work in there as well to paint?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, yeah, and shortly after that I met a girl, young woman, pardon me, and we started living together and we rented a place and then I worked there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that's your wife Linda?

TOM BLACKWELL: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, a different person.

TOM BLACKWELL: Different, yeah. I was very active in those days. Anyway.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was she an artist, too?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, she was—she had literary ambitions I think.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And as soon as you got to Woodstock, did you start going to Manhattan to museums and galleries on a regular basis?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes, yes, and I was in a show. I don't even know if it's listed, some gallery that was kind of midtown. It was a group show.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the '60s, I see a show that was in East Hampton and a show at the Riverside Museum called *Psychedelic Art*. But that was in '66 before you moved here. Then the Whitney [Museum of American Art] show in '69.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, that came a bit later, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let's see, no, I don't see anything in late '60s.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, there's an entry missing. There was a show. It was sort of this—it was part of this sort of collective psychedelic art thing that I was involved with and there was a show at a—I can't now remember the name of the gallery. It was midtown.

JUDITH RICHARDS: There was a gallery named Midtown.

TOM BLACKWELL: I don't think that was the name of it. But yeah, there is a gallery named Midtown.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you not only went into the city to see work, but you actually had work included in a group exhibition.

TOM BLACKWELL: Correct.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It sounds like that happened not too long after you got there, so did you start feeling like this was going to work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, what I felt—I felt somewhat encouraged. I mean, at least I wasn't devastated the way I was the first time, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you at some point show your work to galleries in New York?

TOM BLACKWELL: At that point, I didn't. I didn't think I was quite ready. I thought I was on the way to being ready but not really quite there yet and I felt like I needed more time to develop.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how did you end up having work included in that Whitney show, *Human Concern / Personal Torment*? That was 1969.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, by then what was happening, in '69, I had met Linda and we were early pioneers in SoHo.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, okay, so I jumped ahead. When did you meet Linda? Up in Woodstock?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, in New York. I had moved to New York. I think it was '68. We got married in 1969.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you moved to New York in '68 by yourself?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did you live?

TOM BLACKWELL: This is the wild part. Well, the thing is that—see, in Woodstock I was involved in a kind of collective art group called Group 212 which had a lot of kind of experimental artists and dancers, media people, I mean, like Meredith Monk was there and all these people were there. Anyway, but I had a bad experience. I was busted for marijuana.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Up in Woodstock?

TOM BLACKWELL: In Woodstock and it was a horrible experience and so I had to get out of there after that was over. The whole thing was just—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What do you mean you had to get out?

TOM BLACKWELL: I mean, psychologically I had to get out. I had been, you know, exposed as a pot smoking hippie artist and so it was no longer a viable place for me. So I left New York and I had a couple—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You left Woodstock?

TOM BLACKWELL: I left Woodstock and two of the people that I knew from this Group 212, one guy was named Lindsey Decker, who was a sculptor who also taught at Rutgers and the other guy was a man named Franklin Drake.

Now, both of them in that summer of '69 I guess or '68, I forget which year, they'd had this deal to buy these old railroad barges. I mean, they were used by the railroad to haul coal and stuff up the Hudson and I guess they no longer needed these things.

So they sold them at public auction. Well, the thing was that Lindsey and Frank wanted to use them as studio space in Lower Manhattan. They were huge. I mean, they were 50 feet wide by 100 feet long and they were like floating lofts, only enormous, you know.

So Lindsey bought one at this auction for $500 and the other one Franklin bought for $5. The $5 barge had a leak, so it had to be pumped out with a sunk pump. You had to keep the thing going. So I had no way to live in New York.

So we made a deal that I would be the barge tender. So these barges were hauled down, moored right near the Brooklyn Bridge and I was the barge—

JUDITH RICHARDS: On the Manhattan side?

TOM BLACKWELL: On the Manhattan side. So I was the barge tender and the guy kept pumping out the one that was slowly taking on water. But it was studio space. It had a little cabin in the thing. So I thought, well—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You lived there too?

TOM BLACKWELL: I lived there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So there was a little cabin where the person who might have directed the boat would sleep.

TOM BLACKWELL: Would be, right. It was tiny. The cabin was like the size of this room probably and so I'd—you had like bunk beds and a little potbelly stove.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long did you live there?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not long because it started getting cold.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So some summer months?

TOM BLACKWELL: Several months, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the warmer weather.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. It was pretty crude but it had mucho space, great studio space, primitive living.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Once you left, what happened to that barge?

TOM BLACKWELL: What I heard was one of them was towed over to the Jersey shore and the other one I think eventually sank. I'm not sure.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did that leave you in finding a New York studio?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I found a—I found a mutual friend through a former girlfriend I'd met in Woodstock who was an aspiring writer who had a small place on the Lower East Side, needed a roommate, somebody to split the rent. So that became—so I split the rent with this guy. Peter Lefcourt was his name.

But Peter Lefcourt has since become a kind of Hollywood—he's a producer. He does a lot of TV things. I guess Peter's successful. I haven't seen him in years. But he wrote a few books, so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How was your work developing at that point, in '68, '69? You hadn't painted motorcycle imagery yet.

TOM BLACKWELL: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the imagery that you were painting then?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think it was basically sort of very derivative popish sort of imagery with a very heavy Rosenquist, Rauschenberg kind of influence.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Going back to that question—how did you end up in the show at the Whitney?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, what happened was through this fellow Peter, I met Linda, and she could see that I was a mess and basically had a lot of talent or potential or something and we fell in love, got married, and her mother died.

She had a small amount of money from her mother's estate, a very small amount of money. But we bought one on the first lofts in SoHo on Prince Street.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And this was in 1969?

TOM BLACKWELL: '69.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the address there on Prince Street?

TOM BLACKWELL: 131, it's right next door. In fact, we may in fact—if we've crossed over the building line, we may be in the very building. I'm not sure.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you moved into that new apartment, got married.

TOM BLACKWELL: It wasn't a new apartment. It was an un-renovated loft and we knew a few people in the theater who were sort of set builders and stuff and they did the basic construction. So we went to Canal Street, bought a bunch of old junky used stoves and whatnot, made a loft out of it, just started living in SoHo, one of the early people in SoHo.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What other artists did you know who were living there that early?

TOM BLACKWELL: At that time, I met some people but not until we were there. I didn't know anybody before. We knew Lawrence Weiner a little bit. Let's see, who else. Well, shortly thereafter I met—we met neighborhood people, like I met Chuck Close. I met Jack Beal. I met Lee Bontecou.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you particularly close to any of them?

TOM BLACKWELL: I was very close to Chuck for years, yeah. We were good friends. We're not that close anymore. But in the early days, I used to see him a lot.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the thought process that brought you to painting that first motorcycle?

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, the first motorcycle—well, let's back up a little bit back to the Whitney show.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: *Human Concern* show, of course the early days of SoHo, I mean, this was a very politically radicalized area here. I mean, there were all sorts of kind of politically active things going on, a lot of antiwar things and stuff of that nature.

So I did a show. Oh, I know. In the building was a very famous but also totally crazy jazz musician by the name of Ornette Coleman. You know who he is?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, he's a genius but he's a madman and so in any case, not to name drop, but I mean I got to know Ornette pretty well at that point.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did he—

TOM BLACKWELL: Actually I guess the reason I bring it up is because I did this painting for the—which got into that Whitney show—which was a very, very radical painting. It was by this—it was a shaped painting.

It was not a rectangle. It had amorphous shapes which I had cut up and then painted and it depicted, among other things, a—well, it had an astronaut's mask and a whole big thing and it had a kind of stop-action picture of the famous execution in Saigon of—who is it—Col. Chu, who executed the guy with a pistol.

So it had that and some other—it was a totally wild radical painting which—well, it's a funny story because Mac Doty, who was the—everybody called him Mac. His real name was Robert Doty.

He was the curator of that show and many other shows at the Whitney. Anyway, he came to see—he came to the studio to see the show and I mean, to see my work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who do you think told him about your work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Nobody. I think—you know, they put—somehow word got out that they were considering—that they were going to do studio visits for the show and if you were interested, you could apply. So I did and to my amazement, he came. We had a dog by this time, a little Beagle, which Linda's daughter had fallen in love with. So Mac came in and you have to kind of set the scene.

Mac was this very tall, proper guy all done up in a dark suit with all—you know, exceedingly—an intimidating presence to me, in any case.

So he stood in front of this painting, which is this wild execution astronaut painting that I had. He didn't say a word. He just stood there for a long time. Well, this Beagle ran up to Mac and grabbed him around the leg and started having sex with his leg.

I was appalled. I mean, you can't imagine. I was like, oh my god, this dog is ruining my career, you know. So I screamed and went down and grabbed the dog by the neck, pulled him off and scared the poor dog who started urinating as I pulled him away from Mac and he left a stripe of urine across the floor. So I spent the next five minutes mopping up the mess, you know.

All this time, Mac said not a word, not a peep out of him. He didn't move. He just stood there with his arms crossed looking at the painting very seriously and then at the end of all this, he wanted to know the dimensions of the piece, which I had no idea what the dimensions were.

First of all, it was not a rectangle, an amorphous shape. I hadn't measured it, no clue as to what the size of it was. It was big though. It was a big painting. It was at least 8 feet across, you know.

P.S., I got in the show. I was in the show and as a result, I met a few people there. I met Al Held, who at the time, I mean, I knew who Al Held was and respected his work and everything. But he was somebody I would see around the neighborhood but you couldn't really approach him. He was like a real—you now, like sort of a god to me or something.

Anyway, at the opening he sort of came up and he says, "Is this your painting?" And I says, "Yes." He said, "It's good work," or something to that effect, like acknowledged that it was very strong, which made me feel like, okay, I'm beginning to chip away at this thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You're getting closer to when you first painted that motorcycle from the magazine.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes, we are. So this is SoHo in the early days. Around this time, and I mean, really I felt like although in spite of the fact that I'd got this show, I mean, this painting in that Whitney show, it was still exceedingly derivative work I thought. I think I had not really found something truly mine or a direction.

So about this time, I think I was not one of the earliest Photorealists; early, but not the earliest.

But around this time, OK Harris had opened in the old space on West Broadway and I think the first pure Photorealist show I ever saw was Ralph Goings who had a painting in that show called *Airstream Trailer* and I was grappling with the whole issue of, okay, how do you approach imagery in some way that's not a cliché, that's really a, you know, some—

[END OF TRACK AAA_blackw09_1567.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards with Tom Blackwell, November 11, 2009, on Prince Street in SoHo. I guess we'd call this the second disc two.

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay, so anyway, I was grappling with this whole issue of how to in some meaningful or original or at least personally meaningful way to do realist imagery in some way that wasn't a cliché.

So I had done a painting a few months before that was this same kind of montage approach to various snippets of imagery put together in these ways that I described à la Rauschenberg and so forth.

I did the painting and at some point I looked at it and I said, "You know, this is really ambitious but it's kind of all over the place. It's not really—it's not really going anywhere, you know."

One of the images that I had used in this painting had a section of a close-up of a highly chromed motorcycle image taken from a magazine. I looked at the painting and I said, "You know, you could get rid of everything else and just cut out that section and you have a terrific painting right there."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you know whether or not if any of the other early Photorealists were involved in painting cars or parts of cars at that point? If they were, would it have bothered you?

TOM BLACKWELL: It was not well-known at that point to know whether that was an issue or not and I mean, this is the birth of something. A lot of us didn't know what other people were doing.

Anyway, so I was still grappling with that issue. So I thought, okay, if I cut out this section of motorcycle I'll have really something—you know, it's strong, it's very graphic. But the thing is, I had no either knowledge of or interest in motorcycles or engines per se at all. I knew nothing about them.

I was just looking at it is like here is a collection of really fascinating kind of machine and yet these kind of biomorphic forms which are also chromed so that they reflect light in this way and the way they reflect the light also defines their shape.

So I thought it was a really, really interesting abstract idea and that really was the birth of the whole thing for me. But then the information from the magazine just wasn't good enough. I did several like that. But they were crude compared to later work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you show them or did you hesitate to show them because you didn't feel that they had achieved what you had in mind?

TOM BLACKWELL: I showed them because I was desperate to show them. In retrospect, I can see that they were crude.

But at the time, I mean, they had a real power and they were very—they had a kind of visceral almost kinetic power to them. So but it was much—I mean, a little bit later that I started using my own photographs and going back to the Ralph Goings' *Airstream Trailer*, I thought this guy, I don't know his work or him, but he's grappling with the same issue.

But he somehow put it together, you know? And that image, that *Airstream Trailer* was an amazing iconic image which to this day—and I saw it recently in Berlin and it holds up beautiful. Forty years later it's still a knockout.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that when you went to the show at the Coliseum?

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, yes, so these things were converging. I mean, I had through my own experimenting with painting, had arrived at a certain point and a place, you know, mostly by eliminating things that didn't work and kind of distilling it down to a core of what really worked and then seeing Ralph and thinking, boy, this guy—he really did it, you know. This is the way to go. But I had my own way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And then you—the rest is—

TOM BLACKWELL: The rest, as they say, is history.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, and that brings us to the point in time when you started the disc from the previous session. Thank you.

[END OF TRACK AAA_blackw09_1568.]

This is Judith Richards interviewing Tom Blackwell in Andes, New York, on September 22, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

So, you were talking about how you came to paint the first motorcycles, first from a magazine image, and then you decided that wasn't adequate.

TOM BLACKWELL: It wasn't adequate and I thought, you know, the thing about these motorcycles, and particularly the more customized ones, is that—and I know nothing of motorcycles or anything about engines or anything like that—but I just thought in purely plastic terms, I mean, they're amazing. The shapes, the forms and the way that a sculptured form that was chromed would reflect everything around it, and everything around it that was reflected would define the form. So I thought that was extremely rich painterly ideas.

Well, so—[coughs]—pardon me—anyway, but I thought I had to photograph my own. So we heard—Linda and I heard about this thing—something called the something or another custom rod and cycle show that was taking place at the New York Coliseum. So I thought, boy, I've got to go there. And so I took several roles of slide film,

went, and out of that one-day shoot, I got, like, three years of work, I think.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were photographing the motorcycles, were you thinking that the shot would be a painting—that you were composing it in the camera?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At that point, were you looking for a detailed image, depth, flatness—how were you dealing with the space and the background?

TOM BLACKWELL: On those first—you know, the shots I got at the rod and cycle show were basically, kind of, these machines out of any context. So there was no—they would often be in a shallow space or with a darkened background or something. So basically, you couldn't—you really weren't thinking about any kind of relationship of the object in space; it was more just the object, you know, as—and I really thought of it, then, as a kind of a highly realistic, abstract painting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you think of it as questioning the perception of reality—using the photograph and painting the photographic reality?

TOM BLACKWELL: Probably at that point, I wasn't really thinking in those terms. Later, I may have thought that, but to be honest, at that point, I was thinking just what a great source of amazing visual information and what kind of painting I could make out of it, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: After you were painting those motorcycles, you started to also paint airplanes. Why did you make that—not change, but addition?

TOM BLACKWELL: It wasn't a change. What happened was that I received some commissions to paint airplanes, so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: From whom?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, the first one came through a big aviation attorney named Stuart Speiser.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was he also a collector?

TOM BLACKWELL: He's a collector, yeah. And he put together a major collection of airplane paintings, which is now in the Smithsonian.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you meet him?

TOM BLACKWELL: Through Louis Meisel. So that was really the airplane thing; it wasn't, you know, an artistic decision, per se. It was basically—well, it was an opportunity to paint—you know, to do something very, very similar or almost the same as I had been doing, but you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said you met Speiser through Meisel? How did you meet Meisel?

TOM BLACKWELL: Meisel was courting me as a potential artist for the gallery at the time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did he know your work? Did he go to L.A. to see it?

