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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Robert Bechtle on February 8 and 9, 2010. The interview took place at 871 de Haro Street, San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Robert Bechtle and Judith Olch Richards have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Bechtle on February 8, 2010, on 871 de Haro Street, San Francisco [CA], for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

This interview takes up from more or less where a previous archives interview left off, that concluded in February 1980. And so, roughly starting from there, I wanted to just set up some basic facts.

At that point, you were living in Berkeley, but I think shortly after you moved from Berkeley to San Francisco. Did you move to the place we are here on de Haro Street?

ROBERT BECHTLE: No, actually we lived for, I guess, six or seven years in the same neighborhood but in a different location. We were on a street called Pennsylvania Avenue. It's about 10 blocks from here. It was when Whitney and I were first -

MS. RICHARDS: Your wife's name is Whitney Chadwick.

MR. BECHTLE: Chadwick, yeah. And then 1980, 1979 I mean, that was when I separated from my first wife, Nancy, and when Whitney and I started to live together and then got married. So 1980 is the year that I think of as a sort of watershed, and I think we moved into the place on Pennsylvania in 1980.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a separate studio at that point?

MR. BECHTLE: At that point I did, yeah. I rented a space - because of overlapping events, I rented a space in Emeryville, which is on the other side of the bay. It was because I was still keeping a lot of contacts in Berkeley and my kids were there and so on.

So Emeryville is a little industrial suburb. It's kind of between Oakland and Berkeley. It's also the first exit when you cross the bridge, so it's actually a very easy - at that time anyway - a very easy commute from the Potrero Hill neighborhood, which is kind of the first exit on this - on the San Francisco side of the bridge.

You could get from here to there in like 20 minutes, and you can certainly count on it being pretty much the same. But then over time that commute got more and more difficult as more and more traffic was becoming an issue.

MS. RICHARDS: That's the studio that was on Horton Street?

MR. BECHTLE: That was on Horton Street, yeah. It was a - there was an artist co-op there that had the, kind of, master lease on three buildings, and so all of us that had studios there, we rented from the co-op. We were members of the co-op.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you find it because of artist friends who were already there?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I did. I guess a former student that - yeah, I was in need of studio space, so I asked about it, and they said, "Oh, come on and see what -

MS. RICHARDS: That was a change from working in your own home?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I've had studios away from home and studios at home, you know, over the years alternately. So, at that particular time, I had had a studio in Berkeley that was originally a small garage, two-car garage, that I had remodeled into a studio with a high ceiling and skylights and so on.

But then when I left Berkeley, I needed to find another place to work. And, you know, for various reasons,

Emeryville seemed like a good choice, partly because space was more available over there than it is in the city. It's very difficult to find studio space here, you know, and it was very cheap. And it was kind of a neat community, mostly younger artists. But some went on to become well-known.

MS. RICHARDS: For example?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, Richard Misrach, for one. I don't think he has a studio there anymore, but he was one of the people that was there. And Bill Fontana, a sound sculptor, was there. And I can't think of anybody else that became famous, but -

MS. RICHARDS: Was it a kind of a community, I mean, in the sense -

MR. BECHTLE: It was, yeah. Yeah. Eventually the group was able to negotiate with the city of Emeryville for some kind of financing to purchase the buildings as a - I forget what they called it - a limited equity co-op, which meant that you - if you had bought a space in it, you could sell the space back to the co-op for what you paid for it, plus whatever improvements you made on it, but you couldn't put it on the open market and speculate in terms of real estate, you know, what its market value might be, which was perfect for that kind of a setup because that meant that the purchase prices were very low and people were able to afford it.

I moved out just when that was taking place, and the person that rented the space when I had purchased it, and he's still there. I mean, he's still doing it.

MS. RICHARDS: How long did you have a studio there?

MR. BECHTLE: I think it was about seven years. It seemed to go in seven-year cycles, for some reason.

MS. RICHARDS: During this period of time, the early '80s, I saw in the various publications a number of charcoal drawings. Have you - did working in charcoal begin earlier, and how did it relate to watercolors and oils that you were using?

MR. BECHTLE: Well -

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, there is a distinct -

MR. BECHTLE: I think I did the first of the, sort of, an ongoing series of charcoal drawings sometime in the mid-'70s.

MS. RICHARDS: The earliest one in the retrospective was 1979, but, of course, I didn't know if that was necessarily the first one.

MR. BECHTLE: I can't remember which one - it might have been. Although I think that there were a couple that would have been, you know, '77, maybe '78. And I'm not sure why I started [laughs].

MS. RICHARDS: I was asking because, of course, the precision of your work, the precision that you chose to put into your work, both the paintings in oil and watercolor, would seem to be contradictory to the medium of charcoal, and yet you use it in a very precise way, and it seems so perfectly attuned also to the kind of - rather than graphite, perhaps.

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I think the -

MS. RICHARDS: I was wondering how you found your way to charcoal and how you came to use the technique, the touch that you use, that you have.

MR. BECHTLE: Good question [laughs]. I mean, there were a few earlier drawings in the '60s, which were graphite. So I guess there was a kind of an urge to work monochromatically, and there were things that I felt you could do in a drawing that made sense in the '60s. You could make shortcuts happen or combine, you know, color with black and white and so on in ways that didn't make sense in bigger paintings - oil paintings.

But at some point charcoal suggested itself, and I honestly don't remember why. It was kind of like a challenge to see if I could do it. Why I was interested in doing it, you know, I'm not sure. The first ones, I was using the kind of tradition of smudging the charcoal but using those paper blending stumps, the, sort of, French stumps.

And then after the first one of those, which seemed to work well, then I started experimenting a little bit with different ways of working it, using, in some cases, Conté pencils, which gives it a denser black. I think when I tried using something called Wolff pencils, which are carbon but not quite as black as Conté, those didn't really seem to lend themselves to the stamping, so they were more using the grain of the texture of the paper to create the halftone.

And I guess I found that by using charcoal pencils, which were a little harder than the stick charcoal, and keeping them sharpened, I could make it work with charcoal as well. And so most of them are done that way, that is, using charcoal pencils without any stomping. Every once in a while I'll decide to maybe go back and try doing one with the stomping, just because maybe for a particular image it seems appropriate; I don't know. But, you know, I was very taken, years before this, by the wonderful Conté drawings that [Georges] Seurat did.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, one can't help thinking of Seurat when you -

MR. BECHTLE: So those were - you know, they were sort of out there as a kind of model to think about. I wasn't trying to imitate the look of the Seurats, which are much looser than what I was trying to do. But the use of the French paper - you know, the typical [Jean Auguste Dominique] Ingres texture - definitely came from looking at the Seurats.

I mean, charcoal was something we used in art school - you know, figure drawing class and so on - and we always used it in a loose way that involved a lot of rubbing things out. Maybe put down fairly broad masses of tone and then rub it out with a piece of paper or with a chamois, and then maybe go back on top of it and refine it a little bit more, and then rub it out again - you know, just kind of keep trying to gradually focus in on what you were drawing. So doing the later charcoal drawings was an attempt to use the medium without getting hooked on the rubbing-out aspect of it.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned at the first that it was a break from using color. What kinds of issues could you work out, or were you aware of wanting to work out, better without color? Or, alternately, was it more an attraction to working just with values in creating an image that way?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, well, there's a couple of things that probably were part of it. I mean, one thing that I haven't mentioned is that I've done a lot of lithographs, you know, starting -

MS. RICHARDS: I have a whole section to talk about printmaking.

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, okay. So -

MS. RICHARDS: And that started in the early '80s, too.

MR. BECHTLE: Well, no, actually the lithographs - I mean, actually, they went back to when I was an undergraduate.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I guess the etchings started, yeah.

MR. BECHTLE: And, you know, the first ones were very painterly, and there was stuff that I did for maybe like 10 years that was very painterly, very kind of abstract expressionist in terms of the way it was worked - very liquid as well as broad.

And gradually I got interested more in - you know, as the paintings tightened up and became subject-matter oriented, I started thinking in those terms, in terms of the lithographs. And so - the earliest lithographs, the painterly ones, were all in color. I got interested in doing black and white, with maybe very limited color or no color at all. And I found that I liked doing that, you know, and just sort of manipulating the grain of the stone to make the halftones.

So, in a way, the drawings really grew out of that I was gradually doing fewer lithographs and, in a way, letting the charcoal drawings become substitutes for it, because the aesthetic issues were the same, but the technical issues were very different.

And a lot of the technical issues of lithography - one of those things that, if you're interested in being a lithographer, that's, you know, one thing to learn the skills that are requisite to doing that, but in a way they get in the way, ultimately, of what you might be wanting to do as an artist. I mean, that's a whole can of worms, an issue of the artist-printmaker and the artist who works with a printer to make prints, separating the technological part from the aesthetic part.

I remember I had my - had a lithographic press in my studio. This was in Oakland, a big rented space, and I remember Ivan Karp came over one day.

MS. RICHARDS: This was in the '70s?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, this was probably in the '70s. And, you know, he looked at the press, and he said, "Sell it. Get rid of it. Don't waste your time on printing." And it was good advice. But, yeah, the charcoal drawings sort of, I think, grew out of that.

There was something maybe intriguing but also slightly perverse about taking a color slide and then making a black-and-white drawing of it. I mean, you would think, well, you know, if you're going to make black-and-white images, you should use black-and-white photographs.

But there's something about the translation that you have to make from color - in terms of values - from color to black and white to make the gray scale read like the color scale does. It's kind of fascinating, and it's sort of the reverse of doing the opposite - you know, that if you're using a black-and-white photograph and inventing the color, that sets up a series of problems that, you know, can be resolved many different ways, but they're definitely problems that you have to deal with. And so this was sort of like turning it around and doing the opposite, taking the color out rather than putting it in.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you thinking about questions of color and how true to the reality of the photograph to be when you were painting, as you were translating it into values, and therefore maybe you wouldn't have to translate it into the, quote, correct, unquote?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. Well, it was because of the transposition you could exaggerate things that, maybe if you were working in paint, you would be a little bit more leery of doing. You know, you would mix something, get really dark, and let it go all the way to black, which would make sense, perhaps, you know, in a drawing, where in a painting where you might have something that gets very dark, but you've still got to maintain some sense of what color is there, what kind of light might be there. And so you can't let it go quite so far. You can't - it seems like it can't become quite so abstracted.

I mean, it's an issue that I sort of played around with a lot, because there were some paintings that I did with, oh, sort of backlighting on the figure, and then it's - so the light is kind of around the edges. And then behind it is shrubby that's in shadow. And that was - related to the drawings - I think in some of the cases, I made drawings of the same image and did the drawings before the paintings. In some cases it went the other way, and the drawings were made after the paintings.