TOM BLACKWELL: No. By then, I had been in a group show with OK Harris.

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs.] Oh yes, I wanted to ask you how you met OK Harris. In 1971, you were in a group show there.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was the first New York—

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, and the first motorcycle painting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you meet his acquaintance—Ivan Karp?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, like thousands of other artists who were living in Soho at the time, I went to the gallery with my little packet of slides and asked for him to look at them. And he did. And he liked what he saw. And then he came to the studio and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And so when started you had work in a show there, but you didn't want to join the gallery?

TOM BLACKWELL: I wanted desperately to join the gallery. We had a misunderstanding, which we both regret to this day, I'm sure, because I think I wanted to be with Ivan and he wanted me, but we just, for some silly reason, just got off on the wrong foot. And it didn't work out. And I later—it was in a group show with some OK Harris artists in a gallery on Madison Avenue called Dannenberg Gallery, and I think Louis had seen me there or possibly at OK Harris—I don't know. But anyway, he thought I was a comer, so you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that was in 1971 and then in 1972, you were in the Whitney Annual.

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did that come about? Who was the curator? The curator knew your work?

TOM BLACKWELL: I forget the curator of that show, but there was a previous Whitney show that I was in.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes—

[Cross talk.]

TOM BLACKWELL: —concerned personal torment [*Human Concern / Personal Torment*]. That was a—that was during the, kind of, Rosenquist Pop art period. I was doing these kind of anti-war paintings with various imagery culled from, you know, magazines and newspapers and stuff.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about that show, because from what I remember from the catalog, there was a lot of emotional content in that show.

TOM BLACKWELL: There was a lot. I was not reproduced—or at least, an image was not reproduced of mine in that show—in that catalog. But I had a big, very strong painting in there. About that time, I began to think they're starting to notice me now. The big thrill for me at that time was, Al Held was at the opening. He came up to me and he said, "Is that you're painting? That's pretty good. It's strong," or something like that. And I thought Al Held—wow!

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel, by that point, that you were committed to using the photograph, and that you felt that you'd found your way, that you had found something you really believed in and wanted to pursue?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At some point, perhaps after—'73, '74—you also added to window reflections?

TOM BLACKWELL: That came later. Partly, the window thing was—you know, since we're being candid, I can tell you—I was reacting a little bit to the idea that—well, I think there were several aspects to this. Partly, it was sort of the criticism of that macho imagery—all this kind of stuff, you know. There may have been a little Audrey Flack influence in there.

And I thought, well, I mean, I'm more—what do they think I am—some grease monkey who decided to start painting or something? So I thought okay, I want to do something that, if a motorcycle is some kind of a macho icon, why not do the opposite?

JUDITH RICHARDS: There were also other artists doing window displays, Photorealists.

TOM BLACKWELL: There were a few, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you know their work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, sure. Don Eddy did some and of course, Richard [Estes]. And I mean, my take on it was always somewhat different. You know, I thought of the mannequin as being kind of an idealized feminine icon. It's very divorced from reality, very much in the way that a custom motorcycle is divorced from the idea of transportation, right?

So I thought okay, let's take the idealized figure here in a display situation and put it behind plate glass, which reflects ordinary reality and this is really a complex, layered kind of thing, which I've always been very drawn to the idea of complexity. I mean, the idea of putting two kinds of realities or situations together in the same space is sort of the idea of, you know, putting two and two together and coming up with something more than four, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Not only did you have the motorcycle, but all of the reflections in the motorcycle.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, of course. And so I mean, the motorcycle itself—it was never about the object; it was

always about what the light is doing and what the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were painting the—

TOM BLACKWELL: And in fact, if you go back and look at the early painting in the psychedelic art book, I mean, it was very much that kind of thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Multiple levels of reality.

TOM BLACKWELL: Plays throughout the entire—all the work, I think.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Soon after you started painting the windows, I guess starting with this '74 painting —*Takashimaya*—you're mainly using very upscale storefronts, not just any old storefronts. Why did you choose to do that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Interesting question, because one criticism I got was that it seems to be, you know, worshipping at the altar of consumerism, which is—of course, it's really funny in my case. I hate shopping and I know nothing of fashion and care nothing about it. It happens that the upscale stores have the best window dressers and have biggest budgets for displays, so they're—and you know, they're mannequins are always the highest quality and you know, so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The window glass is clean.

TOM BLACKWELL: They have the best stuff, yeah. You know, so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it wasn't a desire to add any elitist kind of—

TOM BLACKWELL: Not at all.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I noticed a good number of the stores whose windows you chose to depict, at least those in New York, were all in the same vicinity. Why is that?

TOM BLACKWELL: That's where all the great shops are, often. I mean, why would I do some little, skuzzy boutique on the Lower East Side? I would if they had a good window and were—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you continually scouting and looking for good windows?

TOM BLACKWELL: Always, always.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel it was essential, after the years of living in California and Woodstock, to be living in SoHo when you were doing this work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Absolutely, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel there was an artist community? You weren't yet permanently affiliated with the gallery, but you were living in SoHo and you were doing work there. With whom did you became friends with and who you feel was part of your artistic world?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I knew Jack Beal, but not well. I mean, we lived on the same street about a block away. I got to know Chuck pretty well.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have conversations with him about painting? Did you exchange studio visits?

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, we had a lot of them at a certain point, but by then, I was already with the gallery. I didn't know him before I had the gallery. Personally, the artist who was living in the neighborhood at the time who really kind of was the first one who really sort of advanced my cause to anybody at all was Lowell Nesbitt, who told some people you should check this guy Blackwell, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What happened from those references? Who did you meet?

TOM BLACKWELL: That's how I got with Dannenberg on Madison Avenue.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have a sense that there was a movement—Photorealism—and that you were part of it?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not until later.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Not in the mid-'70s?

TOM BLACKWELL: I mean, you know, there was a sense, sort of largely unspoken, I think, that this idea of painting not necessarily from photographs, but—well, maybe from photographs, but you know, the idea of a return to some way to make realist painting viable again. That idea was very much in the air.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel a kinship with other realists who weren't using the photograph?

TOM BLACKWELL: Sure, except that they hated us. Other than that, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were there any of them whose work you really loved and sought out/wanted to see?

TOM BLACKWELL: I liked Al Leslie a lot. I was never crazy about Pearlstein—I didn't—and of course, Jack Beal—terrific painter.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel that you were breaking ground artistically, and did you have an explicit drive to do that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes, very much, yep. I thought, well, this is the new direction that I knew was out there somewhere, you know, though it was early.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were taking those early photographs—even into the storefronts—were you looking for a certain kind of light?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes. And let me specify what that is.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A kind of a brightness—

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay. The thing about it is—the thing about these window paintings is, there are two kinds of light: There's reflected light, which is ambient light, outside light, and then there's inside light, which is the light—[inaudible]—initially very directed. So when I photographed and looked for the windows, I was always looking for a situation in which the light is not on the side of the street, where I'm photographing, but on the opposite side, so it can be reflected. If it's on the window, then you get nothing, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What part was played by your seeing something you just thought was so exciting to paint—that there was some element that attracted you to that window—oh, I'd love to paint that, whatever it was? Or was it really the entire composition?

TOM BLACKWELL: It would be the composition. It could also be—and here, we're entering the area of subject matter, but incongruity of some sort. That always appealed to me—some kind of odd incongruity. If, you know, either something very elegant or colorful, which somehow seemed to contrast with something very gritty or, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It could be, you mean, what was in the window versus what was reflected.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A mannequin in high fashion or a construction worker, or—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, or like, one time, I painted an early Photorealist painting called, *GM Showroom* [1975] which was—all it was, was a big, kind of, a turntable with a car slowly spinning around. But it reflected this wonderful vista of Central Park with a kind of, sort of, pinkish, dusky sky in the background. So somehow, that—I mean, that's just one example, but you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have to go about asking permission from the store to take the photographs?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, although lately, I've gotten in some trouble doing it. I mean, sometimes some of the really high-end stores object because they think you're a spy working for other designers trying to steal their designs or maybe you're a thief trying to case the place or something. I was chased away from Cartier's window in Paris for that reason.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you imagine going in the next day with a jacket on and with your portfolio?

TOM BLACKWELL: It didn't matter how I was dressed; it was the idea that I was photographing their window.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, what if you showed them your work and exhibition catalogues and—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I've done that since—that sort of thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did it smooth the—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, with this store—Vuitton in Monaco—I mean, they were a little suspicious. But we had some documentation and once they realized, then it was fine, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who you were and your motivations.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At some point, did you decide, early on, not to have people in the paintings and then, gradually, put them in?

TOM BLACKWELL: I don't think that was a conscious decision—no people. I think I was very interested in the idea of contrasting the idealized mannequin people with the real people, you know. And in fact, this painting is sort of an anomaly in that sense, because it has a real person and the reflection of the person, both, you know, which is not the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —We're talking about a painting in the studio now.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, which is not the usual practice for me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: We'll get back to this painting, for sure, when we get up to 2009.

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay.

JUDITH RICHARDS: During the time you were in New York, were you always living on Prince Street and you always had your studio in your loft there?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes, in the loft, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you see yourself as part of a tradition of realism, although you were breaking new ground?

TOM BLACKWELL: What, great realist painters?

JUDITH RICHARDS: —or 20th-century realism, as in Magritte or earlier, because you also had the social content, [Gustave] Courbet or others, or genre painting—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, yes, I did and do see myself in a long and wonderful tradition of Realist painting, even though I'm very much a contemporary artist and very interested in the modern world. But yeah, and you mentioned Magritte—of course, in my earlier years, Magritte was a big influence, although later, at this point, I mean, I'm not such an admirer of Magritte now as I was as a younger—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You talked about the juxtaposition of the two different realities.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, that part—right, that part, yes. That was clearly a—that was an influential idea. But I would say of the period in which I was influenced by Magritte and the Surrealists, the one who made the biggest impression on me was probably—was it Tchelitchew who had the great painting in the modern—

[Cross talk.]

TOM BLACKWELL: No, it was in the modern and it burned in the fire in 1948—the *Hide and Seek*, which did those wonderful things with that tree and the negative space between the branches and the leaves that he would put—he'd make figures and faces in.

So it was very much that idea of—very similar to what we said about, you know, the two realities coexisting in the same space, although that painting—I mean, it was a great painting to have of that type. It was a great shame that that burned. But the painters, I mean, that really get me excited—and they're all in the past, or practically all of them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Can you mention some of them?

TOM BLACKWELL: Caravaggio. Americans—Winslow Homer—great, great painter. Hopper never really did it for me, I have to say, you know. I mean, I admire what he did, but he didn't really—just didn't get my juices flowing, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Maybe one of your first storefronts was in Keene, New Hampshire, and I think that connects with your spending some time there?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, we lived there for 16 years, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What happened? You lived in New York and then you left New York, or you had both places?

TOM BLACKWELL: We had both places, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you end up deciding to move? Was it a summer house? Why Keene, New Hampshire?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I think we knew New Hampshire from years before. Linda's daughter's father had a house there, and so her daughter—my stepdaughter—would spend time there. And we visited often, got to know New Hampshire, loved it. And I was getting fed up with being in SoHo, and I said if I ever really make it as an artist, we're going to buy a country house, you know. So we did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When was that, do you recall?

TOM BLACKWELL: Let's see—it must have been '73 or '74, I think.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that didn't take you long.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I started making money. It'll do that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You went up there over the summer, and other times, too?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes, I did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But the focus of your work, the subject matter, remained in the city?

TOM BLACKWELL: Very much. Except that it happened to be in Keene, which is a town close by—[coughs]—excuse me—I saw a great image in the window and said hey, why not, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that your first storefront?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, the first one was a painting called '*56 Harley* [1972] which is at the modern [MoMA]. It was actually a motorcycle parked in front of an auto supply store. So it combined the motorcycle imagery and the reflective window thing. [Coughs.] Pardon me. So that was sort of a transitional painting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Soon after that, though, you did paintings that were just the windows. but while you were painting the windows, you were still painting motorcycles from time to time.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why did you do both? Was it an issue? Was it natural to you, to do that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. I mean, the thing about it is that it's sort of your question presupposes—and now I'm going to be argumentative—an involvement in subject matter as subject that I don't really have. My involvement is, more or less, purely a visual thing, not I feel like a motorcycle or, you know. [Coughs.] Pardon me. So having a trove of slide material, I'd look through and I'd say okay, let's look at this and this and this; which one of these do I feel like painting, you know? [Coughs.] Pardon me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What part does drawing play in the development of a work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, drawing—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Drawing, as a separate work of art.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I love drawing. I haven't done as much of it recently as I used to do—a lot, you know. In Photorealist painting, or in my Photorealist painting, the drawing—[coughs]—is a kind of blueprint, which is—basically, it's all lines. There's no attempt at modeling or shading or anything. It's just—and of course, one of the criticisms has been, well, you guys work from slides and so on.

You know, but I mean, there are all different ways to work from a slide. My particular way is to delineate every single shape, form, the way—you know, a projected image, the way it breaks over a form, whether it's a hard edge, a soft edge, whether it's one thing bleeding into another or a transparent thing over an opaque thing, or what. You know, I just draw it in a—it's a line, really.

And all it does is—so, when I end up with a drawing, it just looks like very fine, sort of, spaghetti on the canvas, you know, which, when I look at it, it's a kind of code that I've worked out, which tells me, okay, this is the way I want to treat this in the painting, you know. This is going to be hard, this is going to break here, or it's chromatic transition or a value change or whatever.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Do you go out to take photographs—slides— on a continual basis, or do you think, "Okay, I'm ready to start a new painting, I'd better go take some photographs now?"

TOM BLACKWELL: Both, both those things. I take them, and also, I'm looking for certain light situations, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You want to have a body of photographs available, but sometimes when you're starting a painting and you look at the photographs, you're not satisfied and you might take more photographs?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Also, the thing is that I'm often scouting, sort of, locations, as it were, you know. Check this out, see if that window's still there or whatever, you know. And lately, I'm—since the stroke, I mean, we're in the city a lot. Linda drives and I'll just stay in the car with a camera.

We'll kind of cruise around and try and find a good spot and then, often, you know, either she'll stay in the car or we'll switch off and I'll be in the driver seat, so that if it's a no-parking or metered space or something and you have to move, you know, one of us can go around the block.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you—do you feel you gradually or, maybe early on, developed an expertise as a photographer?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, I think not. I have a great eye, but I have no skill, no knowledge, really, of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So, how do you decide—

TOM BLACKWELL: I'm pretty much a captive of what the—what's on display. I mean, mostly, I shoot automatic focus and a camera with a built-in light meter, you know. So I mean, really, I'm pretty—in that—as a real photographer, I have no knowledge at all.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So once you have a good number of photographs, what's the process you use to go through those photographs? You're looking for paintings when you're taking photographs, not pieces to put together.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So what's your process when you're preparing to start a new painting, or maybe, multiple paintings? Are you going to possibly find, in one sitting looking at the slides, multiple paintings you want to do in succession or are you just thinking about the next painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: I'm doing the next painting, yeah. And what I do is, basically, load a lot of possibilities into a carousel and blow them up and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Project them on the wall?

TOM BLACKWELL: See what speaks, you know, and how it speaks. And then the next step is, okay, if this is—I think a work is a painting—is this a big painting or a little painting, or what size painting?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Does every part of the light in the slide need to be correct, or would you say, okay, this whole side will actually be lighter. Or this window needs to have a stronger reflective quality. When you're on the site, you take a lot of different photographs of the same image at different settings, different—

TOM BLACKWELL: Sometimes, we'll go back and re-photograph something, but mostly, it's just for—just to corroborate what I'm sensing out of the first picture and I can't quite make something out. If it's a reflection or a building across the street, which is not clear, but I want to know more about it, I'll reshoot it, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you're doing the cropping, as it were, with the camera.

TOM BLACKWELL: With the camera, correct.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you're projecting the image you select onto the canvas, do you make a canvas that's the same proportions as the 35-mm slide, or at that point, do you crop it, in the sense of—

TOM BLACKWELL: At that point, I crop it, often in a little bit the same proportions, but not necessarily or not always.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you might choose to leave out some edges.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right. Say, to make something which is a rectangular slide into a square-format painting—something like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Why have you mostly painted daytime rather than nighttime scenes?

TOM BLACKWELL: I don't know how to answer that. Some people have done some nighttime things which have worked very well.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I think you did, maybe, one or so? Or am I misremembering?

TOM BLACKWELL: I don't recall a nighttime painting. But you know what I did, which we haven't talked about, which is—I did a couple of paintings shot from the interior of the car, where the car window was a kind of framing device.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you recall when you did that? I didn't see those.

TOM BLACKWELL: Seventies.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why did you not continue that? Was there something you weren't satisfied with?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, I was very satisfied with it. I just didn't happen to—you know, there's a kind of serendipity to magical visual moments. It either happens or doesn't. It happened a few times, and I'm open to it again if it happens again. I hope I have the camera, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about the issue of photographic blur, or qualities of perception that are photographic—that are in the photograph—but not something that you would really see with your eye? Do you seek them out? Do you try to avoid them? Do you eliminate them if they're in the photograph?

TOM BLACKWELL: Actually, that's a good question because these paintings that I just mentioned, the shots from the car window—one of them has—deals very much with that issue. In fact, I'll show you the picture if you want.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sure.

TOM BLACKWELL: It's a painting called *Queens Boulevard* [1974], and it's shot from the interior of a car. And it shows a—it's kind of sunset, or light which is getting close to sunset—has that reddish look—and the antenna of the car is blurred and I painted it blurred, but you kind of see the—you know, the scene sort of going right through the antenna. So it was there, so I didn't do a sharp delineation of the thing; I just made it as if it were almost transparent. And it works; it works beautifully.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So the answer is that you use any kind of photographic distortion.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, because—yeah, or anomalies or whatever you want to call them. My feeling is that photographic idiosyncrasies like that are very much a part of the way we see now. In fact, it's very much informed by motion picture, film, video—mediated reality, you know.

This is part of my particular take on the whole thing—not to, you know, kind of freeze it down and sharpen it. I could paint the antenna, you know, in space and make it look real enough, but this gives very—it imparts a feeling of somehow being stuck in traffic inside a car and this kind of whole—the idea of motion and so forth, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So the photographs are like working drawings, in a sense?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, and a photograph is like the recipe; you have to make the cake. That's the whole thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: After you pick the photograph—the slide—and you project it on the canvas and you do your preliminary drawing, do you then, as you're working on the painting, refer to the slide? Or do you make a print of the slide to refer to, if there's any particular element you want to look at?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, different times, I've done it differently. And early on, I had a roll device where you could project the slide through a little mirrored kind of contraption that would show you the slide on a small screen that I could still—I could see that and still have enough light to paint the painting by. But of course—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Like a lightbox in a way?

TOM BLACKWELL: Similar to a lightbox idea. But the problem with that is that if you project slides for any period of time, the colors go on soon [ph], you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: As a solution, you started making prints?

TOM BLACKWELL: Prints—but prints are—you know that prints are basically just an approximation of the color. And besides, the truth is that I make up the color.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you ever look at the slide with a viewfinder?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, sure.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How much do you make up the color? Do you rearrange the colors?

TOM BLACKWELL: I don't rearrange them. Basically, I look at it and I—it's a sort of—it's a process of, you know, knowing what the local color is and kind of figuring out okay, it's influenced by this or it's reflecting that, or it's—whatever it is. And then, you know, I adjust the color.

JUDITH RICHARDS: For compositional reasons.

TOM BLACKWELL: And for reasons of harmony and clarity. Not to blow my own horn too much, but I think I have a tremendous natural gift for color. Just—it's just like breathing to me—color.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you have an issue with the demise of slide film? Do you have a stockpile of slide film, and who develops it for you?

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh yeah, I have plenty of stuff. But I've switched to digital now, so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And a digital projector?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not yet.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you project the digital image onto the canvas?

TOM BLACKWELL: I make a print and re-photograph it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You make a print and then you re-photograph the print? And how does it get onto the canvas?

TOM BLACKWELL: You can—if you take—well, there are several ways, but you can take print film and take the negative—the negative will give you exactly the information that a slide will.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You have that made into a slide and then you project the slide that you've made from a digital print?

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I see.

TOM BLACKWELL: It's kind of roundabout, but I mean, I'm—on my wish list is a digital projector, which they make now, but they're expensive, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. Once you start a painting, based on the reality you photographed, do you make changes as you go along if you think it's not working? I don't think you change the objects, but do you change the colors? Say this is green; do you make it red?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I wouldn't make that radical a change. I may make it a different green or a more reddish green or something of that sort, but if I had to make that radical a change, it would mean I was in trouble, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you ever had the experience where you think, this painting isn't working? Do you declare it a failure and give up? Do you put it aside for years? Do you gesso it over and start again with the same slide?

TOM BLACKWELL: I've not really had quite that problem of—I've had some paintings that drove me to almost suicidal thoughts, but—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you pull it back from near death? [Laughs.]

TOM BLACKWELL: From the brink? [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, often, I think what I do is kind of sit back, look at it and be very, very analytical about it and say okay, this is working but this is not working. Why is this not working? What are your assumptions about this that are making this not work? There's some logical reason this is not working. What is it? You know, back to basics—think it through, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You haven't just totally given up on a painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: I'm just too stubborn and tough. I will not give up.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At what point did you start doing watercolors?

TOM BLACKWELL: Shortly after I started Photorealism.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were working with oils on canvas at the same time as you were doing watercolors?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, I did some watercolors. Often, I would do a watercolor because—and it would be after the oil, not before, which is—would seem to be the reverse. Like, a lot of people do watercolors as a study for an oil. I would do it—like, a fair number of the early ones—the painting—I'd do it and it would sell and I'd say well, gee, that's great. I wish I still had that painting or could do another one, you know.

So I'd do a watercolor and then I'd dry it out. And I admit that the watercolors of Ralph and Richard McLean were just tremendous inspiration. I thought those guys are so good; I'm going to see if I can do that well, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you decide there's a painting for which you also want to do watercolor, what are the qualities in that painting that excite you that cause you to want to do a watercolor of that painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I think it has, as much as anything, to do with one of the kind of central aspects of my painting, which are true for oil or watercolor or anything, which is the issue of transparency. I mean, it's really important to me to use transparency and opacity in the dialogue to create an image, you know, in a way. And of course, watercolor is all about transparency, so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How has your painting technique evolved, talking about transparency makes me think of oil glazes?

TOM BLACKWELL: I use lots of glazes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you always?

TOM BLACKWELL: Let me—let's backtrack to an early—because I've been thinking about this because I knew this interview was coming up, and I thought, how do I explain this? Well, I'll try. I was living in Los Angeles and struggling to be able to, you know, transpose my skill; as a draftsman, I could really draw well, but I didn't know how to paint, really, and I couldn't—my paintings just didn't make it—couldn't get there, you know. And I thought, one afternoon—this is a drug experience. Is that all right? We can delete this later, if you like.

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs.] All right, we'll break now until the next session.

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay.

[END OF TRACK AAA_blackw09_1569.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Tom Blackwell on September 23, 2009, in Andes, New York, for the Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution disc four.

Tom, we left off speaking about painting techniques and mediums and the start of—

THOMAS BLACKWELL: You were asking me about glazing, and I was very enthusiastically going to give you an answer. I love glazing. It's an integral part of my whole approach to creating the images, and especially the store-window imagery, which is so layered, and glazing certain parts and, you know, kind of pulling out highlights by removing the glaze in key areas is one of the ways in which I achieved the effects.

Then I was going to tell you this story about how I got into glazing, and this goes back to the early '60s, when I was living in Los Angeles. And it was during—you know, the '60s, well, what can you say? You know, it was a time of great experimentation, and I did my share of that. And it was a Sunday afternoon and my wife at the time, Rosalie, and I had taken some peyote, which is a hallucinogenic mushroom. And I went to the Los Angeles County Museum and I was sitting in a room. It was not crowded, and there were old master paintings there and I was just—it became a kind of revelation. I didn't quite know how to paint at the point or achieve color or anything, and I was—so it was a sort of revelation, sitting there looking at these great Titians and Tintorettos

and Rembrandts and all these people.

And I couldn't figure out how they could do that color—that was the thing that was amazing to me. But under the influence of the peyote, it was—something happened that was really a kind of revelation. And I—in my mind I was able to somehow, by looking at the painting, sort of recreate the process by which they arrived at the color, and I came up with this whole idea about glazing, about, well, there's—you know, if you start with a white canvas, the light hits the canvas and it is refracted back to the eye. If you put a transparent color over that, the same light is refracted but now it goes through a transparent color and has changed. So I thought, well, okay, so these guys, they painted these paintings with colors and then they put these glazes over them which altered perceptually how you saw the color.

And so I got this idea about, you know, how to master this as an approach to painting. So later, after this day, I went home and I made a whole bunch of what I called glazing charts which consisted of—I would do a whole range of spectrum colors, yellow through orange through red and violet, violet-blue, green and so forth all around the color wheel in vertical stripes.

Then I would run glazing colors across them either—horizontally and see how the glaze affected each color as it passed over. And then I began getting more and more elaborate with this, sort of graying out the spectrum of colors and doing the same thing. And then layering one glaze color over another, over another, until it would—you know it was like—I thought of it almost in musical terms, like, you know, a note or a very complex chord based upon a note, like that.

I mean, that was—once I sort of got into this idea, I thought, you know, the whole thing is that when you are painting it is like a chess game. You have to put a color down and think four or five moves down the line—how you are going to use this as a base and alter the perception of it by the application of glazes. Well, I mean, this was an idea which is of course—I didn't invent this, it was not a radical idea, except that at the time, in the '60s and what was going on in American painting, nobody was using glazes that I knew about.

It was all direct, alla prima painting that was—and all the Abstract Expressionists were—I mean, glazing was seen as some throwback to the 19th century. So I'm painting, I'm assuming, a thoroughly discredited the kind of approach, but I saw a way for me to really use it in my own way, and I've been using it ever since, which is one of the reasons my paintings are very different than the other photo-realists, none of whom, or almost none of whom, use glazing, and certainly not in the way I use it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Describe the painting process that you used—and maybe if it has changed, mention that. You talked about projecting the slide and doing a tangle of pencil marks; what comes next?

TOM BLACKWELL: What comes next, of course I use a fixative to fix the marks because I'm painting in oil, and graphite pencil is soluble in oil, I don't want to lose the line. So my approach is to start with, you know, like, whatever local color of the object is. If it is brown—excuse me—or blue or whatever, I will make a thin mixture of the basic local color and just paint it very thinly over the area that I want to, you know, paint. And so since I've fixed the pencil line, it won't dissolve, and I can see where the contours are and where the various breaks are and the way the light breaks or shadows cast or whatever. Whatever notation I've made in the drawing is still clear to me.

And then I—by a process of taking clear turpentine and dissolving certain areas I get back to the white, or very close to the white of canvas. So it is a process of putting on a thin kind of a middle value of transparent paint and picking out highlights and then taking the same color and possibly darkening it and rendering a form or making the middle or darker values and kind of creating it in that way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are you painting over the entire surface at the same time?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, I go area by area.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Up to a complete finish of an area?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not complete, I'll take it like two-thirds of the way or something so I get a pretty good reading of it but not a complete rendition of the thing. And the reason for that is because the way I finish a painting is by getting all of these elements to a certain point. And then I think at the end it is sort of—the methodology goes out the window, and then basically, I'm trying to orchestrate the effects in a visual way.

And I think about—you know like with Photorealist painting, I think of—it's like a good attorney building an airtight argument for a particular point of view. So I mean basically, I'm saying, well, if you accept this then you must by inference accept this other thing which is next to it or relates to it. And so bit by bit I try and make a completely compelling argument for whatever my vision of this image might be.

And then the whole goal then is to make it so compelling and so convincing in that way that you don't start questioning, well what is this, or did he mean that, or is this—I mean, in other words, I want no ambiguity. I want you to be able to, you know, interpret the imagery the way I see it without any questioning or input on the viewer's part and not saying oh, I think maybe he meant this, but he could have meant that or something, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The ambiguity being that it's either a reflection, if you are talking about the reflections, paintings of the windows, questioning whether it is reflection, or whether it is not a reflection?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, that's a—yeah, that is true and that's one aspect of it. And the reason I know that I've succeeded at this, I've had people who've gone to my shows and seen the window paintings and say, you know I've never—I've walked up and down Fifth Avenue a thousand times and never really seen something like this, and yet you've made it so clear.

So basically it is not that I am painting this particular thing with such exactitude as the idea that it's a familiar and overlooked and perhaps not noticed kind of visual situation that people experience in the modern world. And that really—now we're into my philosophy of what I'm trying to do with painting as sort of a—you know, magic moments in mundane things that we see or circumstances, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: One more point about the technique, once you discovered this process, you've been able to continue with it?

TOM BLACKWELL: Continue it and grow or build upon it. One of the things that technically which is essential is that each layer—and there are many, many layers as I build a painting, thin, transparent and occasionally opaque areas. It is essential that they be dry before I put the next coat on.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Does that mean that you might be working at more than one painting at once?

TOM BLACKWELL: I have done that, but I don't like doing it because I lose my focus, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were saying that you use something to make—

TOM BLACKWELL: Accelerate drying yeah, a dryer. Well, some of the mediums have dryer in them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you stuck with the same brand of oil paint throughout, or was it a mixture?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I'm pretty much a Windsor & Newton man, you might say, mainly because the pigments are—they're better. I mean they have more pigment per cubic whatever, however you measure paint.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Compared to—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I mean, other brands are fine, Grumbacher I've used a lot, but Windsor & Newton—well they make a student grade which I don't like to use because it is not as quality, it is not as good. Also, Windsor & Newton makes a lot of the colors that I use for glazing and transparencies, like—certain colors I love and favor a lot, like, olive green is a great color, because it can go either warm or cool, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I noticed in a list of your paintings— I don't know if this was accurate or not, some were oil on canvas and some were oil on linen. Was that correct?

TOM BLACKWELL: I've done both. Usually I work on cotton, but there have been some times when I've used linen. Not for any particular reason, I just may have had some linen, you know. Of course, as you know, in the old days linen was considered a superior surface.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are there other issues that you consider in creating your paintings that have to do with archival issues?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, of course, one thinks about it because you want the paintings to last, you know. But I guess—in fact, linen is supposed to be long-lasting than cotton duck. On the other hand, conservators are so advanced these days that I'm not so worried about that, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said that you prefer to work on one painting at a time. Is it important to you or not to have past work in the studio to reference when you are doing a painting, whether it is just the most recent works or others?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I don't usually keep the actual works around because, you know, the way I've worked is, I finish a painting, I deliver it—excuse me—and it is either sold or it is in storage at the gallery. So I'm not—I don't have a lot of works that I've finished just sitting around. But pictures of them I keep around because, you

know, I mean, especially if they're good, good paintings and I'm having trouble with a current painting and losing heart or thinking I can't do it or whatever, then it is good to look at other things that I've done where I've succeeded and it gives me some courage to go on. So that is—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you use or have you created sketchbooks or diaries or any kind of written documentation on your thinking or progress going from one work to another or thinking within a work?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, I just don't do that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What part does intuition or accident play, if any, at the beginning or throughout a work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, of course one has to—I'm a believer in being open to wonderful happenstance occurrences that can be inspiring or lead to, you know, really interesting things. So that degree, I'm very, very much—in the actual execution of the work, accidents are not welcome, but in the conceptualizing of a piece, which is usually done when I'm photographing, then I am completely open and hopeful.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What is your system of titling the paintings? Has that changed over the years?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I am a—as Linda would tell you, I'm a terrible punster, I love puns and sometimes I can't control myself. And some of the works are sort of derived from that part of my sensibility. But usually, as a general rule, I try to be as succinct and descriptive without being, you know, overly elaborate or alluding to anything too far astray from the actual subject of the painting.