But anyway, there are these wonderful Renaissance paintings with figures against black or very dark gray backgrounds, you know, which I've always admired. And -

MS. RICHARDS: Is there any painter in particular that comes to mind?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, I don't know - you know, [Jacopo Robusti] Tintoretto or, you know, in some cases Rembrandt [Harmenszoon Van Rijn]. Who - what's his name - [Michelangelo Merisi da] Caravaggio, kind of a Mannerist painting more than Renaissance painting.

And it seemed like something that would be fun to paint, but the idea of just painting a black background doesn't go anywhere. You know, it's like if you try and make it too obvious that that's what you're doing, it's not going to work.

So this was as way of having that happen in the painting but in totally contemporary terms. If I told people it was based on Renaissance painting, you know, they might say, oh, yeah, I see that, but they wouldn't think of it themselves.

There is a wonderful painting - fresco, I think - I think it's in Siena [Italy] - [Ambrogio] Lorenzetti [Allegories of] Good Government and Bad Government [1338-39]. It has this city - the walls of the city- against a black sky. And I wanted to do something like that, so I did - this was in the '80s, I guess - a cityscape out in the Sunset District in San Francisco, and the light is falling on all these white stucco houses going up the hill, and then the sky is very dark - not dead black, but it's very dark, and then it gradually sort of shades into blue, you know, what we see sometimes in the fog in the summertime here.

But the effect in the painting was these brightly lit houses against an almost black sky. So that was - that came out of that interest as well.

MS. RICHARDS: Just touching on the charcoal drawings a little bit more, do you feel that your approach to the medium and the decisions about when to do a charcoal drawing have evolved over the years, or has it been pretty consistent, since the '80s to the present? I mean, you continue to do a good number of drawings.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, they tend to go in spurts. There will be periods where I won't do them, and, you know, it might be over a period of several years. And then for some reason, whether it's - I start thinking, well, it would be interesting to maybe do a show of drawings, and there's a time frame that suggests that that would be a good thing to do. Or just one leads to the next.

Sometimes I would do one and that would be the end of it, you know, and I would go do other things. And then other times certain momentum would get established where, the next thing I know, I've got a whole bunch of

slides laid out that are all drawing possibilities, and keep that going.

So for a while there, the drawings were really - I was doing those; I wasn't doing any watercolors. It was a period of about 10 years.

MS. RICHARDS: I noticed that in the retrospective -

MR. BECHTLE: Or I did very few watercolors.

MS. RICHARDS: - seemingly from their selection. If it reflected what your body of work was -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - there were watercolors and then stopped, and then only charcoals.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. The watercolors maybe didn't stop dead, but there would be very few of them, you know - maybe one or two a year - but a lot of drawings. And then I've kind of been doing watercolors for the last couple of summers and -

MS. RICHARDS: Well, speaking of summers, in 1984 you bought a summer house on the East Coast -

MR. BECHTLE: Right, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - in Massachusetts. Tell me about why that happened. Had you had a place to go - a special place to go in the summers before? And how did that affect your work? Did your work change in that kind of place in the summer?

MR. BECHTLE: No, I didn't have a -

MS. RICHARDS: Is it a rural -

MR. BECHTLE: Well, yeah, it is. It's in Massachusetts in a town called Westport, not Westport, Connecticut. It's near the ocean. The house that we got in 1984 was in a kind of semi-rural area. There were little suburban houses near us on both sides, but a quarter of a mile down the road is a big dairy farm and, you know, kind of a mix of older houses, some from the mid-19th century, some of them earlier than that.

It's a New England township, so the - what it really is, is as conglomeration of little villages, and some of which have a more rural feeling about them than the others. It's near Fall River, so one part of - the northern part of the township tends to function as a kind of suburb of Fall River, but the southern part, which is near the ocean, has several villages, one of which - well, I should backtrack, I guess, because the house that we bought in '84 we sold about 12 years later, I guess, and then didn't have a house there for a couple of years.

And then we bought one in 1999 that was in one of the villages that was next to the water, down, you know, right near the ocean, that is a wonderful little New England fishing village, I mean, literally - you know, 18th-century houses and a fishing fleet that still operates out of the harbor about half a mile from the town beach, you know, where the old house was about eight or nine miles from the ocean near one of the other villages.

The '85 house was in a village called Head of Westport, meaning the head of the Westport River, and that had some old, you know, 18th-century houses as well. But the one we have now is in a village that's called Westport Point.

MS. RICHARDS: You know, people think about San Francisco as being a beautiful place to be in the summer.

MR. BECHTLE: It's not. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: It's not. So was your motivation to get out of - to get to a different place for a few months in the summer - escape?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it was something that, as a kid, I had no access to anything like that. Growing up, you know, we'd go up to Lake Tahoe for a week or something like that in the summer, but it was not - it's actually not really a California thing in the same way that it is in the east, you know.

And it goes back to my discovery of New England, which was in 1961, really. I was on my way to Europe and going by boat, sailing out of New York, and I sort of timed it so that I was in New York about a week before the ship was supposed to leave. And I had a friend, one of my teachers at CCAC - California College of Arts and Crafts [Oakland, CA; now California College of the Arts] - Jason Schoener, and he and his wife had a house in Maine near Bath, in a place that was called Robinhood on Georgetown Island.

Anyway, it was a 1800s Federal house that was magnificent. I went up there, and I spent most of that week with him. And, you know, going around the countryside doing the whole bit - the blueberries, the lobsters, et cetera - and I fell in love with it, and I swore that if ever I had the opportunity to do something like that, I would do it.

And so, you know, when Whitney and I got together - she was originally from western New York and went to school as an undergraduate in Vermont and then lived in Cambridge [MA], where - she taught at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] for a while. So she had, you know, reasons for being there, and I kept thinking it would be good to have a place that was within commuting distance of New York that one could, you know, spend summers at.

So originally, our plan was to get something in Maine, and then we quickly figured that that would not work because of the distances and - it wouldn't work in the right way. And so we went to Westport on the suggestion of one of Whitney's sisters, who knew about it, and, you know, we sort of, over the years, kind of fell in love with it.

At one point, when we sold the house in the Head of Westport, we sort of toyed with the idea of looking elsewhere, and we sort of went down along the Connecticut coast a few times. We have some friends down near Guilford, or in Guilford. Then we looked in Stonington, which is a wonderful little town near Mystic, but we kept coming back and saying, but we really like it better in Westport.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you find that you did certain work when you were there in the summer - small works, because you would have to bring them back, or one large painting to focus on, or a number of drawings?

MR. BECHTLE: I sort of did both, yeah. I tried to not let the transition be - you know, affect the choice of what I was going to be doing in terms of the work. So in some cases I would start a fairly decent-sized painting in San Francisco and then ship it back and finish it there over the summer.

In some cases, I started something there and didn't get it finished and shipped it back to San Francisco to finish. More recently, I've set aside the summer just to do watercolors, partly because of the transportation issues.

MS. RICHARDS: So what you would normally - this is getting into the use of photography a bit, but you've taken photographs in San Francisco for paintings done here, but also the paintings continue there, and photographs taken in Massachusetts for works that you did there, as well as here?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, but not as much. I've not really found a handle on Massachusetts.

MS. RICHARDS: So most of imagery comes from San Francisco still.

MR. BECHTLE: It comes from San Francisco or California. I mean, the painting that I'm working on right now is from Massachusetts, but - and there are a couple - there are some New York interiors. There's a couple of interiors from North Adams [MA].

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you, there's a few years of living in different places that I wanted to quickly cover. I read that you had a sabbatical in '84, and you took the opportunity to rent a loft in New York [City].

MR. BECHTLE: Yep, that was right.

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe it's obvious, but why did you decide to spend your sabbatical in New York?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, it seemed like a good thing to do.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you toying with the idea of possibly moving to New York, testing that out?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, in a way. I mean, we were not seriously thinking about it, you know, anything that major, but, wanted just to be able to get a sense of what it would be like to actually live there and not - I mean, you know, if you're subletting somebody's space, it's not the same as having to find your own space, but, you know, just see if one could deal with the intense urban-ness [sic] of it and -

MS. RICHARDS: Were you subletting from another artist?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. We sublet from a couple. It was Charlie and Nancy Wolf, and it was on Broome Street, between Crosby and Lafayette. And she was an artist, and actually pretty good, but, you know, I think she's sort of - one of these people that sort of goes in and out of it and so on.

So, like the space - the loft part - the living part of it was set up quite nicely, and then it had this large, relatively undeveloped space that was the equivalent of maybe half of the whole loft that was meant to be a studio, but it was mostly just boxes and stuff, you know. But it took a little bit of doing to get it set up with lights and

everything so I could really work there. But it was - yeah, just to sort of see what it would be like to be in a city that valued artists, or seemed to.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you friends with a number of artists - was there a circle of friends that you picked up that you knew or developed from your time in New York?

MR. BECHTLE: There were a number of people, yeah, that we knew who had gone to New York from California. And then there were various people that I knew from the art world, from the gallery, artists who were at OK Harris [gallery]. And, you know, there were a number of art historians that Whitney knew that were based in New York. And so we had a rather lively scene.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that a positive experience?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it was great. It was very nice, you know. It was so great that, I mean, we actually did it a couple of times, you know, for slightly shorter periods.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I think you went back a couple of years later.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Also on Broome Street. Coincidentally?

MR. BECHTLE: Coincidentally, yeah - totally coincidentally. We had three lofts on Broome Street [laughs], one across the street from one of them and the other down the block a ways.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel that - the image - I've seen many works that you did there of images in the loft. I believe they were all interiors. I'm not sure if that's just -

MR. BECHTLE: They were -

MS. RICHARDS: Were most of the works that you did at that time interiors?

MR. BECHTLE: No, those - I mean, the occasional interior crops up in my painting. Those seemed like a way of painting about the experience without falling into the trap of trying to paint what's outside. You know, the look of New York is -

MS. RICHARDS: I don't think - you didn't take any photographs and do any paintings of New York?

MR. BECHTLE: No, no. I didn't even -

MS. RICHARDS: That was a trap?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I thought - yeah, I thought it was a trap. I mean, one of the things that I felt is important to me was to have a certain authenticity that comes with being a part of the subject that I'm working with and not be a kind of tourist - a visual tourist or a voyeur. And that's the problem I have with Massachusetts. What I love about it is all the stuff that I wouldn't paint, because it's too quaint. And what I love about it is that it is quaint, but not to make pictures of, you know.

So I find ways around it, you know. And my barn, you know, it looks like New England, but there's nothing particularly charming about it. It's just there.

MS. RICHARDS: But it's clearly not San Francisco.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. They have too many trees. So the interiors were sort of the same thing.