For example, this painting in the studio, which was a commission, commissioned by a collector, and the woman walking down the street is his fiancé, so I mean, struggled with a title and I thought her name is Susan. So I thought, well, at first I thought well, "Susan at Louis Vuitton," which is a store there.

And I thought, well that's kind of silly, you know. I mean it is on the one hand too personal and too much of like a plug for a store which I don't care about. And so finally I decided on the title, which is "Morning in Monaco", which has certain simplicity, alliteration and is less specific, and yet—anyway I liked it. And then the street is Rue de Beaux Arts, so I thought well, okay, there is a great title right there. "Morning in Monaco, Rue de Beaux Arts", and date, and that is it, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: There is one painting that has a puzzling title to me. It is from 1989, it is called *First Full of Dollars*.— was that a a misprint?

TOM BLACKWELL: *Fistfull of* [*Dollars*]—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's supposed to be "fist," okay, that was just a typo then—

TOM BLACKWELL: Which, there was a logo on a bus which was for a bank and it reflects a fist full of dollars.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Aha.

TOM BLACKWELL: *Fistfull of Dollars*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How would you describe your studio routine and has it evolved? What kind of hours do you work? Days of the week? Time of day?

TOM BLACKWELL: I work a very long day. Usually, you know, I'm in the studio by 9:00, 9:30 and we break for lunch around 1:00, 1:30. And then I work all afternoon until, 6:00 watch the news and then we eat, and I'm usually back to work in the evening by 8:30 and work until 11:00. So it is a full, full day.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Has it always been that way?

TOM BLACKWELL: Pretty much, yeah. Except once.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you take the weekend off?

TOM BLACKWELL: No. When I was younger it was more. I had more energy and I was driven by desperation to just get the works out anyway I could.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are you concerned with the light in the studio, in terms of how you read the colors on the canvas.? Do you want to use a consistent light, no daylight, or always daylight? Of course you work in the evening, so how do you control the light?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, daylight is the enemy to me, I mean for painting, you know. So we've got these blinds

but they're not good enough, they don't keep out all the light so I'm thinking of putting some black shades onto them, because basically I want it always the same. And in fact, this kind of oblique daylight coming in is terrible for me because it gives a sheen to the paint from a side angle and I can't really see the values or what I'm doing quite right. So it has to be—I mean, my approach is, I want the painting to be painted under conditions which is —which closely, as closely as possible mimic a gallery situation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Consistent throughout whatever the time of day—

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or the season.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What about the kind of light—[inaudible, cross talk].

TOM BLACKWELL: These are halogen.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Halogen. Have you always made a practice of using a certain warmth or coolness of lights?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, mm-hmm.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What kind of sound do you like in the studio?—music, radio, TV, silence?

TOM BLACKWELL: I used to, I—when I was younger, I used to listen to music constantly.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What kind of music?

TOM BLACKWELL: Rock. Really you know—I mean I think about it now, its sort of, rock music was like almost marshal music , I mean, it would sort of get the blood pumping and it was sort of like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Energizing.

TOM BLACKWELL: Energizing. and building courage, you know, that was—so I don't know, I mean, I guess I'm older now and I almost never listen to music when I work. Almost never. And for a while here I would put—this thing it is a T.V., this little flat screen thing, which most times I have tuned to CNN but the sound lowered. The problem with CNN is it is a great news source but it's all bad news, all the time. So it is just a kind of drone in the background. I became very, very addicted to CNN during the election. I couldn't—you know, I just had, I was just mesmerized by the whole unfolding of the Obama campaign and the whole thing, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And now?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, now my latest vice is recorded books. So I listen to them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: While you're painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: Novels, yeah. But not, nothing, not terribly serious books, but books which have a kind of narrative.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You can concentrate on what you're hearing at the same time as what you are seeing?

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, absolutely.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That is quite amazing. What about a sense of your studio being private or not private, allowing your paintings to be seen by other people before they're finished? Do you have any sort of regular routines or requirements?

TOM BLACKWELL: I prefer that people don't see them until they're finished unless I'm at a particularly good point, because people don't understand the process, and then I—whatever it is, you know, I—they say, oh that is amazing and I say well, it is not resolved and you don't understand because of this or that or these things have to happen which haven't happened yet, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Does that apply to non-artists and artist friends alike, or do you just mean people who don't understand? If an artist friend with came over, it wouldn't matter or it still does?

TOM BLACKWELL: If the artist was someone familiar with me or my methods of working and so on so that I didn't have to explain too much, I would be then more comfortable with that than with people who are non-artists who don't get it, however well-meaning they may be.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you always stand when you're working, or sit?

TOM BLACKWELL: Mostly sit.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you always been able to do that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What impact has technology had on the development or execution of your work?

TOM BLACKWELL: What kind of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The evolution of cameras or projectors or any other technology that you depend on to do your work. The Internet or digital technology?

TOM BLACKWELL: We're getting into an area where I feel a little squishy about it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Okay. I just want to go back and make sure that we've covered where your studios have been. We talked about Prince Street in SoHo.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And then, and at the same time, you had a summer house in New Hampshire.

TOM BLACKWELL: Correct.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what town was that in?

TOM BLACKWELL: In Dublin, New Hampshire.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Dublin. Okay. Spelled like?

TOM BLACKWELL: Like the Irish spelled it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs.] Okay. How many years did you have a studio in your home there? And was that was just in the summer?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, it was—we were there sort of weekends and summers. So we were there. We counted that as our main residence, actually.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And when you had a studio both there and in SoHo, did you treat them equally?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, in the Dublin house there was a carriage house separate from the house that was a studio there, which was also a horse stable so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you transport a painting that you were working on from one place to the other?

TOM BLACKWELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I did.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So they were both equally important studios?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How long did that go on, before you ended up finally giving one up for the other?

JUDITH RICHARDS: What happened was—you know, the thing was in Dublin, we moved there but we really wanted a very isolated kind of country existence, which it started out to be. But Dublin and that area of New Hampshire were—over that period of time, evolved increasingly into a kind of bedroom community for people working in Boston or that area. High tech people, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that in southern New Hampshire?

TOM BLACKWELL: Southern New Hampshire. So they could live in New Hampshire there and still commute, and taxes were better, it just became built-up more than we liked.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This was in the '70s? The late '70s?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What did you do?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, after 16 years we moved to New York State.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What year was that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Eighty-seven.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you decide where in New York State to move?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, we took a—we still had the loft on Prince Street, or a loft. A different loft, but we were in the same—

[Cross talk.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh really? So you moved from one loft to the other on Prince Street.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right. Yeah. We had a whole floor and then we sold that and bought a half-floor.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the same building?

TOM BLACKWELL: Same building.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You re-did your studio at that point?

TOM BLACKWELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel it was an improvement for your studio or just equal?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, it was equal. It was comparable in size, the studio. But the advantage of it was that—being that it was 131 Prince, Louis' gallery was 141 and he would often bring clients up to the studio. It was so, easy you just walk one door down, take the elevator and come up, you know? So it was great. And we had—we did a lot of—we sold a lot of paintings that way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So in 19, you said, '86?

TOM BLACKWELL: In '87 we bought the farm in Upstate New York.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you drove around—

[Cross talk.]

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, our idea was we were not—we had some money and we did all right with the sale of the New Hampshire place, but not rich by any means. So we said, okay, it has to be within a three-hour driving radius of New York City, no further. So we looked in Westchester, we looked around, we looked in Pennsylvania, we looked in Ulster County, didn't like anything there. And then we discovered Delaware County and New Kingston, which is this little hamlet outside of Margaretville, a little valley there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Margaretville, how do you spell that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Margaretville.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, oh, Margaretville.

TOM BLACKWELL: Where you got off the bus.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: The place was a wreck, but the site was spectacular. So we said, well, we've done this before. We can do it again.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Buy a wreck and re-do it?

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that what you did in New Hampshire?

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right. Well, the New Hampshire place wasn't a wreck. It was just a very modest house that needed some tasteful redecorating and painting and stuff.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you took on this new house in 1987.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And is that the point when you sold the second loft in New York?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that you had one residence in Margaretville.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At what point did you start going to Florida in the winter?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, it kind of evolved. There was no specific time. It—sort of over the years there would be various times where we'd go down and, sort of think about well, maybe we should buy a place down here or something.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mean just for a few weeks?

TOM BLACKWELL: Kind of explore and get a sense of it without actually being there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When did you end up starting to spend a good number of months of the winter there?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, the thing that really did it was after I had the stroke because——

JUDITH RICHARDS: What year was that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Ninety-nine, 1999.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's terrible.

TOM BLACKWELL: I'll never forget it. September 9th, 1999. So that's like 9/9/99. If one believes in numbers or the significance of numbers, nine is not a good number for me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So after that you started going to Florida.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, because I mean, I couldn't—you know, I mean, we had the house and the barn up here in Upstate New York in New Kingston, but the problem was the barn—which was a great studio, big and everything, a good hundred or so feet from the house—in the winter I had to go through snow and ice and cross a stream and up icy stairs, and this was not a good situation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you thought you should spend the winter in Florida?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what—

TOM BLACKWELL: I got the message. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: And where is that place you go to in Florida?

TOM BLACKWELL: It's in Naples, which we had never—well, we were looking—originally we were looking on the east coast, somewhere around Boca Raton and in that area, where— I'd shown there at—I mean I was in a museum show in Boca and also there's this big arts complex called the Gallery Center that has about, I don't know, 20 or 30 galleries. So I thought, well, that'd be a good place. But I hated Boca itself because it's a—basically I felt like, well, I haven't really left New York here. It's the same people. Just that they're in Florida and, they're the same pushy, aggressive New Yorkers that I know up north, but I don't want to be around them down here, I want to—you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You found a much different atmosphere in Naples?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yea. A friend said, well, why don't you come to the west coast? Try Naples. It's beautiful. And

she was right. It's a much more, kind of, relaxed, low pressure, low-key kind of place. Equally beautiful but not so frenetic and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh.

TOM BLACKWELL: Anyway, it was a good fit.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And not too long ago you ended up selling the house in Margaretville and moving here where we are in Andes.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was how long ago?

TOM BLACKWELL: Let's see. It's been two years. Two-and-a-half years, I guess. Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And you've set up a studio here.

TOM BLACKWELL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: One other question related to technique. Were you interested in printmaking, lithography, etching, at any point in your career?

TOM BLACKWELL: I've done some printmaking and I would like to do more. I think I'm more interested in doing that now than I was when I was actually doing it. I didn't see printmaking as a direction for me, per se, but simply as an adjunct to the painting. But I can see printmaking as really interesting and something I would like to do more of in the future.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What medium would you pick?

TOM BLACKWELL: Probably I would like to do litho, I think.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM BLACKWELL: I really enjoyed drawing out on the plate. A lot of the printmaking I did, though, were silk screens which I worked with a master printer named Norman Lassiter who did a lot of work with Frank Stella and Andy Warhol. And we worked out a way of doing Photorealist imagery where he would take—we'd take the transparency and have a photopositive made and then he would, what they call, shoot the screen, which is use the positive to—the silkscreen is coated with light-sensitive material and then exposed to light which, where the light goes through it dissolves the coating and where it stops, it doesn't. So this is the way.

But, a silkscreen made that way will just—it makes a kind of poster-ized effect. There's no subtlety or gradation or possibility of tonal transitions. So anyway, Norman and I came up with this idea of, by doing this, kind of, poster-ization process. By altering the exposure time you would get more or less exposure. Therefore, the grain of the film gave you a kind of granular breakdown of the separation of color. So you'd get a, kind of, a sort of, rough gradation. But, then in the process of actually making the final silkscreen, I would work on the photopositives with a tuche, blacking out the—you could paint right on the acetate with black ink and I would use a kind of stippling technique with a Pentel pen. So by making thousands of little dots you could actually create a tonal transition fairly smoothly.

And in this way I built up color. We do silk screens that—you'd have as many as 20 or 25 layers of color built in this way. It was very labor intensive. It was crazy, in a sense, but I did some pretty good prints that way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you decide how big the edition would be for each of these?

TOM BLACKWELL: This was during a time when—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What year was this about?

TOM BLACKWELL: I'm guessing the '90s, somewhere in there. Some smart accountants had figured out that people could basically shelter income by investing in fine art prints. So there was a lot of money for producing editions during that time. And so I was one of the recipients of that. So that was the whole idea. So the size of the edition, I guess, would depend upon how much money they were sheltering and giving—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Some financial—[inaudible, cross talk].

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Rather than your—

TOM BLACKWELL: Right. Had nothing to do with my—if the edition were 50, fine. If it were 150, it made no difference to me, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You didn't have any philosophical issues about wanting there to be a lot to have the price low or wanting there to be a few to keep them more precious?

TOM BLACKWELL: Frankly, I didn't have the luxury of that. I mean, as a working artist, as you know, this is a pretty insecure field to be in. The way I looked at it, these people wanted to pay me a fee to produce an edition of work based on my painting and that I had artistic freedom to do it my way and I didn't see a downside.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The method, didn't break down? You could still get 150? You made sure that each one—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. I don't know if you'd go much more than that, I don't know what would happen. But up to 150, I think they had a lot of integrity.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How many of those did you do? Do you recall?

TOM BLACKWELL: I did a total of probably less than 10 editions, in total. Couldn't give an exact number. Some of them were big. Some of them were big prints like almost painting size. In fact, we have one upstairs if you want to see it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And after that, did you want to do that kind of printmaking again?

TOM BLACKWELL: Actually, I—no, I wanted to do lithographs because—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM BLACKWELL: —well, the thing about the silkscreen editions was that they were—this was a big, very elaborate print facility and there was a lot of upfront money involved in producing them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM BLACKWELL: For myself, if I were making prints, I'd want to do something much more modest and just kind of work on a plate and draw. I mean this crazy stippling and all this kind of thing was basically just a very elaborate way to avoid making an image with a commercial half-tone process.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So if you were to do a lithograph, you would do a unique image. Unlike those prints that started with a photograph of a painting, you would create a unique image.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right. Mm-hmm.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Around the mid-'80s, going back to your paintings, you began a group of works that weren't Photorealist. I think you called them metaphorical paintings, and I wanted to—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, here, we can—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —talk all about those. How did that develop?

TOM BLACKWELL: Come about?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, how did that come about?

TOM BLACKWELL: It came about because I was feeling increasingly constrained by being a Photorealist, and although I was very proud of it, and in many ways, loved it; I also felt this is a, kind of, limited thing to do. By choice but then that choice, after a while, became a trap.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh. Bella.

TOM BLACKWELL: Bella, you door opener you.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. So you felt it became a kind of a trap?

TOM BLACKWELL: It had become a trap, yeah. And also I thought—well, you know, this whole idea of being faithful to a photographic source. Well, that's fine but I'm more than that. Also it was during the time when people like David Salle and [Julian] Schnabel and all these guys were basically getting all this attention, and we Photorealists had been, pretty much, shoved into the background of the recent past and ignored.