MS. RICHARDS: So not to paint San Francisco would be inauthentic? There's a kind of an essence of your practice that has to do with the light and the imagery of this area.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's sort of - if I think about it, there's probably no real reason why I shouldn't, you know, make interpretations of any place that I happen to go to, but it just seems the wrong thing for me. I feel fake, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: Another - you got a Guggenheim [Fellowship] in 1985.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you feel about that? I know you used it again to travel. Was that a really important -

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, I love traveling, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that a very important grant to get?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. I mean, it's important - you know, it's a fairly large, substantial grant, and it's very prestigious, and they're not so easy to come by.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say especially because you're not in New York? Would you have viewed it that way?

MR. BECHTLE: I'm not following you on that.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you think, because you're based in San Francisco, that getting a Guggenheim was especially important in terms of recognition from New York?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh -

MS. RICHARDS: I really don't know how broadly Guggenheims fall, but -

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, yeah. Well, I mean, the Guggenheim is - I mean, they do a pretty good job of spreading them out across the country. I think that at one point the committee, the sort of advisors that advise some of the art stuff, were the same people, and they were all New York artists, and I think there was always a feeling that, you know, that they tended to go to New York people.

But I think by the time I was in the mix, that had rolled over and was no longer - certainly now when I look through the listings of who's gotten them, you know, they're all over.

MS. RICHARDS: You used that money to go to Spain. How long did you spend, and where were you based in Spain?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it was basically a month, I guess.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, that's all?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. It was probably a little more than that. We were able to borrow a house in a village in Catalonia, or it's actually kind of almost on the line between Catalonia and - what's the - Aragon, I guess. Anyway, it was Mel Ramos's house. It was a house that he had bought some years before, back when property was very cheap in Spain. And it's in the village that Picasso had, you know, gone to and painted some of those early cubist things - Horta de Saint Joan. I guess when [Pablo] Picasso went there, it was called -

MS. RICHARDS: It's Horta -

MR. BECHTLE: - Horta de Ebro, but the name sort of changes. It's now called Horta de San Joan, but with the Catalanian spelling, J-O-A-N for Juan. When we were there, I think it was Horta de San Juan, with the Spanish spelling of Juan. Anyway, it was - you know, it just seemed like a good thing to do.

And I was interested in doing some work from multiple sources, that is, you know, combining photographs. I was interested in the idea of making studies - you know, watercolor - and then trying to put them together to make a bigger painting.

MS. RICHARDS: You said works from multiple photographic sources. That's something you didn't usually do?

MR. BECHTLE: No, no, it was kind of - I mean, I sort of wrote that up as a kind of project. I can't remember. Part of the thing that I wrote for the Guggenheim was involved in being in New York for a good part of it. So I think that - boy, I can't remember. But we were there in '84 -

MS. RICHARDS: And then also '86.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. And so, the Guggenheim was from '86, I think, because I think in '84 I had an NEA[National Endowment for the Arts grant]. But I remember writing the Guggenheim up apropos spending, you know, a certain amount of time in New York. The rationale for doing that was, you know, what we were talking about before.

MS. RICHARDS: It says in the SF MoMA [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art] catalogue that you got it in '85. And it connects that with taking a teaching break in '86.

MR. BECHTLE: With what?

MS. RICHARDS: You got the Guggenheim in '85, and it connects with taking a break from teaching in '86?

MR. BECHTLE: That's - yeah, no, that's right, yeah. And the - '84 was a teaching break as well, and '86 - we were in New York January through March, I guess. And then we went to England, picked up a car, and drove it to Spain. We drove a little bit around Spain but mostly stayed up in the mountains.

I think we drove in from - or just sort of in the mountains, just in from Barcelona. Or not even Barcelona; what is it? Tarragona, I guess, but it's relatively near the coast. And then, to get to Madrid from there, you have to drive across the mountains, and they're quite wonderful.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to after that - oh, I wanted to ask you - in New York, were there any artists in particular who you came to be close to or whose friendship or relationship mattered to you, that happened because you were in New York, and people you met who became important?

MR. BECHTLE: Yes and no. I mean, at that point, I got to know Chuck Close somewhat. We would talk. We had lunch a few times. There were artists in the gallery that -

MS. RICHARDS: What about John Salt? Were you familiar with him?

MR. BECHTLE: John, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: He was still living in New York at that time, I think.

MR. BECHTLE: He was - yeah, I think he was - wait a minute. No, I'm not - he may not have been. I knew John when he was in New York, but that may have been from earlier trips to New York, because Whitney had not met John Salt until just last year when we went to the opening in Berlin.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm thinking about him because of his use of watercolor and the, kind of, sense of light.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And there seem to be connections to your work, a sympathy - a kind of a -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. No, it's true. I'm a great admirer of his work. It holds up, you know, more than a lot of the other stuff that people were doing. Yeah, he's sort of a wizard with the airbrush, and he's so good that you're not even aware of the airbrush when you look at the work. You just look at it, and there it is, you know - the height of skill to be able to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: Around that time - 1987, I think - you ended up moving from Pennsylvania Avenue to this house.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. Yeah, we bought this, I guess, in the fall of 1986 and then moved here in the beginning of '87.

MS. RICHARDS: And you established a studio in this house at the same time?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, well, I still had the Emeryville studio at that point, because this was just raw space down here. And one of the reasons bought the house was because it had a developable studio space in it.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were really preferring to have a studio in the same place you lived.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. It seemed like a good idea. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: You mean there are pros and cons.

MR. BECHTLE: The thing is that it's so - I wanted something that I didn't have to drive across the bridge, and it seemed like - it's difficult to find studios in the city, so it seemed like it would make sense to do the studio-at-home routine. I mean, I sort of alternated doing that.

I've had studios at home in Berkeley, and then rented a studio in downtown Oakland for, I don't know, seven or eight years, and then developed a studio at home in Berkeley another time, and then rented a studio in Emeryville, and then developed this one at home. So, I mean, there's advantages both ways.

MS. RICHARDS: Were the other studios more or less the same size and had the same kind of quality of light as this studio?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, some of them were. I mean, the one in Oakland was a sort of second-floor loft, and so it had very high ceilings. I guess they were like 14-, 15-foot ceilings with north light - industrial-type windows, really nice.

And it was pretty big. It was about 1,500 square feet. And there were a number of artists that had studios in that

building, including Crown Point Press at one point - several artists that I knew. And, you know, those situations always are fluid. And one time I was sharing a fairly large space with two other artists, and then they pulled out, and I ended up having this fairly large space.

And then I moved to another part of the building, again sharing it and having a huge space. It must have been, I don't know, 3,000 square feet.

MS. RICHARDS: But those different spaces didn't seem to affect the size of your work or the -

MR. BECHTLE: Not particularly, no.

MS. RICHARDS: It didn't -

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I mean, in a way they did. The biggest painting I did was the one of the Thunderbird ['60 T-Bird, 1968] with the guy standing - with my brother standing by the car, and that was in one of the big spaces that I did that. And there would be no reason why I couldn't paint the same size painting in here, but it's less likely that I would think of doing it.

So the spaces - yeah, it does sort of affect - I think the thing that's most frustrating about the smaller space is that it just gets cluttered. With the bigger spaces, you sort of keep the clutter all at one end or something, and then keep a fairly big space that was just empty.

[END CD 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Bechtel on February 8, 2010, on de Haro Street, in San Francisco, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

So you were saying that sometimes a bigger space prompts you to do a larger work, although it hasn't been an ambition to get a bigger space to do a larger painting.

MR. BECHTLE: No. [Laughs.] It seems like it comes the other way.

MS. RICHARDS: I want to ask you a few questions about working methods. It seems that as we get into the mid-'80s, late '80s, while you're still working from photographs, the paintings look less tied to the photographic source, possibly, both in the imagery and in maybe the color. Did your approach to using the photograph change in the late '80s, and how has that piece of your practice evolved?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I think it's changed, but it's by small degrees. I have friends that - painted from photographs - that would say that their ambition was to make the painting look as much like the photograph as they could, but I didn't feel that that was my intent.

I kept in reserve a sense that there was a certain painterly quality that I was trying to achieve, even in the most - you know, the period that I think of as the most precisely painted - you know, mid-'70s to, say, mid-'80s - and I think I started looking for ways that I could expand on the painterliness, find ways of painting a little more roughly, not finishing things quite so much. And when you're working with photographs as a source, it's very hard to break away from [all the information] - there's a certain tyranny that the photo imposes.

MS. RICHARDS: You're, at this point, working from color prints rather than a slide?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. Well, color prints made from a slide.

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

MR. BECHTLE: Which is - I think I switched from looking at a projected image of the slide, you know, on a viewer, somewhere back in the early '70s - started having prints made. I've been doing that ever since.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, you were saying that there is a kind of a tyranny in -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, well, I think there's a kind of - you know, the physical presence of the photograph has all this information in it, and not all of that information is necessarily important, and yet it's there, and your eye tends to absorb it. And you have to kind of fight against including something just because it's there in the photograph, and you have to constantly be questioning whether some area in the painting could be just as easily achieved by broader means than getting in there and noodling out all of the little bits of information that the photograph is giving you, or seems to be giving you.

It seems easier to break that hold of the photograph when painting figures than it is painting something more precise, you know, like the car. The car is harder to loosen up than the figure is. The figure on those - you just

sort of know that it works best if you can suggest things rather than trying to be that precise about it.

And then, you know, with training and painting the figure, it means that you have the little moves available to put a bit of paint in a certain place, and that suggests -

MS. RICHARDS: Is this because of how you expect the viewer, or how you yourself read the figure in reality and also the experience you have reading previous painters' realistic renditions of the figure versus a car-

MR. BECHTLE: Well, that's a part of it, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - because you could paint a car much more impressionistically.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, but it's hard. It's harder because the - you have certain leeway with the figure, you know, where the brush can suggest things because you guide it in such a way that - you know, it's like your hand knows the moves. It knows what to look for - to get fingers to make sense as fingers. You don't have to get in there and draw every little thing that's there.

But with a car, the contours, especially, require paying attention to, because if they get off a bit, it's not going to look - it's not that it's not going to look like a car, but it's going to have that sense of not being quite right, and anybody that is aware of cars - I'm not sure that that many people are anymore, but - because they all look the same - but somebody would look at it and feel that, well, you didn't quite get it, you know. Something has gone astray. I don't know that people actually look at it that closely, but that's my reading of it.

And so it's a question sometimes of it being more difficult to paint a certain mark quickly than it is to make it sort of slowly and carefully. And yet it's a quick mark that's going to give the painting a little more offhand quality.

My theory is that a painting should never be finished any further than it needs to be to get the idea across, and that anything more than that is fussing. However [laughs] it depends on what the goal of the painting is, you know, what level of finish is appropriate for it. And the - you know, only finished as much as it needs to be might mean that it has to be finished at a fairly high level.

And knowing where that is, is going to be is tricky, and that's where the difference between painting the figure and painting the car sort of comes in, that it's kind of easy for the car to maybe get into fussing and then the figures are going to probably not look right. In many cases, to make it work, the car would have to be made rougher - convincingly - to match up with the figure, if that makes any sense. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: When you first started using the photograph, from what I understand, it was as an aid, because you wanted to be able to make the image convincing and you wanted to look at a photograph, and that seems to be different than other artists who have been grouped with you as a Photorealist. And their relationship to the photograph seems - there is a range, and you seem to be on one far end of it, versus another painter who is really after a painting of the photograph of reality.

And you're using it as a tool and not - and correct me - not wanting to paint the effects on reality of the photographic eye - the camera's version of reality.

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I mean, it's both, really. I think originally I thought, just as an aid, a way of remembering what an arrangement looked like when it was no longer available to be painted.

MS. RICHARDS: Or to capture a moment of light?

MR. BECHTLE: No, not so much that. It was more like - you know, one of the first ones that used a photograph had set up as a still life of stuff on the dining room table, and Nancy was sitting at the table reading, and I had -

MS. RICHARDS: I think that's called Nancy Reading [1963-64], right?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. And maybe it wasn't that - that one I think was done entirely from life. I don't think it was a photograph. It was the other painting that was the same format. It was the daytime scene - I think it was called Nancy Sitting [1964]. And that one, I took a black-and-white photograph so that I could work on the painting when she wasn't there.

So that was really the beginning of it, and I was sort of using it in the same way that, you know, illustrators use photographs, just as something to offer reference material when not there. And the particular viewpoint of the camera didn't enter into the mix, you know, in my mind at all at that point.

I mean, at that time I was using, like, a Rolleiflex - you know, old fashioned two-and-a-quarter square format. And so that has a certain kind of distortion, which is very different from the distortions of a 35-millimeter with a

50-millimeter lens.

And so it wasn't until I started using color film and shooting stuff outside the house that the photography aspect of it became apparent to me. I was basically still thinking that the camera was simply showing me what I saw, and, you know, I wasn't originally aware of those distortions playing a part.

But you can't photograph things like architecture or automobiles without soon learning that where you stand in relation to what you're shooting makes a big difference. You know, there are distortions that inevitably come into play, and so once you're aware of that, you begin to see how that's something to be paid attention to, but maybe also to be kind of manipulated or played with. You know, how close you are to the car affects how much of the foreshortening is distorted, whether you're seeing it in a three-quarter view or whether you're seeing it full on from the side make big differences.

For the eye seeing it, it becomes kind of seamless. You know, if you're looking at it, and you're up fairly close to the car from the back, you're not really paying that much attention to the foreshortening. You're only looking at this object, and if you move across the street you're still looking at the same object, but all of the lines and so on that you're looking at have totally changed, and you don't realize that unless you start to draw from one or the other of those positions or to photograph it from one or the other of those positions, and all of a sudden the distortions start to be a part of it.

And, you know, it's not just that; it's then the whole aesthetic of the snapshot and the photographic time versus painting time, and there are all these issues that start to become - the issues are always there; it's just a matter of becoming aware of them. I think I became more aware of them as we moved into the 1980s than I was when I was first using the camera.

MS. RICHARDS: And so, around the middle or late '80s, would you say that you were less and less engaged with the qualities of the snapshot, the issues of painting the photographic reality -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I think I was trying more -

MS. RICHARDS: - and gave yourself more license to invent or -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. I think I was, if anything, being more aware of certain photographic aspects but less concerned with replicating the more obvious photographic information that my camera was giving - you know, trying to defeat that to some degree.

I did it by tiptoeing, and it's still - you know, I don't feel that I changed it all that much. But I started painting arbitrary marks on top of the underpainting.

MS. RICHARDS: The kinds of dabs of color that one sees.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, and, see, the painting process that evolved where I would kind of rough it in, in monochrome, sort of an old-master approach, and then I would paint on top of that fairly quickly and roughly in approximations of the actual colors that the painting was supposed to have. And so when that was done, I could see what the painting basically was going to look like, but then it would have all these rough edges and places where, you know, I'd just scrub the paint on - a lot of sketchy painting, not paying attention to resolving anything.

And then I would paint the more finished painting on top of that. And I found that interposing between those two stages, some arbitrary color placements - you know, just putting dabs of paint on, almost like making an impressionist painting out of it, except it was much more freewheeling.

And the color choices were based on - that I would paint over, you know - they would be little bright touches that were - I would guess would make some kind of sense against the area that I was painting. That if there was a street, I would be putting down dabs of a lot of different colors, but they would all be chosen to be a value that was close to the gray of the street, so they would change - they would shift colors, but they wouldn't, you know, jump out as too contrasting.

I would do this over the whole painting, then go back and do my finished painting on top of that and try to - you know, gradually I realized that I should leave as much of those dabs showing as I can, so I'm going over the painting and correcting where it needs to be corrected; maybe you're cleaning an edge up where it needs that, but in some cases just leaving the under-painting showing.

MS. RICHARDS: And what was the function of those dabs of color?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, mostly it was to just kind of loosen it up, but it actually was - they serve a color function of letting the color kind of shift, so that instead of just a flat color over a given area, what the eye is picking up

from, you know, any distance is little hits of related color side-by-side. Sort of, the point was -

MS. RICHARDS: Was it to increase a sense of reality or to add a personal interpretation of reality?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it's both, yeah. I mean, primarily to give the - what I think of as the color shifts, the fact that we see things in terms of little points of color and not - even if you paint the wall white, when you actually look at it, because of what the light does to it and the falling off of light, the change of color of the light.

And so, you know, I see little things flashing on and off. I think we all see that way, actually.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that what brought that solution to your mind, or was it some other artist - the idea that the way you would get to this point would be to use dabs of color.

MR. BECHTLE: No, I think the dabs of color were sort of a desperate attempt to, you know, to destroy the pristine quality of the image and to do it quickly. And I wasn't - well, I was going to say I wasn't really thinking of those color shifts at that point, but actually I was. I didn't know how much of that was going to show, because I think my original idea was that I would basically cover all that up. And even covering up that, it would still affect the way the painting looked as a final product.

Yeah, and then I've always kind of liked the look of impressionist painting, but it's kind of a - it's a dead end in terms of trying to make it a practice. But you can borrow things from that. And it seemed that I was finding a way that I could borrow something from impressionist practice that was not going to look like Impressionism.

And, you know, partly that comes from the fact that I see Impressionism as being one of the forerunners of contemporary realist paintings. It's much more important to the development of 20th-century realist painting than most people think, because they look at it only in terms of technique, when it's all full of little dabs and it's painted out of doors and tried to capture certain effects of light and all of that. But in fact, the whole idea of painting contemporary life as directly as possible is of major significance, you know, in terms of 20th-century figurative painting.

MS. RICHARDS: We were talking a little bit about your place amidst Photorealists. What do you think your relationship is to contemporary painters who are simply realists, who may or may not use the photograph, compared to artists who are shown within the context of Photorealism? I mean, you could think of someone like Catherine Murphy or - you can come up with some other -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. No, I have great admiration for a lot of them. Someone that really comes to my mind is Rackstraw Downes. But, you know - yeah, I like a lot of their work better than I like most Photorealists' work. And I think one of the reasons for trying to fiddle the image, for me, was trying to get it to not look so much like other Photorealists' work, because I found I was bored with most of it.

MS. RICHARDS: You know, your work has another element that people have commented on, that distinguishes it from other Photorealists, that I wanted to ask you about, and that's sometimes a kind of a psychological ambiguity. People have talked about - oh, made various comments about a kind of a mysterious foreboding, and they're reading into a number of the images, like the covered cars or the street scene, like Early Sunday Morning [20th Street-Early Sunday Morning, 1997].

Is this something - and this goes way back at least to the early '80s, if not earlier. Is this something that you're consciously aware of enjoying as it happens by chance, or purposefully investigating, or is it a completely erroneous reading of your work?

MR. BECHTLE: No, no, I think it's a good reading, and I'm - I'm sort of looking for that, you know, without trying to make too much of an issue of it.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, that's in contrast to the Impressionists, of course.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, you know, I mean, I'm not trying to redo Impressionism.

No, I think there's - I like the kind of ambiguity that is possible in painting, and the relationship between the static quality that is so much a part of painting and the kind of implied narrative that may or may not be a part of the image.

You know, part of it just comes out that way, but it's also present in my thinking about images and about what I would choose to paint.

MS. RICHARDS: And what you chose to photograph.

MR. BECHTLE: And what I chose to photograph, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And which photographs you use.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. But, actually, with the photographs, they're much more random, you know, and while I'm looking for that feeling, to some degree, I usually don't find it until after the photographs have been made. They're not in the viewfinder; they're on the film, and the process of sorting out slides and images to decide which might be something worth working on, then that can come into play.

But in some cases, I think it's just - it goes along with my choices and is the result of the choices. You know, I'm not interested in pushing that to the point that it starts to look weird, you know, and look like I'm really trying to tell a story. There are some artists whose work does that who are quite good, and I very often like their work, but I'm not going there - Joel - not Joel but Jerome Witkin, for example, comes to mind. He's an incredible painter, but, you know, it's a little too Friday the 13th-ish for me.

I'm obviously influenced by Edward Hopper in that regard, too. I kind of love the way his work has that quality of, you know, implied narrative and yet still keeps its secrets. You don't really know anything, and he doesn't necessarily - I mean, his work is characterized often by the people being lonely or the very lonely paintings, and he has said, you know, "I don't paint lonely people; I don't paint lonely paintings. People read that in."

But there's something in his view of what is of interest to him that comes out in the paintings without necessarily being conscious. I think -

MS. RICHARDS: You think those are the most successful of his paintings, those that -

MR. BECHTLE: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: The most successful of his paintings, and maybe of yours, are those that combine the factual reality that you want to depict, the everyday scene, the quality - the formal qualities, and that ambiguity?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, I think so, yeah. And it doesn't always work. You know, it doesn't always - there are lots of Edward Hoppers that are not up to snuff, but, you know - I mean, they're not up to his snuff. But the really good ones are so uncanny, the combination of getting all of that to work on such an abstract level, the emotional resonance of the paintings, in a way that looks like he's not even trying to do that.

Yeah, that's one of those things about painting I think that is so - it taps into emotional states that are very buried, and the psychology of painting is - it happens under the surface, and things come out because of the intensity of the act of painting. There's a kind of energy that is put into the painting and comes out of the painting when it's performed at the highest level. You know, it's just kind of amazing.