I mean, the way I put it was the critical response to Photorealism was vituperation for about five years, followed by 15 years of not very benign neglect, and then suddenly you had Schnabel, the great hero of the new painting and all this Neo-Expressionist stuff and I thought—and David Salle was a particular thorn in my side. And I thought, well, he's not doing anything new, I can—not only can I do better than that, I did better than that years ago. So I was very angry—

JUDITH RICHARDS: In terms of his use of photographic imagery—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —and, kind of, a montage, collage setting.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right. Absolutely. So I thought, well, this is not new. I mean I did that 15 years before him. So I went back. Started doing more work like—well, they're calling it metaphorical.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You didn't call it that?

TOM BLACKWELL: I didn't call it—no, I didn't call it that. I just wanted to do the work. And I did. And of course Louis had no interest in showing that work at all. In fact, he saw it as a threat to his little Photorealist enterprise there. One of the sheep got out of the pen. [Laughs.] That sort of thing, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you thought about when you started those paintings—of course, they're also oil on campus and they do use photographic imagery—how did you decide what subject you'd be addressing?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I thought, the thing is that with Photorealism or at least, my Photorealism in particular, has always been about how things looks and how we perceive things in the real world. These paintings would be about using photographic imagery to deal with issues. And the issues that interested me, in particular, which has been a, kind of, constant theme in the work, have been any idea of contrast, a sort of irony. But not the kind of irony that was fashionable in the '80s as kind of a slick, cool irony.

My irony was more based on a more old-fashioned irony, I guess. Well, anyway, thematically the ideas kind of broke down into contrasting ancient and modern aspects of life or nature and civilization. So there was a, kind of, thematic underpinning to this thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Conflicts, you'd say? Between nature—

TOM BLACKWELL: Not—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —and culture?

TOM BLACKWELL: —one thing. They could be conflicts. Or they could be even a kind of a—well, I think the idea really was they may be in conflict, but in terms of what I was trying to do in the painting was to try and find some way of resolution in the work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Merging these two realities.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. In some way that didn't make logical sense but could, perhaps—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm sorry, yes?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think I finished the statement.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you trying to incorporate political or social issues of the time?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think so. But I was—but in a way which—I was at pains not to be judgmental about it but rather to, kind of, raise the issue in a visual way. I'm reminded of an old Bob Dylan quote where he's talked about his work at some point, and he's talking about evolutions of songs that he wrote and he said, I don't want to write any more finger-pointing songs, like no more "Masters of War" and that kind of thing. So that was it. I didn't want to do finger-pointing paintings. I wanted to do paintings which addresses issues with a kind of irony and yet sincere involvement in the painting, in the issues but not—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Not paintings to be read as a position you were taking.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right. These are not political or environmental statements, per se. They are the observations of somebody living in the world, seeing what he sees or she sees and using this as raw material to create compelling images.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay. That's, kind of, my take on what I was doing. So I went out—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm going to change tape.

[END OF TRACK AAA_blackw09_1570.]

This is Judith Richards with Tom Blackwell on September 23, 2009 in Andes, New York, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay, so where were we?

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you went out—

TOM BLACKWELL: To try and interest other galleries in this work, and it was a humbling, shocking and not a very pleasant experience because, I mean, basically, I had a lot of doors politely closed in my face—and sometimes not so politely—but some people were kind about it. The underlying message was, well, you're known as a Photorealist.

I had an interview with a very nice woman who was a director at the Curt Marcus Gallery. She was, you know, in her 30s, very pleasant, and she looked at the work I was showing her and seemed interested. And at the end of my presentation, we got to some of my Photorealist work and she said, oh, I remember this work! We had this in our slide lecture series back at Barnard—or wherever she went to school, you know—I remember this work; I love this work.

But it was like, suddenly, I was an old guy. You know, it's like an old man.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you mentioned Curt Marcus, it reminded me of Mark Tansey's work, who showed there. And that might have been a reason for you to go to the Marcus.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, I love Mark Tansey. I also knew another artist that they handled—Richard Pettibone does these miniatures. We weren't friends, but I knew him, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were doing that work, you mentioned Schnabel and Salle. When you started doing these new works, were there artists—other contemporary, or even historic artists—whose work suddenly became interesting or you referenced in thinking about this new body of work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, but nobody was working at that time, I mean, my reference was the recent past. I mean, I would think about some of the radical work that early Rauschenberg would do, for example. So I wasn't thinking about David Salle; I was thinking about responding to my immediate predecessors, not somebody who came after me, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And did you change your technique for the photographic elements?

TOM BLACKWELL: Actually, I decided that for this work, I would approach it differently. Like in a Photorealist painting, I always worked—as we talked about the idea of transparency—starting with a white surface and building layers of transparent color.

I thought, with this new approach, I'm going to reverse that. So I painted the canvas black and I started working opaque color; a kind of painting with not really, well, let's say the gestural element was more important, but not predominant, not anything you would call gestural painting. It was pretty tight and descriptive, but more interpretative and less descriptive than what I would do in Photorealism. The thing with a black ground was that would often lend a kind of strange, almost eerie aspect to the imagery, you know, and it worked very well.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You also use other media—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, some of them I created—a whole textural thing. We went to the Yucatan on a trip and saw the Mayan ruins and I became intrigued with both the ruins and the whole culture and their language and the way they—you know, their whole ideas of mathematics and how amazingly advanced they were, and yet their civilization crumbled and so forth. So I had very much an idea about the—[laughs]—well, looks to me this civilization is crumbling pretty fast, too! So I could see parallels with our modern world.

And this painting, it's a good example of it—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which is *Nowhere, Now Here*, 1993-94.

TOM BLACKWELL: That's right. What you don't see is these things are actually built up like a bi-fold—it's canvassed but it's constructed out like that. And I covered it with—I made a kind of surface which mimicked the stone of the Mayan facades. I came up with this great way of doing this where I would stretch canvas over, then coat the whole thing with Elmer's glue, carpenters glue, and sprinkle, of all things—forgive me—kitty litter over the thing.

The thing about kitty litter is, it sounds awful but it's just granulated clay and very absorbent. So it would absorb the glue and then once it hardened it became very tough. But it could be painted; it could be—you know, you could paint on it. And I did; I painted all these Mayan glyphs, which, when you see the painting, I mean, you know, it is a painting that's flat except for the bifurcated panels top and bottom. But then I combined it with some great graffiti that I photographed on the Lower East Side—Nowhere Now Here—and I thought, how perfect.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You did these paintings for how many years?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I think it started in the mid '80s and went all the way through the early '90s, I think. At the same time, I was still doing Photorealism. I continued—kept my hand in that so people wouldn't forget me, you know—but less.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you ever show them together? Did you want to?

TOM BLACKWELL: Show the two kinds of paintings together—no. Well, Louis, he thought, from his point of view, my doing this work was ruinous to my career because it would show that either I didn't have a commitment to Photorealism or was not a reliable product, or whatever you want to call it—[laughs]—as a dealer might see it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And why did you eventually stop doing these paintings?

TOM BLACKWELL: Several reasons. One of the ones—well, I left Louis and then I ended up with this gallery uptown, Carlo Lamagna, who had been Ivan Karp's second-in-command at O.K. Harris. He opened his own gallery and he was amenable to my experimental painting.

So I had a show there, which—well, we didn't sell anything out of that show, although it got really nice reviews. For the first time in my entire career, I got good reviews, sold nothing. But I forget who wrote the reviews. I don't know if Canby was still writing for the *Times* or John Russell or one of those guys—no, Hilton Kramer, I think it was. Anyway, said nice things.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that a difficult moment where you had these positive reviews yet no sales?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Sure. You know, before I had steady sales and no reviews. The only review I ever got as a Photorealist early on was a kind of backhanded compliment from John Russell in the *Times*, who allowed as how he had no respect for Photorealism and didn't think anything of it, but this Blackwell fellow—there seemed to be something more serious going on there than the simple replication of something—impatient labor—or something like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hmm. Since we're talking about it, let's talk about the critical response. I was going to do that later but since we're talking about it. Your works have been shown in many countries—did you see a difference in the critical response from another country compared to the U.S.?

TOM BLACKWELL: In general, yeah, there would be a difference, but then I think in other countries, the whole idea of importing a somewhat notorious and yet noted American art movement into another country would glean a lot of attention—and I don't think they got into the more subtle aspects of anyone's work, or certainly not of mine—but I think it was more a kind of general, this is American culture here; brash, full of fast-food emporiums and, you know, kind of shallow values; the usual sort of take on Photorealism.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hmm. What was your reaction to being labeled at the very beginning a Photorealist, or any of these other labels?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, first of all, I chafe against the very name Photorealism. I hate it because, to me, it emphasizes photo—Photorealist—as opposed to say, life realist or—to me, it's a word like oil painter. I mean, it doesn't mean anything, really.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why do you think it's survived? That the term just keeps—

TOM BLACKWELL: It's easy. I think, I mean, Ivan Karp, in the very early days, talked about this. He called it something which I liked a lot better—he called it Radical Realism, which I think, to me, it's more descriptive, or at least it fit more closely with what I was trying to do.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have there been writers who have written about your work and misunderstood and

misinterpreted; have there been misconceptions out there that you'd like to correct?

TOM BLACKWELL: Sure. I can remember a few things. I'd have to go back and reread them to remember who said what, but I remember one critical response where it said something about how I must be—my work was a celebration of consumerism, or something; that I was all about consumption, luxury products, and you know, stuff like that.

You know, I could see how someone would get that idea, but, of course, as I mentioned earlier, it's not what I'm about; it's not really what the paintings are about. But, you know, I mean, you put your work out there and people can look at it any way they wish, and often do. You have no control over that beyond a certain point.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you have had what you've felt was negative criticism, how has it affected you and how do you deal with that?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I don't like it, of course. [Laughs.] Who would like it? But nobody's ever said I was a bad painter.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What they've done is, instead, just dismiss Photorealism.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, it's just a kind of blanket rejection of the whole idea.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which is very different than being individually attacked.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, I mean, they had never said, well, Photorealism is okay but Blackwell doesn't really measure up to the standard or anything—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it hasn't been quite as painful, the negative criticism.

TOM BLACKWELL: No, no, not in a personal way. It's just, somehow, I feel it's just one more of those kinds of not very well thought out and easy-to-arrive-at blanket assumptions about something that people don't really want to think about very deeply.

And of course, maybe—you know, people are busy; there's lots going on, so why should they take the time to really examine their attitudes about something which a lot of people think was, anyway, a short and not very important thing that happened in art history in the '70s which is as easily forgotten as bellbottom trousers and, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which keep coming back.

TOM BLACKWELL: [Laughs.] Yeah, things like that, you know. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you ever have the opportunity or the ambition to meet and talk to critics or art historians, maybe through another artist or dealer, to cultivate a kind of better understanding of your work?

TOM BLACKWELL: The only one that I really got, I would say—aside from Linda, of course—talked at length about anything like that was Gregory Babcock who unfortunately is dead. And he's the only one who really sort of got it—what I was trying to do. And he wrote a wonderful essay, a short essay, but anyway, talking about flatness and kind of taking off on the whole Greenberg idea of the picture plane and how somehow that I had taken this idea and done a little twist on it.

So the picture plane was, in my case, a windowpane and that I was playing with that idea spatially. He said, in a way, Blackwell paints the illusion but it's flatter than flat. It's a kind of inside-out depiction of depth.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So he was, you would say, a champion of your work.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Very much so. And he would have been more so had he lived—I think he was angling for me to get in a little painting or a little watercolor or something, which I would have gladly done! But he was killed, unfortunately. Never happened.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you had opportunities, and have you welcomed them, to speak about your work? Would you like to speak about it publicly—lecturing, teaching, being a visiting instructor?

TOM BLACKWELL: I've done that. I did that at Dartmouth; I did it at the University of Arizona—I loved it. But I was—for three years, I taught at SVA [School of Visual Arts, New York City] in their graduate program. Quite an honor considering you know where—you know my background, also you can imagine how I felt about that. But that was very challenging and tough.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that in the '80s?

TOM BLACKWELL: In the '80s, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were still living in New York.

TOM BLACKWELL: And gee, I remember one talk I gave to the entire MFA student body. A slide lecture and it worked talking about it all. I was terrified. I was absolutely shaking before I could—I went up and I gave a great talk and got a standing ovation, the whole thing. It was thrilling.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I guess you're touching a new generation.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, well, I mean by then they were already thinking of me as well, Photorealism, that's like the '70s. But they were all—that generation was thinking in terms of, how can I network and how can I find strong mentors who will advance my career? The whole idea of being an artist had evolved from one of artistic commitment to the idea of, sort of, engineering a career. Totally alien idea to me, if you can imagine.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you feel that teaching at SVA impacted your work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Didn't really impact the work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You said you enjoyed it.

TOM BLACKWELL: I enjoyed it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was your approach as a teacher?

TOM BLACKWELL: Unconventional, I would say. I'm like some of the other colleagues there. It was a great faculty. We had—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Blank out?

TOM BLACKWELL: Senior moment, here.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Robert Mangold. Judy Pfaff was on the—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Interesting.

TOM BLACKWELL: —pretty top people. So of course, I was the lone Photorealist.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Don Eddy taught at SVA.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Not in the M.F.A. program while I was there, maybe at some other time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Maybe in the undergraduate program.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But when you moved full-time to Upstate New York that would become difficult to continue.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that why it ended?

TOM BLACKWELL: It ended because of budget cuts, really. They said, well, look Tom, people like you—we like you here and you're doing a fine job, but we have budget cuts and we're going to have to put you on part-time. And I said, well, fine, do I keep my medical benefits then? And they said I couldn't, so I said, well, I'm sorry, I can't continue.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Moving to a more conceptual question, one writer recently proposed that there was something in common between Photorealism in the early '70s and early reality television, such as that show on PBS, *An American Family*, as well as connection to the documentary films of the Maysles brothers [Albert and David Maysles] and others. Was that something you or other artists you talked to thought of?

TOM BLACKWELL: [Inaudible.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I think it goes to the question of whether or not one thinks Photorealism is essentially a documentary form as opposed to a more interpretive or philosophical approach. So I guess I would say, yeah, I mean, Photorealism is a documentary form. But I think it documents pretty banal, ordinary things. Doesn't go into any kind of extreme, for the most part, situation or milieu or anything. And in fact, that very ordinariness is one of the things that was held up against it in the early days of being. Of course, ordinary not really a fit subject for serious artistic exploration of any sort of kind.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yet it was following Pop Art, which focused on the same kind of ordinary—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, it did. It focused on it but in a, kind of, mocking, in-your-face sort of way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM BLACKWELL: Whereas Photorealism said, well, there's nothing extraordinary about this. This just is a reflection of the world that many of us, if not most of us, live in.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yet these TV programs, and documentaries did sometimes focus on the American family, a typical, potentially boring, slice of American culture.

TOM BLACKWELL: If that's what they did then, certainly, we're doing very much the same sort of thing. And if it's radical, it's only radical because the ordinary is put into a context in which it's seen as either some kind of art or something notable, or at least notable enough to be documented in that way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mentioned the title that Ivan Karp gave.

TOM BLACKWELL: Radical Realism.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Radical Realism. That made me wonder, do you see your work as being connected to, in any way, other artists who were realists at the time, who weren't using the photograph, but who were finding ways of continuing to paint in some kind of realist tradition? We mentioned Mark Tansey. There's lots of other artists who were—who have been realists.

TOM BLACKWELL: Of course. I mean I can admire what they do and yet see it as very different. There are people like William Bailey. Fine painters or even people who are more closely related like you mentioned last night, Claudio Bravo—very fine painter. But, I think he's doing something which—philosophically and then his basic approach, I think, is a very different kind of thing. It relates to a much older tradition of painting than we do.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It's been said about Photorealism, that the impersonal photomechanical look of the paintings—of course, that's one person's opinion—calls attention to the cold artificiality of the post-modern world and therefore implicitly criticizes it. Does that ring true? Or false?