Look at a [Diego] Velazquez. Those people look like they breathe and they're surrounded by real air, and it's just paint like anybody else's paint - [laughs] - and yet, you know, how does he do that?

[Audio Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask about the psychological ambiguity. Around the mid-'80s or maybe a little later, you shifted from taking photographs and painting images with a midday sun, a kind of an even brightness - and correct me if I'm wrong - to more the beginning of the day and the end of the day, those times when the light was different, and perhaps that kind of shift lent itself to more psychological ambiguity. Maybe not, but what prompted that shift, that investigation of a different kind of light, and maybe a more dramatic visual imagery?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it was - it was conscious. It was sort of like saying, well, why not? I think in the earlier paintings I was trying for a very, kind of, even light and -

MS. RICHARDS: And that kind of, in my mind, ties in with the kind of light that other Photorealists aimed for, that kind of bright, even light.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, probably - probably. There's a kind of Kodachrome light that may be a part of it - the first Photo[realist] paintings that were done from black-and-whites, where I was making up the color, tend to be rather tentative in color as a result of that. And that was partly, you know, just inexperience, but partly it was intentional, because I was looking for a kind of painting that was the opposite of the expressionist, in your face kind of thing.

The word "neutral" sort of got used a lot. You know, it was appropriate to - there is a certain search for a kind of neutrality of light. And I always felt that it was quite, you know, loaded with, kind of, emotional underpinning that was actually kind of scary.

MS. RICHARDS: The brightness, even midday?

MR. BECHTLE: The brightness, the flatness, the so-called neutrality of it - neutral in terms of not being a dramatic statement that tells the viewer what they're supposed to think about it. And I think by - well, say around 1980, but it was probably before that, I got interested in pushing that aside, you know, and just saying, well, why not? Why should it be noon? Why should it be flat and without light and with the shadows washed out and all of that? Why not go to something that was more contrasting, within the context of the overall sense of work?

And what I was talking about earlier with the paintings with the dark backgrounds, and trying to use that as a way of bringing some drama into the painting but still making it totally in terms of contemporary California, that was - where that was coming from.

So I started shooting a little - you know, early in the morning and late in the afternoon to get a light that was a little different. I started more recently shooting some stuff at night and doing some paintings which were night scenes.

MS. RICHARDS: Those were the Potrero Hill views you're talking about? The street views at night -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: As well as interior.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Mostly - yeah.

MR. BECHTLE: And those started with the drawings, actually, because the photos that I was making at night weren't really usable for - or at least I didn't think they were at that point - for making paintings.

And so I took some slides that I had shot during the daytime and then turned them into night images by just making it up, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: In a drawing?

MR. BECHTLE: In the drawing, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: In a charcoal drawing.

MR. BECHTLE: In the charcoal drawings, yeah. And that's where working in black and white was a big advantage, because you didn't have to worry about what color it was; it was just dark, and you could control the darkness and lightness, and you could sort of say, well, if the porch light is on, then maybe it's going to be bright there, and then gradually it will get a little darker as it goes down here, and then there's a tree there, and so that's just going to be black and - you know, you can make those decisions fairly easily.

But once you start into that as a painting idea, then it seems like making up the color becomes extremely difficult, because the color is so close in value. You know, it's difficult enough with the color print, photograph. You know, there's all these colors that, if you saw them by themselves on the palette, you'd say they were black, and you would say they were all the same color, but in fact in the painting they end up - when you put them next to each other - being quite different. And they might be very important in terms of being able to differentiate, you know, different parts of the painting - a tree in front of a house, both of which are almost black.

So I haven't gotten too far with those yet, but -

MS. RICHARDS: Back in the late '80s or so, was there a particular painting that you felt marked a turning point in this change from the midday to the earlier or later? I mean, it sounds like you consciously decided you wanted to see what it would be like - you wanted to use different light, and you went out and took pictures at different times of day.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that was true. There was one that was called Albany Monte Carlo [1990] that's -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know about what year that was?

MR. BECHTLE: Was that - that was the name of the print that I did from that. I think the painting was called Marin Avenue-Late Afternoon [1998]. It was sort of mid-'90s, I think. And it was - I mean, the thing is, all these paintings are - they're always playing off of each other, and there are, sometimes, attempts to resuscitate an image maybe that I had done 20 years ago.

I mean, the painting that I'm working on now is a sort of revisiting of the painting of my brother and the

Thunderbird, except this time it's me and a different car. But the painting that I'm referring to from the '90s, it was a late afternoon -

MS. RICHARDS: There's one called Sunset Garage [1994].

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, but that's pretty - that's mostly of a dark interior of a garage, you know. The light of the day is hard to determine. I mean, the Marin Avenue one is a stucco house and this car, a Chevrolet, parked in front of it. And so, in a sense, it revisits those paintings from the '70s that I did a fair number of. But this was taken from across the street, and the house - everything was - you know, it took in much more, so it was more of a landscape than just a car and a house.

So that was part of the reason for doing it. The fact that it was late afternoon was serendipity. I just happened to be driving in that part of Albany [CA]. I think it was a subject that I had spotted some time before, you know, thinking that someday I'm going to photograph that, and the day that I had the camera, that was when it was.

So in a way it was accidental, but it was a - you know, the light was more at an angle. It wasn't bright, necessarily, as I recall, but there's a big shadow that runs across the street at a diagonal, but it's not a very dark shadow. But it definitely has a kind of late-afternoon look about it, a slightly golden light and dark. It's in the catalogue somewhere. But, I mean, if I sort of think about it, that seems one that was definitely a turning point.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about the effect of the midday sun and kind of a static quality and a nonnarrative. And occasionally - most of the images you've chosen, whether they're interiors or street scenes, have a stillness to them. There were a couple of times when you have action. There's a man raking; there is someone watering. Those are very few, I think, and then I didn't see any more.

Rather, you would have the figure standing; you have the car parked. Can you talk about that aspect of your work, that kind of search for the stillness, and maybe why, actually, you did a few where there's raking and watering and doing something else?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I mean, the action there, if you think about it, is pretty static. You know, somebody is raking, but they're basically staying in one place doing - and certainly watering. The water moves, but the waterer doesn't.

No, it's a feeling that painting is at its best when it deals with things that are still. I mean, that's just my take on it. For me, that is important. You know, other people can do whatever they want, and I think it's just fine. I'm not saying, you know, that one has to do it one particular way.

But I'm just fascinated by the static quality, the kind of - what's the word I'm looking for here - the meditative quality that is induced by painting; a kind of contemplative viewing of it, that it stills everything down, and you have this kind of classic, perhaps profound, effect of things being always in that particular position.

MS. RICHARDS: Timeless?

MR. BECHTLE: A kind of timelessness, yeah. You know, and it's hard to say what Hopper has that quality to some degree. The American still life painter John Peto has that quality very much, and yet others, whose work is very similar to Peto, don't have it. [William] Harnett doesn't have it. You know, Harnett's a wizard, but he doesn't have that quality that Peto has. [Giorgio] Morandi has that quality. And I just love that particular aspect of painting, and I'm hoping to achieve some of that, but, you know, sneaking up on it. You know, that is, doing it with things that seem totally ordinary and where there is no great sense of manipulation, and yet somehow the end result is this feeling of kind of timeless stasis.

MS. RICHARDS: There's a kind of humanism, you could say -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - that enters the work, as opposed to something that's totally photographic.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Somebody quoted - I wonder if you think this is fair - that your work is "Hopper without the melodrama." [Bechtle laughs.] Do you think that's fair to you and fair to him?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, who said that? I can't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: I don't remember.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I remember reading that. No, that sounds good to me.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, do you find Hopper's work a little bit melodramatic at times?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. But we forgive him because he's so good.

MS. RICHARDS: Around the same time, there was a long statement you wrote about your work - you were interested in looking and what things look like, et cetera, and combining, you know, the middle-class American life and the formal qualities. And there's this long, well-written paragraph, well-spoken paragraph, and not once did you mention photography or the photographic quality. Photography, at all, didn't come into it.

And I guess it underscored to me the fact that the photograph is not in any way a driving force in your work, that it seems to be the tool to get to where you want it.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, well, I think that's probably right. I mean, I'm more aware of the importance of the photograph to the whole enterprise now than I was way back. I can't remember exactly when I wrote that.

MS. RICHARDS: That one's from '99.

MR. BECHTLE: It was from the early '80s or -

MS. RICHARDS: Actually, that statement was from '99 that I just -

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, really? Well -

MS. RICHARDS: I think it was with an image of a painting of the two Volvos [Two Volvos, 2001]. Actually, I don't remember what the date of that was. It could have been - you know these things - it could have been a quote of something from an earlier -

MR. BECHTLE: I think that was something I actually wrote earlier, and maybe - yeah, I don't know. That's very interesting because - I guess I was consciously pushing the photograph out in writing that because - you know, and saying, as you said, the photograph is part of the process and not the end.

I've always felt that the photograph was, on one hand, totally unimportant to the whole enterprise, that the enterprise could be done by different means - you know, more traditional means, whatever. But in another way, it's absolutely essential to the whole enterprise, and so it becomes one of those paradoxes that art is so full of, that it's this, but it's also its opposite. I mean, that's a sneaky way to - but it's true.

You know, I always tell myself the paintings have nothing to do with the subject matter, but - [laughs] - the subject matter is very important and is, in its own way, very central to it. And it's the nature of art and the nature of - certainly the nature of painting to always be dealing in paradoxes; it's this, but it's also that, and the two things can be absolutely dead opposite each other and they're both true. So that's a way to have your cake and eat it - [laughs] - I guess. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to go back to the relationship between the drawing and the painting. Do you usually explore an image with a drawing first, or is that not the case at all and you just make sketches, or really the photographs are the sketches?

MR. BECHTLE: The photographs are basically the sketches. There are times when I'm trying out some different combinations. If it's something that involves multiple photographs, there might be some drawings involved. But, yeah, there's no real relationship. I think of the drawings as finished works of art, you know, monochromatic black and white, and I'm looking at the photographic material with an eye towards what I think will work well in that mode - you know, what kind of shapes, what kind of values. Will this really make sense as a drawing?

And it may be something that I have used for a painting before that seems like the drawing might make sense. Or it could be the opposite. You know, it could be something I've never done before. And then maybe, you know, months, years later, I'll look at the drawing and say, gee, I could make a painting out of this.

Because you look at them differently. There are slides I've had on my light table, you know, for 20 years, and they're sort of in the little piles that I move around and so on, and I think, one of these days I'm going to do that one. And sure enough, "one of these days" sometimes comes.

All of a sudden you start looking at it a little differently, and a slide that was on the edge of being rejected, or maybe even something that's been rejected, something that's in the pile of stuff that I hardly ever look through anymore, you know, maybe I'll find something in there that is possible, because the needs seem to change, you know, what I'm looking for.