TOM BLACKWELL: That's true, but it's only half the truth. I think the other half of the truth is that, and again I speak personally, there's also a celebration of that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Celebration of the world, of the—

TOM BLACKWELL: —the cold, impersonal and yet gleaming, in a very particular way, very beautiful world.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. There's also this question of inviting the viewer to think about the difference between reality and illusion, imagination and truth. Are those kinds of dichotomies and questions part of your conscious thinking approach to your work?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think they are, yeah. What you said a minute ago about the impersonal, and this, sort of, I forget the phrase, what was it?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let's see. Photomechanical?

TOM BLACKWELL: Photomechanical world. The thing is that this cold perfection in all would seem to be anti-human and in some way, kind of, soul destroying. The modern world basically reducing people to numbers or just, kind of, little cogs in some gigantic wheel of civilization and all this kind of thing. This is true. At the same time it gives a great deal back to people in terms of our, kind of, access to knowledge and transportation and everything else. So I mean it's not all just one kind of thing. And this is a weird segue but suddenly I was remembering—cause you said you had recently interviewed Richard Serra. And he's a—

JUDITH RICHARDS: No.

TOM BLACKWELL: Didn't you say that?

JUDITH RICHARDS: No.

TOM BLACKWELL: Or somebody said that, no? Okay. Well, anyway, I was thinking about Richard Serra. Forgive me, I thought—who is an amazing sculptor. I certainly without any hesitation give him that. But I recall an incident of a few years back where he created a sculpture, I can't remember whether it was *Tilted Arc* the really famous one that was installed in Manhattan outside of the federal building. And the workers were complaining about the thing because they'd come out on a lunch break and have to walk through this thing and felt so oppressed by the whole thing.

And I thought, boy, here's a perfect example of this sort of, okay these poor workers living out their days, their work days in these soulless cubicles in some federal building. And their lives are so proscribed by this whole thing and then they go out to get some air and just get a little break from their obviously monotonous, if not downright soul-destroying, job or whatever. And have to walk through a magnificent and yet from their point of view has to be, further oppression of their space in a way.

And yet, for a sculptor like Serra—I mean this is a huge, monumental and brilliant achievement and yet, in that configuration and location there it was oppressive—further oppressive of their lives, you know? So it is doing exactly the opposite of what art should do. Anyway.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hmm.

TOM BLACKWELL: Forgive my segue by it somehow just came out because of this reference to this kind of cold, impersonal—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. Other than the paintings that have been called metaphorical, have political or social events of the time entered your work? Have you thought about that? Or have you specifically chosen not to—

TOM BLACKWELL: I chose not to because I did previous work before I was a Photorealist that was very political and consciously had the social aspects to it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM BLACKWELL: So I made the decision once I started doing Photorealism to—it's sort of, like that old, ancient TV show where—ever watch Dragnet back in the '50s? Where the cop would be interviewing a woman witness—she'd say well, I don't know what—and Jack Webb would say, we just want the facts ma'am, just the facts. Well, that's what Photorealism is like, just the facts. And hopefully, the facts themselves are amazing. You don't have to elaborate on them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Going back on a couple of paintings that you did of store windows, one, I think, is called *Modesty under Construction*, 1988, where scaffolding is one half of the painting.

TOM BLACKWELL: Where it's in front of the window.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In front of the window, which was a new element—I didn't see that in others. Did you think that that was a new addition to your vocabulary? Was it an experiment? Or was it as if there was a car there or anything else?

TOM BLACKWELL: I liked it for that reason that the scaffolding was there because it did several things. It was an actual element on the street. So I didn't make it up or go to any lengths to fabricate a situation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which you never would have done.

TOM BLACKWELL: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No.

TOM BLACKWELL: But, the scaffolding and the angles of the scaffolding divided the image up in a way which made a really interesting compositional element which I was happy to use and, in fact, I liked a lot.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you do any other paintings—

TOM BLACKWELL: With scaffolding like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or with any other element that broke up the space in that way? Using such a strong element that was not a reflection?

TOM BLACKWELL: I may have. It's really hard to think back.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes—[laughs]. Well, we can go on.

TOM BLACKWELL: So many of these paintings.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —wondering if it was an important moment.

TOM BLACKWELL: That, sort of, gets to this issue like I told you about this painting yesterday.

JUDITH RICHARDS: *Queens Boulevard*, 1974. Yeah.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. And the antennae—

TOM BLACKWELL: But I mean it's taken from inside the car, you see?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Ah, yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: So the dashboard of the car and part of the window becomes a kind of framing device, gives it a context and also refers very much to abstract painting of a sort.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: Which is really important in my work. I mean, I think in a way I'm a realist painter with a, kind of abstractionist's sensibility.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Through all the years when you were in New York, living in SoHo, did you regularly go to galleries and museums?

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —to see the work of your contemporaries?

TOM BLACKWELL: Always, yeahyes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you miss that when you left? Moved Upstate New York?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, first of all, we didn't give it up because we were traveling. We went back a lot.

JUDITH RICHARDS: On a regular basis to New York?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. So there was not too much to give up. Also, one can become sated with it, doing it so much.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You also continued to go back to the city to take photographs.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, yeah. Mm-hmm.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was always your source.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I noticed that there are many paintings done from photographs you've taken during your travels, and I wanted to ask you—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, that's more recent though, that aspect. And also, I mean, there's a certain philosophical aspect to that where I feel like these reflective-window situations and modern urban imagery which is also impersonal, in many ways, this is the modern world. So you could go to Tokyo and find the same thing you might find in New York or Paris or London or any modern urban city.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have there been any travels that have had an impact on your work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. We went to Morocco at some point and hired a car at some point and went out into the desert and visited an old Roman ruin that was left that the Moors had pretty well trashed, but the basic—a lot of the basic architecture was still there. And it was a magical thing because I mean, the Roman Empire as you know, was everywhere, everywhere. This was an outpost, in fact, I used a thing—it was called Volubilis that was a—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hmm. Do you know how to spell that?

TOM BLACKWELL: It's there. So what I did, and this—was I used imagery from the ruin—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, here it is.

TOM BLACKWELL: —interposed with modern imagery. So I'd take fragments of architecture and stuff and or—the statuary, unfortunately, was pretty well smashed up and had been transported to museums.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hmm.

TOM BLACKWELL: The Muslim culture, of course, thought that any—well, that was a bit of mosaic that was left. So I made a—so this is a kind of meditation, if you will, on the idea of ancient and modern where I used the letters as, kind of, spatial and time dividers between ancient and modern iconography. And put it together and it spells out this word and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And this word is the name of the site.

TOM BLACKWELL: It's also, as they point out in this essay—Volubilis means something about, let me see, something about like water or transformation or something. I don't know the exact—but I mean, aside from the name of a Roman city, it also is descriptive of a process of some kind which I can't—I'm not recalling at the moment.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A related question. Do you find that things you read, either fiction or non-fiction, can be inspirations or important to any aspect of your work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Sure.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Any particular kind of reading that you have felt was enriching and important for your work?

TOM BLACKWELL: Reading history, for example, is very important.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you focused on different aspects of history over the years?

TOM BLACKWELL: It's more random. But I think about—well, a book that was really important to me in a funny sort of way was Robert Hughes, who's mostly an art critic but he's also a social critic and historian. And he wrote a great book about the founding of Australia called *The Fatal Shore* [Vintage Books: New York, 1987], which I found absolutely fascinating. But I can't really, you know, draw a direct line between that book or any particular book and what I'm trying to do in these paintings.

But just a growing sense of, sort of, the continuum of human endeavor and how we attempt to do a particular thing in our own time, but that's divorced from the greater sweep of history or time. And the way the culture changes and how it's all seen in a much broader context over centuries, that sort of thing. I think the influence of that idea just informs the work of—I'm fumbling for words, I'm sorry.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mentioned the documentary aspect of Photorealism in your paintings, as if each painting is a snapshot of a point in history.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And can be read by historians or by people as a historical document.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. The models of cars that are there, what kind of clothing they wore, the signage, the architectural styles. In that sense it's—this is a genre painting, of a sort. Which I used to think was a kind of a dismissive or pejorative term. Except forgive me, Vermeer, I mean, the gods of painting. A genre painter, well—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Or [Jean-Baptiste-Siméon] Chardin.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Moving to a different subject, your relationship over the years with gallery representation. You had some early shows, we talked about Los Angeles galleries, and then we've touched on other exhibits, but I wanted to go back and start with the show you had at Sidney Janis in 1995. How did that happen, what were your feelings about that,what was your experience of working with Sidney Janis?

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay. The Janis Gallery, before I was with them, put on a show. This is in the early days, Photorealism was emerging, called "Sharp-Focused Realism" and I was in the show, as were many of the other

Photorealists. This was a show that garnered tremendous attention at the time and press and everything. It was our, sort of, moment to emerge on the whole cultural scene.

I had a pretty good painting in the show. I was thrilled because, of course, at that time Janis was still seen, I mean, as one of the very top galleries. Probably equal to, at that time, Castelli in terms of its reputation.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let me see, that's 1972.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yep.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: So anyway, after the show—they were interested in various people, representing some people. I think they were more interested in Chuck Close than anyone else. Although Chuck refused to be in the "Sharp-Focused" show. He wanted to be in a different show. Chuck was a very astute career builder for himself. He said, I'm not going to be part of some group like Photorealism, whatever that is. But anyways, so they were clearly interested in me and so I was, of course, thrilled. I thought, well, this is it at last, the big time. Sidney Janis, I mean, I've arrived. So it was all good to that point and so I started doing paintings.

And so we made a kind of informal arrangement where they paid me a stipend every month. That's very nice. So I thought, well, this is great, I don't have to worry. I can just do the paintings I want to do and it's all good from here on. And it was. And then I had the show and the show was well-received and the reviews were decent too. That's the one where they said, this fellow seems to have a little more going on than the others.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was in 1975.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes. Not just monkey see, monkey do, this guy has some other agenda that we're not quite sure what it is, but something.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how was it working with him?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I had little to do with Sidney. He was an old man by then and was, kind of, abrogating gallery responsibilities to the two sons. He had Conrad and Carroll. Conrad had little to do with it. Conrad was trying to pursue an acting career. And Carroll, the other one, was involved in the gallery a lot but I was never impressed with Carroll very much. He seemed to me to just to be a, kind of the sort of, pampered son of a rich gallery dealer who kind of fell into the business without any great amount of real commitment or—well, he certainly had a lot of knowledge, he grew up in the business, but I couldn't—I never took Carroll really seriously.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you had that one show. It was received well. But you didn't stay with the gallery.

TOM BLACKWELL: No, the thing was that they—the show was critically received well but they weren't selling. They weren't selling, they weren't selling. And in the meantime, I was getting the stipend and at some point I said, well wait a minute here, I'm getting the stipend every month. I owe them thousands of dollars and they're not selling any of the work.

We had a friend we sent into the gallery as a kind of spy, as a potential collector interested in the work, go in just to see how they would respond to this. He went in and spent some time there and the finally talked to Carroll and Carroll said—he had this kind of whiny voice and he'd say—well, what do you make of this work, what's your reaction?

So our friend said, well, I think it's terrific but Carroll said yeah, we're trying him out, we think he's pretty good. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: Something ambivalent like that.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah—[laughs]. Yeah, I mean, it was like no commitment, no conviction whatsoever. Just, sort of, I'm one of the guys that they can try out. So anyway this came back to me and I thought, well, that's not too good to know. Didn't sound like they're buying me very much at all. I went to the gallery and I had to go to the restroom and I went through the back rooms to find the restroom. As I'm walking through the back rooms I see in the racks stacks of [Arshile] Gorkys, de Koonings, I'm seeing [Constantin] Brancusis, [Alberto] Giacomettis—a treasure trove of huge, major, major artists from the 20th century and I thought, all of whom at one time or another had passed through the gallery. And I thought, aha, that's how they build their collection. See, they put them on stipend, then don't sell the work and then the artists have to release the work to get out of the debt.

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JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Tom Blackwell in Andes, New York, on September 23,

2009 for the Archives of American Art, disc six.

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay, so I'm with my Janis story, so I walked through the backrooms trying to find the men's room, walking by this treasure trove of, you know, all the major artists of the mid 20th century—Pollocks, Gorkys, de Koonings, Giacomettis, Brancusi—the works go on and on. I mean, just, they—a kind of hit parade of major, major artists, all of whom or most of whom at one time or another had been associated with the gallery. And I—suddenly the alarm bells were going off in my head.

I thought, that is how they accumulated this collection. They would put these artists on stipends and then not sell the work, and they'd have to give up a work to settle the debt. And so I thought, well, no wonder Sidney Janis is such a powerful dealer. He's a shrewd old man, you know. So I thought, I have to get out of here. They're—I'm not going to be played like this, you know.

So we had a family friend who is a lawyer who I told the situation to, and he was—it was a father-and-son law firm and he was the son, but his father was a very crusty, crafty old guy who really knew the ropes and was of Sidney Janis's generation. So he agreed to do the negotiating for me. So I met with him, we shared a cab over to the gallery and went up and Henry's father, the elder Mr. Blumenthal negotiated a way out of my situation with Janis. Sort of two crusty old bulls, you know, kind of.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you in fact need to leave a work there to finish it up?

TOM BLACKWELL: Actually no, we worked on the payment arrangement where I would pay them back over time, which was great. And at that point, that is when—during this period, Louis was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Louis Meisel—

TOM BLACKWELL: Louis Meisel was trying to convince me to go to the gallery—with his gallery, which I didn't really want to do. But he put together with this man, Stuart Speiser, the airplane lawyer, who had a huge collection of airplane paintings and wanted to commission this big collection. So it was a kind of a fait accompli, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Having had this legal entanglement with Janis, did you start out with Meisel thinking, okay, I'm going to—I'm not going to make any legal agreements, I'm just going to be represented?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think it was—you know, they didn't offer a legal agreement, and I didn't insist upon—and don't forget, and I was still pretty young and kind of wet behind the ears, and I wasn't going to do anything to jeopardize what clearly was a huge opportunity, or I thought.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was 19—and so then you had a show there—

TOM BLACKWELL: I had a show, yeah—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —in 1977, and you remained there, and—

TOM BLACKWELL: Not '77. Had to be earlier than that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, that's what I had, 1977, the first show—one-person show.

TOM BLACKWELL: I thought—I would have thought it was earlier, '75, maybe.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, seventy-five was the Sidney Janis show.

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, was the—oh—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The one-person show.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, okay, '75. So what was '77, that would be—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The first Meisel one-person show.

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, that would be right, then, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Maybe you had work in the gallery before that.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, mm-hmm.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —obviously, there's other shows we're not mentioning.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What were you looking for in a dealer?

TOM BLACKWELL: Primarily, a way to make a living, I suppose.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

TOM BLACKWELL: And also, right below there would be visibility and respect, I guess.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you thinking of it also as joining a community of artists? Some artists, say in the '70s, who are all part of a gallery would know each other or come to know each other, and have said that that could be a supportive kind of situation.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, Louis certainly had that idea and supported that mindset. He and Susan would have these kinds of parties or brunches. It was a kind of salon idea where, you know, we would all go over there and get to know each other. And that was very nice. It wasn't anything formal, it just happened that he would—they had the space, they had a huge loft in SoHo, and it was an opportunity to meet your colleagues and have a nice dinner or a brunch or something. And, you know—but nothing was any—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was it through those events that you became friends with other artists in the gallery?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are there any particular people you want to mention whom you became close to?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, at around that time, and not because of these salon things, but it just happened that we lived in close proximity—Chuck Close and I were very good friends at one point, you know. A lot of studio visits, we'd go to lunch together several times a month and just—or, you know, have an evening or something, you know. Chuck and I were very good—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How was that support important to you?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I mean, very frankly, I—Chuck was emerging at that point as one of the most important artists of that generation, and he knew everybody, and of course, Chuck also had—you know, from my point of view, I mean, Chuck was—you know, we both, I think, respected each other a great deal, but of course, as you know from my background, I was kind of hardscrabble and Chuck came out of the Yale [University, New Haven, CT] M.F.A. program and very much kind of Ivy League. You know, that whole thing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did he have certain insights and reactions to your work that were interesting to you, and likewise you to him?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, I mean, of course, we'd talk painting all the time, and I'm not sure that it was so much in relation to my work, per se, as it was issues of painting or painting from a photograph and how you dealt with that, and sometimes just broader issues about just painting, per se. And of course he knew—I mean, you know, the thing with Chuck was because of his Yale background there. I mean, he was friendly with other people who were as far removed from Photorealism as you can imagine, like Richard Serra, who went to school with them there at the same time, and various people. Nancy Graves he knew. He knew everybody, and in fact, Chuck—a big part of Chuck's whole way of operating was, his social life was an adjunct of his art and life, you know, to great—to his great advantage, I might add.

Which I didn't understand at all. I mean, to me, I mean, you know, from my point of view, the idea of cultivating powerful mentors seemed like cheating to me. I mean, the whole idea of building a network of people who could advance your cause seemed totally a dishonest sort of thing. And I mean, this was before the '80s and the whole idea of mentoring and mentoring, and a lot of stuff—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It sounded like there was mutual support going on, too.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, there was. I mean, there was a—you know, except Chuck didn't need support. I needed support.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But did you think it was one way, then, that you were the only one who was gaining from this relationship?

TOM BLACKWELL: No, I don't. I think—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it was mutual.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Well, I think Chuck had tremendous respect and perhaps a little fear of my talent. I mean, I was one of the few people who could actually constitute a challenge or a threat to Chuck in some way, you know? I think.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So in addition to discussion of issues of photography and painting and realism, it sounds like you also enlarged your understanding of the art world through these conversations.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, oh yeah. Right, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were there other artists whom you were—in the '70s, '80s, when you were living in New York, whom you had an equivalent kind of relationship with?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, the only ones would be Ralph Goings, Richard McLean, but they were mostly still in California. Later, when they moved back East, or at least had houses back here, we became much closer.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So you showed at Meisel for many years, and then you switched and you showed at another gallery, Carlo Lamagna.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, because I wanted to branch out from Photorealism, and Louis was not in any way sympathetic to that idea.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that's the time when your work was changing, too—you said you maintained the Photorealist painting, but—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. I kept doing Photorealism, but I was developing this other work on the side, so to speak.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that's mainly what you showed with Carlo.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What were the benefits that you saw of being at Carlo's gallery?

TOM BLACKWELL: I didn't see much benefit at all, which was—you know. I mean, the thing was, the only benefit was, the gallery was on 57nd St. and it was in a pretty good gallery building. There were other serious artists who were not Photorealists in the building, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your work could be seen in a different context.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that was a positive change.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, it was.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Nevertheless, you decided to leave—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, what happened was that for financial reasons, I kept doing Photorealism, and I gave a few to Carlo, and Carlo sold a few of those. He was unable to sell the more radical work, but he could—there was still a strong market for Blackwell Photorealism, so I made some money on it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Then you decided to go back to being represented by Meisel?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, what happened was that I—what I tried to do, I left Carlo and I tried to approach some other gallery with the new work I thought would be more connected to Carlo. Carlo was good, I mean, it was not a negative, but he was not terribly powerful or well-connected. I mean, he had some connections, but it was—I thought I could benefit by somebody with a little more juice, you know? At which point I entered two years of kind of heartbreaking going around, sort of trying to show work to people who were 25, 30 years younger than me who either had never heard of me or thought of me as kind of a historical figure, or in any case, not cool, not hip, not au courant, you know. Old, in other words. There's no greater sin than being old. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: You weren't even that old in the '80s.

TOM BLACKWELL: I wasn't that old, but compared to the people I was competing with, I was old, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So that was a discouraging experience.

TOM BLACKWELL: You know, I think eventually the stress of all that was what led me to have the stroke.

JUDITH RICHARDS: While that was happening, you continued to be in group exhibitions, your work continued to be shown.

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, yeah, right. And I continued to do Photorealism, although increasingly hating it and feeling like, well, I could do this, but this is not the real me, you know, this is just—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Feeling trapped?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, thinking like this is my day job, you know, I can do Photorealism, but what I really wanted to do is something else, and—however, I had this major stroke in 1999—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: But before I had the stroke, I had a show of this new work, whatever you want to call it, metaphorical work or radical work or non-Photorealist work at a small arts venue up here in the Catskills. And just because people around here knew about me but were not really familiar with the work, so I decided, okay, I'll show it there. And so there was an exhibition space, and we put on a beautiful show, which—at one point I videotaped the whole show, and I gave a talk there, a sort of gallery talk, one in the round, and you know, speaking about the work and everything. It was great.

But it was run by this kind of amateur organization called the Roxbury Arts Group, which—the head of which was this woman who we didn't know was in the midst of having a nervous breakdown, and she just blew it, and she overbooked things. And during my show, they'd booked a modern dance company into the show and they had to move all my paintings for the modern dance thing, and then she'd booked a wedding, and—oh, it was like—it was just totally an amateur kind of thing.

But the final blow was, I went there—some friends came up, and I said, well, let's go and see the show, and so we went on a Sunday, went in. There was nobody watching the place, the door was open, there was a lawnmower parked in the middle of the—a power, you know, a riding mower parked in the middle of my show. I went ballistic, I just blew my stack and said, I'm out of here, I'm getting my—I'm removing my work and that's the end of this, you know.

So I went around ripping down old posters I could find and, you know, just—but then the final blow was, before I took the show down there was—it happens that the critic who writes for the New Yorker, Peter Schjeldahl, has a summer house in Andes, not too far from here. So we knew a mutual friend—I mean, I didn't know him, I had never met him, I'd read his writings for years, but his wife Brooke had a store, and a couple of people we knew, knew her. So I got the phone number and I called him up and said, look, I know you don't—this is a little out of your normal thing, but this is a local thing, and who I was, and everything. He sort of knew who I was, you know, but—so I told him I had this show at the Roxbury Arts Group of this alternative work and I thought it would be nice if he could look at it, he might find it interesting or something.

Well, he was very dismissive of me, I mean, as—I don't do scouting, he called it, I don't do scouting, like a—I don't know, whether it's—I think what he was trying to say was that the magazine sent him on assignments to cover certain people, but the way he put it to me was kind of—rather curt, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you began to think it was a big mistake to even have a show at that place.

TOM BLACKWELL: Two hours later I was in the hospital, paralyzed, so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, so you remember that call.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I was—first, I was flabbergasted, I was furious after all the rejections of galleries I had gotten, and then to have this kind of dismissive—very—I mean, he was—in retrospect, he was probably just thinking, oh, some local artist is trying to—whatever. And I don't know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, you might have expected that he would know your work, your Photorealist work.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I would think so, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This brings up a question. At Meisel, or other galleries, but since you'd been at Meisel most years, maybe it applies there, did you want to have a role in the marketing process, in calling press, in helping to draft press releases, in deciding what image to put on a postcard? Did you want to be involved in that, and were you?

TOM BLACKWELL: I wanted to be, and often—not always, but sometimes—I mean, whatever my preference would have been was not factored in because Louis had some other agenda. And, you know. And also, I mean—but I mean, you know, I would defer to that because he was a person marketing the work and, you know, I

thought, well, I mean, he has a legitimate point, you know. So—he has my financial life in his hands, so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you ever interested in placing any kinds of restrictions, through your dealer, on the sale of your work or on the exhibition of your work, that you would have control over the exhibitions it was placed in and the context it was placed in? Let me repeat the question.

TOM BLACKWELL: Okay.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Once you brought the work in the gallery, did you ever have any desire to maintain any kind of control once it was sold, either to get money when it was resold or to say that anyone who exhibits the work needs to ask you if it's okay, to control the context it's seen in.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, that was sort of a two-part question, because—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: —as far as the resale of things, Louis has and had, and also still has, as far as I know, a policy with his collectors that if they purchase a painting from him for X dollars, at anytime in the future, he will buy it back for the same price. Now, if the work is then subsequently resold, he will share in the profits.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's a written policy?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, it's not written, it's a—

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's not.

TOM BLACKWELL: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is there a—

TOM BLACKWELL: It's an understanding that we have, and he's been very good about that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's a specific percentage—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, I mean, it's—yeah. And it's very smart, because—for several reasons. One reason is that, of course, it's a great marketing ploy from a collector's point of view, because when they buy a painting, they get to enjoy it, maybe loan it to a show or something, get some credit, and then they can resell it for the—get the money back at some future point.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Has this happened?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. In fact, I have one painting called—it was an early motorcycle painting I did in—I think it was 1976 called *Bond's Corner, Spring*, which we sold to a collector—the prices were cheap then—$6,000. The collector, years later, was getting divorced or something, and—

[END OF TRACK AAA_blackw09_1572.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Tom Blackwell in Andes, New York on September 23, 2009 for the Archives of American Art, disc seven.

We're talking about the painting being resold.

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, yeah. So Louis has—continues to have this policy of—with collectors, if they buy a painting for X dollars at some point, he will buy the painting back at the same price at some future time, and then, of course, he can resell it. And it's very smart from his point of view because in that interim time, the value of the work has gone up a lot, or some, anyway, and so then he can resell it for a profit again. And very generously, he has offered, although this is not written down, to share in that increased sale price.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Not the percentage you got in the first place, but something.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right. So it's a good and generous arrangement, which—so your question was kind of two-part—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: And your second part was about somebody who bought a painting and then wanting to—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Controlling the exhibition of the painting.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, well, I have no control of that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you found yourself wishing that your painting wasn't included in a show? I mean, sometimes when curators create exhibitions—even though they don't have to, they will approach the artist and ask, is it okay with you if I borrow a painting from a completely different source, but do you approve of your painting being in this exhibition?

TOM BLACKWELL: Nobody has ever said that to me, I've never been approached in that way, ever, so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you allowed the gallery to keep the archive, photographic and other, records of your work and your career or have you kept that yourself?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, they keep an archive, and for the most part, we get copies so that we have our own. But the gallery photographs the work in their space there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did they give you copies of the photographs, too?

TOM BLACKWELL: We get—yeah. They take transparencies and slides, and usually I get a slide. And they maintain the original and transparency.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Have you ever wanted to have representation outside the U.S., have a gallery outside the U.S.?

TOM BLACKWELL: Sure, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Has that happened?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not directly, although I did have a show in Paris two years ago. It was arranged through Meisel at Galerie Patrice Trigano, which was a great opportunity. And the show was a big success. I would do it again.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are there any relationships with other artists that have been important to you that we haven't touched on? And has that changed over the years, the importance of close relationships with the other artists from, let's say, when you were in your 30s and 40s and as you've gotten older?

TOM BLACKWELL: I would say what has changed is that I was very close to certain people early on and I'm not so close now, Chuck being the primary example of that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Was that because at that point in your career, it was more important for you to have those relationships, and later, it was more important to be just focused on your work—

TOM BLACKWELL: No. Chuck and I had a falling out, I guess, and I was very unhappy with some things he said about me, and one thing he said about me for publication I really took exception to. And on the other hand, I think it was—I mean, the thing is with Chuck, I admire his—him as an artist tremendously, and I also admire his skill in negotiating his career, but he—the thing with Chuck is that he saw, and perhaps rightly, an art career as a kind of game, almost like a—like a very elaborate chess game, and he was a superb player. Whereas with me, of course, I didn't know it was a game. To me, it was life and death, you know. I saw it more in sort of gladiatorial terms, and sort of like they gave you a little trident and a piece of netting and you'd go out there and fight for your life, and that sort of—that was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you feel you were in direct competition with—

TOM BLACKWELL: Absolutely, oh, absolutely.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you feel that was in a way a positive force in propelling you, in making you ambitious in a positive sense?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, but of course, anything like that has a negative side, and so the negative side was that, you know, any setback or perceived betrayal, or even if it's not a real betrayal, it's just a—could be a misunderstanding, I was just so vulnerable inside, you know, that this is not a good thing. I'm much older now, and as they say, philosophical. I don't really care that much anymore about any of the career things. I care about being comfortable, being left alone and able to do my work and hopefully maintain good health long enough to do a lot more of it, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Have you ever felt that you were part of—and did you want to be—part of an art community when you lived in upstate Upstate New York, or did you really enjoy being there because you weren't part of an art community?

TOM BLACKWELL: The latter. I mean, I felt—yeah, I mean, at various times, like when we lived in New Hampshire, there was a kind of art community there which was comprised of some very nice and often sincere people who were happy to—more than happy to have somebody of actual reputation or renown as part of their group. And that was great—I mean, you know, we got a lot of dinner invitations and people wanted to know us, but I always felt alienated. I thought, these people are lovely, but they don't understand. I mean, you know, the art world is sort of a vicious and competitive place. It's not some nice little society of supportive colleagues. This is battle, I mean, this is—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Again, the gladiator reference.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right. So in that sense, I mean, I could enjoy them, but somehow they weren't in the game, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you and Louis Meisel have an agreement, or did you have an expectations, that you would have a show every other year, or a show every three years, or was it looser and you felt, when you were ready, you would say, okay, we'll now plan a show?

TOM BLACKWELL: We didn't have a prescribed, every two years you had a show. Simply—you know. I'm overdue. I would say, I'm overdue, and then he'd say, well, let's see, who has what painting, and then it would get down to, can I borrow this back, you know, would it be—would the person loan, would the shipping and insurance be too—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Would that make you think, well, why should I sell anything in advance then? I shouldn't bring my paintings to the gallery between shows; I should keep them for the show?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, well, I didn't have that luxury.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You needed a steady income, so you'd have to send them, and yet when you wanted to have a show, you were dependent on people lending them back for the show.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But it usually worked out, right, that—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. I mean, because what would happen with collectors over years, the smart ones got the idea that this lending to a show idea would increase the value of their investment and create more demand for the work and therefore drive up prices, you know, so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you detected an influence of your work on young artists? Have younger artists been in touch with you?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. In fact, we met some of them, you know, like on this latest junket to Monaco and earlier to Zurich. Some of the younger Photorealists that Louis handles who said, oh yeah, you're a big influence. You know, I can see it in the work, in their work. So I mean, that's very nice and never—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Since you have a Web site, do you get e-mails from artists from all over asking your advice or—

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, the Web site is fairly recent. I mean, I didn't have one until recently, and I can't say honestly that I've besieged with—[they laugh]—accolades so far.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Are there younger artists whose works, maybe not necessarily just Photorealists, are there younger artists whose work interests you now?

TOM BLACKWELL: Mark Tansey interests me a lot, because I think it's so smart, and he's a good painter, but he has a really—you know, humor is very hard to do well, and he's—he has a very wry and dry humor which I admire. If he can pull that off in painting, I think—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you seen his recent work—[inaudible, cross talk].

TOM BLACKWELL: Not the most recent, but I—if I know he's showing and it's available, I will go, I'll make a point of going, because I admire it, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. Are there other artists, besides Mark Tansey, who you'd say that about?

TOM BLACKWELL: Sure. There are lots of good artists, and not necessarily Realists.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Right, that's what I mean.

TOM BLACKWELL: I mean I'm very, very much—I've never given up my love of great abstract painting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you go to New York on a regular basis now to see shows?