[END CD 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Bechtle on February 8, 2010, on de Haro Street, in San Francisco, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

We mentioned a minute ago multiple - maybe I misunderstood - using multiple photographic images for one work of art?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And if that's the case, then could you describe the process of how you begin putting that image onto this canvas or the piece of paper?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it's - I mean, it's not something I've done very much, but I've done it a couple of times. The painting that we have here is from several different photographs made at different times.

In cases where I have done that, I've sort of envisaged the - you know, what the combination might look like. And so I'll sometimes then make drawings piecing together - you know, just small drawings and very rough, piecing together the parts of the photographs I'm going to use, just to sort of get a sense of [if] it's actually going to work.

Then, in terms of putting it out onto the canvas, I'll project one of the slides and sort of size it more or less based on the little drawing - you know, position it based on -

MS. RICHARDS: You mean photographic cropping.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, sort of. I think I've figured out enough that I think I can get it in the right place, and then I'll trace those outlines, and then I'll do the same with the other photographs.

MS. RICHARDS: Now, of course, you're dealing with perspective and all kinds of scale issues, so is the second or the third photograph a detail, a photograph that gave you more detail on an area that you didn't have in the first photograph?

MR. BECHTLE: No, not necessarily. In some cases, in fact - in the case of this painting that's called Potrero Table -

MS. RICHARDS: What's the title?

MR. BECHTLE: Potrero Table.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, that's right, yeah.

MR. BECHTLE: The image of Whitney on the left is from a slide that was made in New York in the early '80s - mid-'80s I guess - and then the rest of the painting is the dining room upstairs, which I photographed and posed myself with the self-timer and the tripod and so on, when I had the idea of making the painting.

MS. RICHARDS: The painting was from 1994. I have it here - Potrero Table.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, okay, that sounds about right. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: So the photograph of Whitney was taken much before.

MR. BECHTLE: It was taken much before. It was a - I liked the way it looked, but the background in there was a room in this loft in New York that we had sublet on a third occasion, and the room was all kind of sealed with polyethylene, you know, sheets. I guess they were trying to keep it warm or whatever.

And so I wasn't interested in painting that. I began to get this - I could see that if I included a different table and put a different background on it, that the painting could be made, and so then it was an easy thing to do and to just sort of add the rest of it.

The space in the painting, the background, part of it is real, but it's based on the photograph that I made in the dining room, and the other part, the part that's behind Whitney, is totally made up, because that area is a wall that comes out into the space. That area doesn't exist in reality. And so that was just made-up painting. Her figure was facing the opposite direction in the original photograph. So there's a lot of -

MS. RICHARDS: So you flipped the negative.

MR. BECHTLE: I just flipped the - yeah. I mean, I just kind of turned the slide over.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, slide, yeah.

MR. BECHTLE: It seems to me that the photograph that I was painting the table and myself from had a big vase of flowers in the middle that didn't - or maybe Whitney was sitting over in that chair when I took that. But I remember there was a perspective issue that I had to figure out by just - sort of by eyeballing it between the chair in the foreground and the chair in the background.

So there were a lot of little things. You know, it's a challenge to do it, and so that was probably one of the reasons for wanting to do it, just to see if I could put together a painting that looks photographic and looks like that's really the way it was, but in fact it's all a big fake.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you say that's the exception that makes the rule? I mean, is this an unusual -

MR. BECHTLE: It's the exception, yeah. I mean, it's sort of a game that one plays with with photographs. Photographs don't lie, except, of course, they do. You know, you could do it with Photoshop and probably do it in a much better way if you knew what you were doing, which I don't. So it's a kind of primitive Photoshopping of the image.

The other one that I did that way was from taking parts from the two Broome Street lofts that were on the same side of the street, and including Whitney looking at a television screen on one side, and then on the other side we've got some kind of music thing, long before iPod.

So that was, in a way, a simpler job of meshing them together, but there was a slight perspective issue that had to do with the edge of the shelves and so on, so I had to, in effect, curve the floor to make that work. I mean, you have to curve things in perspective a lot of times.

MS. RICHARDS: So, as you're looking at the photographs and deciding what to do next, you said you might have a series, and you might decide in advance, this is work one, work two, and then I'm going to do this, or do you decide one piece at a time?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it's basically one piece at a time, but I try to be thinking ahead on it, and -

MS. RICHARDS: Is that to avoid that moment when you finish something and you're not sure what to do next?

MR. BECHTLE: That's right. [They laugh.] Yes, it's a way of avoiding painter's block.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, survival tactic.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, you know, and you have to keep making new slides, although I've got, you know, hundreds.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you go out and make - do you still use slides?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. Well, I have a digital camera, as well, but I usually don't use it.

MS. RICHARDS: So what happens when they -

MR. BECHTLE: As long as I can get film, you know, and get people to process it, I guess I'll keep using the slides. You know, it's just the digital - I have to make the rest of the changeover - you know, get a - I have a digital projector, but I've never taken it out of the box.

I haven't actually made the - I've never printed any of the images that I've made with the digital camera. I've printed up the stuff on the slides - you know, scanning them and -

MS. RICHARDS: Here?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, here at the house. So it's all there; it's just a matter of, you know, learning which buttons to push first.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you thought about using Photoshop to combine images?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, actually I have, you know, but I sort of don't want that to become a big issue. I'm not sure it's worth the - you know, the trouble of learning it. Photoshop seems quite complicated, to be able to really do it.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you find it useful, or something you avoid, to have a previous work in the studio at the same time as you're starting a new work?

MR. BECHTLE: It's nice to have one around for a while, but usually it doesn't happen.

MS. RICHARDS: But if you could, you'd rather have past recent works?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. You know, I like having it around, but - for a little while, but it's not crucial. I mean, it's nice to be able to look at it without feeling that you have to do anything to it, because when you're working on it, you're always aware of little things that jump out, and once you've stopped working on it, they disappear and you just sort of appreciate it for the whole painting. You know, basically you start to see it the way other people see it. When you're working on it, you don't. You know, you see it in terms of bits and pieces.

And so you're aware that something is bothering you, maybe some color isn't quite what you thought it should be, or whatever. You know, your eye sort of goes right to it. But then the next day you're worrying about some other part of the painting, and so your eye forgets about the thing that was bothering you the day before. And so that effect kind of happens when the painting is finished. You know, it all sort of falls into place, and you look at it and think, how did I do this? I could never do it again. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Do you come to the point at any time during the development of work that you feel it's just not going well and declare it a failure, or change direction - I don't know how much you can do this when you're using a particular photographic source, but -

[Cross talk.]

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, there are times when a particular part of the painting goes badly, and I found that the best way to deal with it is to just keep slugging away at it, concentrating, bearing down on it, and not letting up until you think you've resolved it. And usually that works. Usually it happens with the figures.

It would be something that isn't right - a hand or whatever - and I always find if, you know, if I stop - sometimes it's good to stop and come back the next day, but mostly not. Mostly it seems like, you know, just keep doing it, because at a certain point it's going to go in the right place. All of a sudden it's kind of like, you've done it and you could never do it again. It's just - I mean, that's one of the things that's kind of mysterious about painting.

MS. RICHARDS: What about working toward that sense of ambiguity that is one of your goals, and when you look at the photograph, you think, okay, this is promising? And do you have a sense of what goes into the painting of it that's going to embrace that, that's going to bring that out? Is there any particular approach to painting it that you use?

MR. BECHTLE: I don't think so. I think it's more in the choices of the image and how you're going to, you know, resolve certain parts of it maybe, but I don't think there's any conscious thinking while painting about that issue. I'm sort of trusting that that's going to happen.

When actually painting, you're thinking about the marks that you're making and the choices of whether you're mixing the right color. And there's a certain even, kind of rough progress that you make, and then there's a point which you're really sort of trying to get it and make each mark be what you intend. And there can be a kind of magic about that, that all of a sudden an edge turns, a finger seems right, you know.

And it's not mechanical; it's very - it's almost like you're dancing. You're just kind of moving - you know, it can be something that's fairly a mechanical-looking part of the painting. There could be a wall that has a straight edge that you have to paint, and kind of lead up to it, and then all of a sudden maybe take a brush with a bit of color that's not the color on either side of the edge that I had been painting kind of carefully, but just make a - you know, maybe take some red paint and then just come right down the edge real fast.

And if it works, you let out a sigh of relief. If it doesn't, you go back, get rid of it, try it again - you know, maybe do the same thing. Little marks that stay marks; they don't blend in, but when you get away from the painting they sort of become little highlights or leaves or something.

And some of it is boring, you know, not very interesting. Big, flat areas are not very interesting, but there are always these little things where you just get - some little detail will draw your attention, and it requires a certain amount of finesse to do it, and if you get it so that it works just right, you feel a great sigh of relief.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you always felt that way, or is this something in recent years that you've realized more?

MR. BECHTLE: No, it's sort of all along, yeah. I think I've been able to raise the bar in terms of expectations, but -

MS. RICHARDS: Does that mean that you are working more slowly than you used to, because you have higher expectations?

MR. BECHTLE: That seems to be the case, although I like to think not, but I think I work more slowly because I

waste more time.

MS. RICHARDS: Waste it on what?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, sitting around, playing solitaire, reading.

MS. RICHARDS: In the studio?

MR. BECHTLE: In the studio. [Laughs.] Taking a break, you know. I'll go for a little walk. It's maybe at its worst at this stage of the painting, which should go very fast.

MS. RICHARDS: In the early stage of the painting.

MR. BECHTLE: But it's totally boring. It may be totally necessary. So I'll work something out, and then I'll clear my head out a little bit. And I'll turn the computer on and play solitaire, and the next thing I know it's - you know, a half hour has gone by, or an hour has gone by. And then I start feeling guilty, and then I go back to it. And then the same thing happens, you know, work for a while, and then I think, well, it won't hurt to just, you know, fool around for a little bit.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know what the title of the painting is - any painting - before you start, or is that something you are adding on later?

MR. BECHTLE: Sometimes I do. A lot of times, it sort of becomes clear. I mean, this painting is - there are two watercolors I did of the same subject, one looking exactly like this, and another one, a slightly different view.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you recall the title of those watercolors?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, one of them is called - actually, they're both called the same thing. It's called Westport Sebring I and Westport Sebring II. I don't think I'm going to use those titles for a painting. It just might end up being called Bob's Sebring, but it might not. I'm not sure. That might be a little too informal.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to the technical for a second, have you always used a certain brand of oil paints?

MR. BECHTLE: No.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have a tremendous loyalty to a kind - one in particular?