TOM BLACKWELL: Mm-hmm. Oh, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have there been any recent exhibitions that have really been—

TOM BLACKWELL: —piqued my interest? Well, of course I'm going to see the Vermeer now. Wouldn't miss it. But also Augustus Saint-Gaudens. They have a study, I think, a new one in the Met, go see that. We—in New Hampshire, years ago, we spent a summer before we owned our house up near Cornish, New Hampshire, where he had a house there, and we became friendly with the guy who was the caretaker of the house, and had a lot to do with the Saint-Gaudens Estate, saw the whole thing and the studio. Anyway, I was and still am an admirer of Saint-Gaudens.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What would you say drives you now to keep painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, it's complex. I think—I suppose the simplest answer would be, I don't know what else to do with my life. You know, that would be the—but then there's more to it than that. A sense, too, that—you know, I mean, for whatever reason, I have been given this enormous gift, and with a gift like that goes a responsibility, I think, to make something for the world, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: To share it.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Turning to this painting we see right here, you said that you've titled this the name of this street?

TOM BLACKWELL: *Morning in Monaco* [2009].

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's a commission. Is this something that is quite common or unusual?

TOM BLACKWELL: It's more common now than it used to be.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why do you think?

TOM BLACKWELL: Because people who see the work say, oh, I'd love to have one of your pieces, how about if you—do you have any interest in such and such a location, or—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Does it make you ask yourself, well, why don't they want to have the painting I've already done?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, presumably, the painting that's already done is one that's already sold.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh. And so have you done a number of these kinds of commissioned paintings?

TOM BLACKWELL: In the past several years, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: With this one, for example, what did the commissioner ask of you, specifically,?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, the idea was, we were in Monaco. He—this collector brought a number of photographs. He had this idea—well, it was a kind of two-part idea. He became—and he's a young man, he's only in his late 30s, I'd say. Anyway, he became interested in Photorealism as a somewhat overlooked or neglected and important movement in recent art, and he's—in his business, he's an entrepreneur, he's a venture capitalist who's a very smart guy who's made and I guess lost and remade piles of money already.

And so anyway, he decided to kind of capitalize a project for a number of Photorealists, both of the original generation and some of the newer people would participate, and he wanted to—he picked as a theme his favorite cities that he likes, and his favorite city is Zurich. So we were all flown to Zurich, and he said, well, you could do anything you'd like, it's just themed on the city of Zurich. Anything that fits within, you know, your normal work that you could theme around the city of Zurich. So I did a Zurich painting—

JUDITH RICHARDS: With the commitment that he was going to purchase this painting.

TOM BLACKWELL: That he would purchase the painting. He also flew us to Zurich, put us up in a hotel, wined

and dined us lavishly. It was a great deal, so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: How many of you were there?

TOM BLACKWELL: I think in the original group there were about eight or nine.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You all went at the same time?

TOM BLACKWELL: We all went at the same time, and Louis also went.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you think, well, why should I paint Zurich—if he likes my work, why don't I paint something else?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I mean, it did fit within my—what I'd mentioned earlier, that I felt like all urban, modern urban environments share many—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So if he said the Swiss countryside, you would have said, no, I'm not the person for you.

TOM BLACKWELL: I'm not doing cows, you know. [They laugh.] But Zurich is a city, and I didn't know much about Zurich except that it was a city, and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were there, you took photographs?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yes. And I did a painting, I did—you know, so we—it's kind of an interesting story. We—he hired a car for me to go around because he knew I had trouble walking at that point, so we went around to various locations in the city and I would get out and photograph. So I was photographing on this one—on something Bahnhofstrasse, which was the main street there, and there was a department store—

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

TOM BLACKWELL: Bahnhofstrasse, yeah. And so there was a store window there that I liked and was interested in, and it happened that a little bit down the street was parked a bright yellow Porsche, which was reflected in the window. And that was great, I'd been helped. I mean the color and the whole thing, it just made the composition. So I was photographing the thing and then suddenly, a woman came out and jumped in the car, was about to drive away, which would have ruined my shot—

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is the painting *Martina's Porsche* [2007]?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. So it turned out that—so he went up and stopped the woman and said—

JUDITH RICHARDS: He who?

TOM BLACKWELL: He, the collector.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, he was with you?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. He went with me for the shoot. He wanted to be art director or something.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Experience your vision.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Could see what the artist was seeing. He wanted to participate, which is great. Anyway, so he went up and tried to stop the woman from driving away. Turned out it was the tennis star, Martina Hingis. And she was—as soon as she saw the photographer and all, she thought—she was worried—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Paparazzi.

TOM BLACKWELL: —about paparazzi and everything. Then he explained, well, no, no, this is no paparazzi. It's a famous artist from New York. Anyways, so she consented to leave the car there for a minute so I could get the shot, which I did. That was the painting then, *Martina's Porsche*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But this relationship has continued because—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, because then his second favorite city was Monaco. So the following year we were sent to Monaco.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Same group of artists?

TOM BLACKWELL: Same group, yep—which was a blast. And the whole thing was crazy. I mean, I had no—

Monaco is not a place I would pick to go, and during Grand Prix Race Week it was nuts. It was like—

JUDITH RICHARDS: He particularly picked Grand Prix Race Week?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: He thought it would be good for you?

TOM BLACKWELL: I don't know what he thought, but we were there, anyway.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I mean that would be the most expensive time to make such arrangements.

TOM BLACKWELL: Oh, it was madness. Madness. I mean, he paid a fortune for hotels. I mean, we stayed—I mean, it was luxurious beyond any need that we had, certainly, or anything I could have imagined or wanted—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how did you navigate around that city, then, taking pictures?

TOM BLACKWELL: With difficulty. [They laugh.] It was hard but I did it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the instance where you did *Martina's Porsche*, that was the only painting you did of that trip?

TOM BLACKWELL: Actually, no. I did another one after that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And they both were purchased by him?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yep.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did he say that, oh if you make two paintings I'll buy them both.

TOM BLACKWELL: No. He wanted the one and he's actually in the reflection on the one, on the *Martina's Porsche*, he's there in the—reflected in the window. And then I did another one just because it was a great shot and I liked it and he bought that too.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you know that he was going to continue it to other cities?

TOM BLACKWELL: Not at the time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So it seemed to have been a success in his mind.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, we did that one and it worked and he had become an increasingly enthusiastic collector of Photorealism, so it all looked good to me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So he brought you all to

TOM BLACKWELL: To Monaco.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Monaco and—

TOM BLACKWELL: This was his fiancée, this woman.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was?

TOM BLACKWELL: Is as far as I know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, okay. [Laughs.] Did he ask you to make a painting and gave you this picture of her to put in it or—[inaudible, cross talk].

TOM BLACKWELL: We walked around Monaco and he thought this street would interest me and he was right, it did. And then he got the idea, said do you think we could put Susan in a painting. I said, sure. So we made an arrangement the next morning and she—we met in the lobby of the hotel and walked over there and she was, as you can see, a very attractive woman. Walked up and down the street and shot a lot of film.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] At no time has he approved or disapproved a painting before you did it?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I would give him a selection of possibilities and he would pick the one of the ones that I thought would be good but he preferred—go from there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I see. So before you did the *Yellow Porsche* [year?] you gave him, what? The photographs?

TOM BLACKWELL: Slides.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Slides, of *Yellow Porsche* paintings?

TOM BLACKWELL: Of that window.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

TOM BLACKWELL: With or without the Porsche.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I see. So you would want to do any of them that he selected.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. But I knew which ones were the best. So I would winnow it down to the ones that would actually work.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] What you were giving him were all—

TOM BLACKWELL: Possibles.

JUDITH RICHARDS: —paintings that you'd feel positive about.

TOM BLACKWELL: Possibles. Some better than others. I'd hope that he would pick the best—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you tell him which one you thought was the best?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: He'd have to go against your opinion to pick a different one?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And then the same case with this painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, she—Susan had some input on this because some of the pictures she didn't like them because it made her look fat. So we picked one that didn't make her look fat and she certainly doesn't look fat.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So have you found that in working on this painting, which is almost complete, you're doing anything differently than you've done before?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I'll tell you what's different about this painting a little bit. Most of the window paintings, the window and the façade around the window is a kind of framing device, and I often include very little of the street or the space around it. So that in this painting it's a different situation because the painting, half of it is the window reflection and the right half of the painting is the actual space depicted on the street. So it kind of gets to the spatial issue that I'm interested in here which is depiction of actual space and then the depiction of a plate-glass window which is reflecting actual space, which, in fact, is outside of the picture in another area. So you have a flatness and a depth, kind of, dialogue.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes. It's rather unique to have this kind of depth.

TOM BLACKWELL: So this is separate from what I would normally do. I mean other people have done this a lot. Like Estes does this a lot. That's not really my practice as a rule. But at the same time, the thing that's intriguing to me is that you have an actual person who's depicting walking face-forward right into the camera which is—she's not looking directly at it, but she's definitely very frontal, and that her reflection is in the window, also coming straight forward in that way.

So the doubling of that is, kind of, interesting. But what I have not done to my satisfaction is that the painting is not quite finished. The reflection and the resolution and that stuff in the glass is much more—it's sharper and more realized than the actual space on the right. So I have to—I want to get that architecture and a depiction of that space, especially the background, equally compelling, which it isn't yet.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you leave that in, because it's more challenging and something you haven't been dealing with lately?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, no. I think—I mean, my usual method of painting is just a very mundane, practical thing. I'm right-handed and I always work away from wet paint for that reason. So if I'm painting an area that's to the left, I'll finish that and gradually work right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I see, we're talking about the right-hand side of this painting so it's the last to be done.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right. And also if you'll notice the reflection of the woman is a little sharper than the actual woman. So I want to go in and really, kind of, tighten up on her and make her as compelling as the woman on the left. Also, the woman on the left—if I do it right—she should be glazed. She's a little too prominent. She should be, kind of, pushed back a little bit spatially speaking.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you adjusted any of the colors? I mean there's a wonderful balance between cool and warm, and then there's certain things like the two men on the right both have the same shirt. Maybe they work for the same company and that actually is true.

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, they're garbage collectors.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, it's garbage collectors. Do you adjust these things like the color of the two flags or the blueness in the windows and the yellow and the fine-tuning all those colors to—

TOM BLACKWELL: Absolutely, I do, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: They might not be exactly as appeared in the slide, in order to create the—

TOM BLACKWELL: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Also, I mean, there are things like the sky color in the actual sky on the right is pretty close to what it will be, although I have another coat yet to go on that. And also, I have to—the flag's in there but I haven't painted the flag poles and also there are things to be done there. Now, the reflected sky in the window here is going to be the same color but just slightly darker, especially on the top and then fade down toward the building because the reflected image has always got to be slightly darker than the actual.

And in the finishing stages of these paintings, that's the part of Photorealism that's the fun part for me because I've done all the really grunt work. All the heavy lifting is over. Now, I can really play with those very subtle relationships and I can do those things that seduce the eye into believing my particular take on this image.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Once you finish it, you think you're finished, do you put it aside or not look at it for a few days and come back, as a sort of test—

TOM BLACKWELL: My usual practice is to put plastic over it and get it out of here as fast as possible.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, oh. Not to be touched.

TOM BLACKWELL: Down to the gallery.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you don't want any second chances?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah, because the hardest thing for me is—painting the painting is not just executing it. I'm doing constant critiquing and second guessing of my work. So I mean it's basically—the work has been subjected to an extremely rigorous process of self-critique, and it's really hard to turn that off as long as I'm involved in the painting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Over the years you've determined at what point in that process it's done. You're not going to keep going.

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, I think I reach a point of diminishing returns. Or another way to put it would be simply giving up. I've done the best I can do. I can envision something better but I can't do it. So essentially it's a capitulation to, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Does that mean that you end the painting thinking that next time, I'm going to do this particular thing better?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. A little bit of that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In terms of that thinking, what kind of issues did you bring into this painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: What I brought into this painting was that—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Unfinished business, you might say. Or just a desire to do better.

TOM BLACKWELL: Top myself, I guess.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was there a particular thing you remember that you had in mind when you started this painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, aside from the fact that I loved the architecture, I loved all that. I thought that was a really, kind of a—you know, it takes this whole idea of a sleek and personal modern world, which it still is. But, if you put it into context that this wonderful Beaux-Arts ornamentation and so on, it softens it, gives it a certain kind of context. So I like that a lot.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were working on that painting, do you have in mind that you're going to do another painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: I have another shot of her that we took that morning coming out of another store which I like a lot. It was one of the possibles that was submitted. But he didn't choose that. But I think it'd make a great painting.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think—

TOM BLACKWELL: So I will do that at some point. Not immediately, I have a painting that I'm planning to do next called *Kiss, Kiss*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: *Kiss, Kiss*? As in, K-I-S-S, K-I-S-S?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yep.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What is that?

TOM BLACKWELL: It's a shot of a window in Paris, the Guerlain Boutique window in Paris, which is right on the corner of Place *Vendôme*. So it reflects the entire Place *Vendôme* and it has a—inside the window is a display of, it's a photo blow-up of a model. A very attractive woman with lip—sort of, and it's lipstick of course. So there's a big mock-up of a lipstick tube, sort of, next to this thing and she is obviously wearing the lipstick.

And then on the bottom of it, so that the Place *Vendôme* is reflected so it's a double image of her. On the bottom of it, in sort of cursive, or—[inaudible]—letter is a neon—bright red neon sign that says, kiss, kiss. And then it's sticking out from the windowsill. It's reflected again so it's doubled in the window and it's brilliant. I mean it's a source of light itself so the thing is just really popping out there. Brilliant, bright red. It's going to be a great painting. Smaller than this, about half the size, but a lot of—you know it, sort of, goes back to my old, my great influence from way back when, kind of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: With that giant tube you mean issues of scale and—

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. And the woman is, you know because the Place *Vendôme* is shown there but then above it there's all this, kind of, architecture and then sky. So she's kind of disappearing into to the sky, the clouds and all.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hmm.

TOM BLACKWELL: So it's both a kind of almost Surrealist image and a very literal depiction of a storefront.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is it common for you to know what you're doing next before you finish a painting? Is that a situation that you want to always achieve to keep their—

TOM BLACKWELL: I don't know if it's common. It just happens. You know, I was thinking about what to do next and we had this image and I thought, boy, this is really an exciting painting. I want to do that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is there a dream project that you haven't done that you've been wanting to do, that you hope to do? That sounds exciting, but something you haven't done yet?

TOM BLACKWELL: I can't say, no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you try to not have a gap—where you've finished a painting, you've sent it off and you have no idea what you're going to do next?

TOM BLACKWELL: It seldom happens but when it does I do what old catlines [ph].

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's a relatively recent development, though.

TOM BLACKWELL: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is there something else you'd like to discuss as we come toward the end of the interview?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. Linda, my wife, Linda, Linda Chase. Who has been not only an inspiration but my

partner in this whole thing. A collaborator in terms of refining the ideas and just a wonderful support to me emotionally and—I'm groping for words. But anyway, I could not have done this without her. I cannot fail to acknowledge the tremendous—

JUDITH RICHARDS: She gives you important feedback in terms of the selection of the images?

TOM BLACKWELL: Absolutely.

JUDITH RICHARDS: During the photography?

TOM BLACKWELL: Yeah. During the photography, before and of course during the whole process, selecting imagery and thinking about what's what. And then through the whole process of painting it. She's observed this whole thing up-close for so many years that she knows, and she knows when I'm bogged down or I'm having trouble or I've taken a wrong turn on a painting or something.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you have a routine that she comes—

TOM BLACKWELL: So she is not a painter but she really understands, through me, the whole process I think.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you invite her into the studio or does she come in on a regular basis? Do you have an understanding of when she would be coming in? At the end of the day, or in the middle of the day when you're taking a break or only toward the end of the painting?

TOM BLACKWELL: Well, she wanders in and out at will, at no particular time or any time. I think we're done here.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Great, great. Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]