MR. BECHTLE: No, I like, you know, a paint of good quality, and so I usually use either Winsor Newton or Rembrandt, which is made by Talons - it's a Dutch paint - or one that's called Old Holland, which is also Dutch.

MS. RICHARDS: And have you always painted on linen or cotton duck or -

MR. BECHTLE: Mostly linen. Yeah, I started using linen, I don't know, back around 1960, I guess.

MS. RICHARDS: And what is it about linen that you prefer?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it's tougher and more - I think it basically lasts longer than cotton.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you thinking about the archival qualities as you work?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, to a degree, you know, trying to keep the painting technique as simple as possible so there aren't a lot of weird problems because of over-painting and drying and all of that.

MS. RICHARDS: Has the thickness of the paint been pretty consistent over the years?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, pretty much, pretty much - thin.

MS. RICHARDS: Thin.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: The thinness of the painting.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. Oh, the linen - yeah, I like the texture of it, too. It's got a slightly more irregular texture than cotton.

MS. RICHARDS: But a smoother texture, right, than cotton?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, if that's what you use. Yeah, this is quite smoother. It's not the - there's something called portrait linen that's even smoother than this, almost like a smooth panel, but I like it to have a little tooth, but not too much.

MS. RICHARDS: So you just put gesso on and begin. You don't sand it.

MR. BECHTLE: No, I put two coats of rabbit skin glue and two coats of white lead, and sanding between two coats of glue, and then I start painting on it. So it's a traditional ground. I don't like the texture of the gesso, at least the times I've tried it. The thing about using the white lead is that you have to thin the white lead a little - you know, it's very thick and pasty, so you have to thin it with turpentine and a bit of linseed oil.

And so you can control the absorbency of it by the ratio of the linseed oil to the turpentine as you thin it, and so I can get it to, you know, a consistency that absorbs the thin layer right at the beginning a little bit, but it doesn't just soak right in, and yet it doesn't run around on top of it either.

And the gessos I've used, you can't do that with. I think they really are making it for using acrylics on. It's much - it's either too absorbent or it's not absorbent enough, so I gave up on it years ago.

MS. RICHARDS: Now, going back to the studio for a second, do you have a particular routine that you've - I mean, have you always started working first thing in the morning and go until a certain point in the evening, or you come back and work all evening? I mean, this is separate from questions of teaching schedules.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. Well, I used to be pretty good at that, and then I'd start usually nine, nine-thirty in the morning and then take a break for lunch and then work until about seven. And if I was under a real deadline, you know, then I might work after dinner. But I haven't worked after dinner in quite a few years, so now I try to get started in the morning and then work until about six or seven.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you concerned with the light that comes in, or do you try to keep a consistent -

MR. BECHTLE: No, actually - I mean, I use artificial lights. I don't have the fluorescents on right now.

MS. RICHARDS: So it's important to you to maintain a consistent lighting -

MR. BECHTLE: I like to have a consistent -

MS. RICHARDS: - and close off the natural light?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, actually, I've been closing it off because of - it keeps the heat in a little bit better to have the blinds closed. But even with the blinds pulled all the way up, because their window is shaded by the deck up there, it doesn't really change - once the studio lights are on, it doesn't really matter what's going on outside. It's all about the same.

MS. RICHARDS: And are you picking the studio lights because, obviously, you're working with color and you want it to appear a certain way, or are you trying to match what a gallery experience of the work would be?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I'm sort of in between. The fluorescents are mostly cool, and even the so-called warm ones tends to be, you know, fairly cool. So that's giving me a certain amount of blue light, like from the window, and then I have the incandescents over the painting, which warms it all up and sort of pushes it so that it's closer to what you would see in a gallery.

So it's actually - the light in here is cooler than it would be in a gallery but close enough that it doesn't look that different. And the gallery lights, because they're all incandescent, tends to warm the color up, and when you warm the color, it tends to make the painting look good. If you go the other way and cool the color with fluorescents, then the colors start looking really lousy, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: So you figure it only can look better from what you previously -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, exactly. That's the whole point, that if it looks good in the studio, it's going to look better, you know, in the gallery, as long as it isn't a gallery that has all natural light. I mean, even with natural light it would be okay, but -

MS. RICHARDS: What about music, working with any sound in the studio?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, I go back and forth with - sometimes I have music on when I'm working; then at other times I'll go months without ever -

MS. RICHARDS: With silence.

MR. BECHTLE: With silence, yeah, but it's not - I mean, most recently I've been using the computer and picking up a PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] station in Cincinnati [OH].

MS. RICHARDS: A talk show or a music -

MR. BECHTLE: No, it's not a talk show. No, it's just music. It's, you know, just classical music.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a particular music you - oh, classical.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. I mean, there's no good classical music station here.

MS. RICHARDS: No more?

MR. BECHTLE: No. The one that's here is terrible.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about listening to CDs [compact discs] or other -

MR. BECHTLE: Well, yeah, I've got a bunch of CDs, so sometimes I'll go through weeks of playing CDs, but eventually I get tired of it. You know, I get tired of making decisions about what to play next.

MS. RICHARDS: That's why the radio is easier, huh?

MR. BECHTLE: That's why the radio is easier, yeah, even though the radio plays a much more mundane selection. Although, actually, the Cincinnati station, the reason I listen to it is it has a pretty good range of stuff. It's all, you know, kind of 18th-, 19th-century - occasionally a foray into Baroque, and occasionally there will be something modern. At least it isn't - you know, the local classical music station, so called, you know, plays snippets of things. I mean, they'll play one movement of something, and then, you know, then there will be chitchat, and then something else that's just -

MS. RICHARDS: Soft classical.

MR. BECHTLE: It's all short stuff. That was why I got a CD player in the first place, was because that station - there was another station that went off the air, and that one was at least, you know, listenable. So when that one went off, in self-defense I got a little CD player and kept adding CDs, so I have a huge number of them now.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you refrain from having people see your work in progress - having them come to the studio in the midst of work?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, sometimes. I mean, it depends who they are. I don't mind other artists looking, and the various gallery people come over from - you know, my dealer in San Francisco comes. Things like that is fine, but I don't like people who aren't used to looking at pictures - there's just a lot of inane commentary, because people aren't used to reading unfinished paintings, which is actually difficult.

You know, as a teacher, you'd run into that all the time, that, you know, the students are working on something, and you're seeing something that's maybe not what they had in mind. And so you have to be very careful about how you read into it, and I think most people aren't - you know, they don't know what they're looking at.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there artists who you're close to in this area who you talk to about each other's work?

MR. BECHTLE: Not so much anymore.

MS. RICHARDS: What about in the '80s and '90s?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, well, I used to -

MS. RICHARDS: We didn't touch on the social circles.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. I mean, my friend Richard McLean, who also taught at San Francisco State, and so we used to talk about what we were doing and what was going on in the gallery stuff and what we were seeing and thinking about. But then, you know, since we both retired, he lives over in the other side of the bay in Castro Valley, and so we don't see each other that often.

And I go on Wednesday nights to a kind of artist's studio salon here in San Francisco that is fun, but they're mostly -

MS. RICHARDS: Who hosts that?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it's an artist named Tom Marioni.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah?

MR. BECHTLE: So it's mostly conceptual artists, which is very interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: So is there a structure to that salon?

MR. BECHTLE: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a structure to it?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, yes and no.

MS. RICHARDS: Does - some one talk about their work?

MR. BECHTLE: His studio is - I mean, the whole thing, the salon, is set up as one of his works of art because that's the sort of thing that he does, or actions of one sort of another. And so the studio was set up with a bar in it, and there was a couple of booths that were at a local downtown bar that got torn down, and so Tom got the booths and so on.

So, you know, it's a perfect setting, and people sign up to be the bartender each week, and the bartender basically just opens beer bottles or wine bottles or occasionally makes a martini. That's about the range of our bartending skills.

MS. RICHARDS: How many people come?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it varies from, you know, maybe a dozen to maybe 20 or 30 people. And so there's a number of people that are photographers. There are some sculptors. There's a couple of painters. The studio is in the same building with Crown Point Press.

MS. RICHARDS: That's downtown San Francisco?

MR. BECHTLE: It is downtown near the museum [SF MoMA]. So occasionally one of the artists that was working at Crown Point comes down. And then, Tom is married to -

MS. RICHARDS: You mean out-of-town artists?

MR. BECHTLE: - Kathan Brown, who runs Crown Point. So sometimes Kathan will bring, you know, whoever is working up. So people like Ed Ruscha or Sol LeWitt or Bill Bailey - people of significance turn up, as well as locals, people from the East Bay, Oakland, and so on.

Mostly it's just, you know, kind of chitchat, but for the last year or so, Tom's been sort of programming a kind of guest readers or guest talkers at seven o'clock for like a 10-minute reading or a 10-minute thing where there were complaints - you know, complain about something. That one didn't go over so well.

MS. RICHARDS: Limited to 10 minutes.

MR. BECHTLE: Limited to 10 minutes, yeah, right. So sometimes - the readings were the most interesting because they were so diverse.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you read something?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, I did.

MS. RICHARDS: What did you chose to read?

MR. BECHTLE: I read part of the bit that's called Knoxville: Summer, 1917 by [James] Agee. It's a sort of prologue to his novel, Death in the Family.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that an important - a book that's particularly meaningful to you?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, not so much. Yes and no. The Knoxville thing is - actually, I came to it by way of music, because it was set by Samuel Barber, and it was sung by a soprano. It's quite beautiful. You don't know it?

MS. RICHARDS: I'll look it up.

MR. BECHTLE: And there's just something about the language that's - it's incredibly moving. I got a very good response from it. [Laughs.] But, you know, some people - one guy who works at the museum as head preparator over there, and he read a list of all of the exhibitions that have been staged at SF MoMA since it moved into the

new building.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow.

MR. BECHTLE: Which was - you know, it was very funny and kind of a wonderful thing to think of doing. So some people would chose really kind of oddball things. One guy read - he was a filmmaker, and he read three eulogies that he had written himself for the memorial services for three friends.

MS. RICHARDS: In 10 minutes he read three eulogies?

MR. BECHTLE: They were short.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I guess so.

MR. BECHTLE: But they were very moving, very well done. So you never know what artists will come up with.

MS. RICHARDS: So that brings me to wanting to talk about Crown Point Press, and from what I understand, you started working there in the early '80s - '82 - and you've fairly regularly, every few years or so, gone back. That's doing etching, right?

So what makes you decide to go back to do some work there? And how does that work into your normal practice of painting and drawing?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it takes time out from doing painting and drawing. It's a nice break. I like doing it. You know, it's kind of a neat experience to work with the printers and -

MS. RICHARDS: As opposed to being alone in the studio, you mean?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, it's like making the drawings, where there's a connection to previous work, but because the process is different, you have to think about things a little differently. And so it leads you to maybe try some things that you haven't done in the paintings or the drawings, not in terms of the subject matter but just in terms of how you can make the image work, because it's more - in a way, it's more indirect, and because of the indirectness, there's also the possibility of kind of stylizing it, or abstracting it, more than you do in a painting.

You have to work out something that's going to read within the process of printmaking that you're using, and so that means that there are a lot of things you can do in a painting that you can't do on an etching plate. And so the challenge is finding that middle way that does what etching can do but maybe get something from what you've been doing in the paintings. So it's a challenge, and always different.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you come in knowing what you're going to be doing with that - with an image?

MR. BECHTLE: Sort of. Yeah, sort of. I try and think of - at least get some parameters set up before going in. So I go in with material. In some cases, it means having some photographs that are printed up backwards, so I can draw them backwards on the plate so they'll be the right way around when they're printed.

In some cases, you know, I'll have several images, but I haven't made any decision about how I'm going to approach it, and sometimes I'll do them in a technique that's very similar to the drawings but overlaid with color. And then sometimes I'll do something where I can work with liquid materials and do it almost like a watercolor, except it isn't really like a watercolor.

And in all cases, you never know quite what you're going to get until they start making proofs. You think you know. You're sort of trying to push the medium in a certain direction, but it always surprises you. And then you have to go with what's coming from the press and start making adjustments - change the color, change the order of printing, make something more transparent, maybe think about adding another plate somewhere. You know, you're basically sort of dancing around trying to make it work.

With painting or drawing in the studio, it's much more methodical, you know, because I know what I'm doing in painting more than I know what I'm doing in etching.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a particular master printer that you've worked consistently with over time?

MR. BECHTLE: No particular - with different people - I guess basically different people the whole time, yeah - I mean each time, because printers come and go, and often they're breaking a new printer in that - they have this way in which - you know, they'll train their printers, and they'll have - someone will be the master printer, and then the master printer will have an assistant.

And so, like in one case, I was working with a printer and the assistant, and then the next time around, the assistant had become a master printer and then there was a different assistant. And it seems to me that it happened several times, where I got the one who had been the assistant - and in one case it was their first time being a master printer, but there was a rapport that was established beforetime.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you decide on the edition size, or is that something that the publisher would decide on?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, they decide on it, and they figure out the economics of it. In some cases, the mechanics of it - some cases the plates won't hold up for too large an edition. They try to keep the editions around 50, I think, and less.

MS. RICHARDS: Fifty? Well, that's fairly large.

MR. BECHTLE: No - and less, you know. I mean, there's a certain point at which the - if the image is too large, then it ceases to be as desirable to -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, dimensions, yeah.

MR. BECHTLE: - the collectors and that sort of thing.

MS. RICHARDS: I just want to go back. Did you say that you decide every once in a while it's the right time for you to do a print, and you contact them and say, I'd like to come in, or is it that they wait - is there a moment when they invite you back?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, usually it's that you wait until they invite you back, but since I know them quite well, it's more informal, and we'll just sort of talk about it in general terms - you know, when do you think you could come in?

MS. RICHARDS: And do you usually - the images that you're working with, are they usually images you've already used, photographs?

MR. BECHTLE: Not necessarily, no. In some cases they are, but no.

MS. RICHARDS: And when you leave, do you leave with instructions to them about how it should be mounted, matted, framed, all those decisions?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. There's a lot of that goes on in the process of making, proofing, and so on, and deciding what the margins are going to be, what kind of paper it's going to be on. And then they tend to mat - they tend to actually not mat them but just -

MS. RICHARDS: Just mount them.

MR. BECHTLE: Mount them - you know, float them. So the decisions about - I mean, they tend to use blond frames mostly. If you wanted something different, you could ask for that, but I prefer blond frames, too, myself. We're in agreement.

There was one print that was printed in China, and we went over there and settled stuff that had to do with the mounting of it, and because it was using Chinese woodblock technique, we thought it would make sense to mount it in a somewhat Chinese manner, using a silk backing instead of print paper.

And there was some negotiating about the margins, which seemed like it would make sense to do it, again, like the Chinese would do, without having the bottom margin larger than the top margin. So anyway, we got it all set up, and then when they printed the edition, sent it over to the States, the whole thing was practically unusable because, in many cases, there were major printing flaws in them. There were major mounting flaws, you know, like hairs and - you know, beard hairs and so on that were stuck between the silk and the backing.

So it all ended up having to be - everything soaked off the backing and remounted in San Francisco. One of the printers at Crown Point had to learn how to do that, and the edition, which I think was originally supposed to be 50, ended up being about 30, with about 20 that had to be just thrown out. So we had to come up with a new mounting of - mounting it on just paper.

So that was a more complicated one. The other things where it was all, sort of, handled in-house, you know, all pretty much was done in consultation with the artist, the director, the printers.

MS. RICHARDS: There was - do you tend to exhibit your prints separately from your paintings and drawings? Do you have a different dealer who does that?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, pretty much - pretty much. I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: Is that your preference, or would you rather have them exhibited with -

MR. BECHTLE: Since I've been printing at Crown Point, they basically are the print dealer for me. You know, they sell for resale to other dealers around the country, as well as to private collectors. And so that's actually a good thing, you know, because distribution of prints is probably hardest part of the business.

But actually, it would depend on the exhibition. I sort of like - I've had, you know, I've hung paintings at, like, SF MoMA, watercolors or paintings and drawings. I sort of like paintings and drawings together and sometimes paintings and watercolors. I'm not sure that the drawings and the watercolors should be shown together, but I don't know what difference it makes.

I actually like the idea that if you're showing paintings, just show paintings. If you're showing drawings, just show drawings, and likewise the watercolors. I mean, there are things you learn seeing them all of them together or being able to go back and forth between the same image done in different media and so on, but just in terms of an exhibition, I think the best ones that I've had have been where paintings were hung just with paintings and that was it.

And with a lot of space, you know, I was - it took me years to learn that it's not bad to have a big room with maybe five paintings in it; that it's actually much better to do that than to try and fill the space up.

They need a fair amount of breathing room, and they can hold the wall pretty well, so the shows where there were just maybe a half a dozen paintings in a fairly large space, I thought were the best.

[END CD 3.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Bechtle on February 9, 2010, on de Haro Street, in San Francisco, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc four.

So, Bob, I wanted to start out asking you about your teaching career. I think that you taught a bit at CCAC but then spent most of your real teaching years at the San Francisco Art Institute.

MR. BECHTLE: No, that's not correct [laughs].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I mean San Francisco State. Sorry.

MR. BECHTLE: San Francisco State University, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, thank you for correcting that.

MR. BECHTLE: No, I never - well, that's not quite true. I sort of shared a class one semester at the San Francisco Art Institute. There were three of us that sort of taught it as a group. But otherwise, you know, I taught at CCAC to begin, and then I taught, I guess, two semesters at Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley].

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember when that was?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it was in the '60s. I don't remember the exact dates, although I could probably figure it out.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you enjoy that experience at Berkeley?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, you know, I was a sabbatical replacement for somebody, and it was in the design department, not the art department. Then I taught at UC [University of California] Davis for a couple of semesters as a sabbatical replacement. And then the job at San Francisco State came available. That was in 1968, and so I went there.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you looking for a full-time teaching job?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I was. When I was - it's sort of complicated in that I had no intention of going into teaching at the time that I was an undergraduate, because it seemed like the only path that was really open into teaching would be to teach in the public schools - high school or junior high school - and I had no interest in doing that, and so my undergraduate major was in design, in graphic design.

And by the time I graduated, I was beginning to be more serious about wanting to pursue painting, and yet when I graduated, it seemed - well, what I'm trained for is to be a designer, so I went out and got a job as a designer. I started at the bottom rung, doing production pasteup for this design group, which was part of the Kaiser Industries.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I think you talked about that in the early interview.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, probably. It's sort of covering old ground.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. BECHTLE: So anyway, you know, I got into the teaching sort of inadvertently. My design professor from school, from CCAC, asked if I were interested in teaching a class, and so I tried it, and I decided I liked it and then just gradually decided that that was the direction that I should be pursuing.

So by the time the - I've been teaching at CCAC for a number of - couple of years. It seems that that was the way to go, and I started getting interested in teaching in one of the state schools, because it was a much better situation in terms of both teaching load and also in terms of, well, salary and benefits.

MS. RICHARDS: So by the time you get to 1980, where this interview starts, you had been teaching at San Francisco State for more than 10 years.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you get involved - were you always teaching the same classes, the same level? Did that change over the years?

MR. BECHTLE: No, that changed quite a bit, constantly.

MS. RICHARDS: So, by 1980, what were you teaching?

MR. BECHTLE: I guess by 1980 I was primarily teaching painting and drawing. And I guess I was still teaching graduates at that point. So, you know, mostly - our teaching load would work out that we would teach two undergraduate courses and usually a graduate course, that if -

MS. RICHARDS: What do you mean?

MR. BECHTLE: We had to sort of rotate the graduate classes among - there were about five of us, I guess, that were teaching painting. And we had funding to do two graduate seminars. One was a studio seminar, and one was supervision of the studio work. And so we would meet the entire painting group, which was usually somewhere 12 to, say, 18 graduate students - mostly 12, and with two faculty members. And we'd meet once a week, and then we'd sort of float around to all of their studios, usually talk about the work of two artists, you know, each time we met.

You know, so that was kind of fun, but eventually it got kind of tedious, and I got to where I actually preferred teaching the beginning classes, you know, more than the advanced ones. It seemed like it was more fun, because people would move faster in terms of their development, because it's like everything you told them was news. You know, it was all new stuff, and there would be remarkable progress from the beginning of the semester to the end. And they could see it, you know, and I could see it.

So there was a kind of excitement about it. By the time they're graduates, you know, it's kind of - they're set in their ways more, and yet there's a lot of makeup stuff that really should be done, but it's not going to happen. And there is such a disparity between their concept and what they're capable of pulling off technically that - not for everybody but in a number of cases.

And then you're dealing with egos coming into play and so on, so after a while I said, "Give me the beginners."
[Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say your teaching method was? Did you have a particular approach to teaching? Did you set your own syllabus?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, we did. When I started teaching, I used the syllabus that came with the class at CCA that had been very thoughtfully and carefully worked out by the chair of the department. And that was good because I didn't have to think any of these things out; I just followed that program. By the time I started teaching at State, I had quite a few years of teaching experience and, you know, would just kind of run what seemed to make sense in terms of what I thought people should be able to do at that - at any given level.

So my expectations for a beginning class were very different from a second- or third-year class. And it depended on what the class was - painting versus a life drawing class, you know, had a totally different -

MS. RICHARDS: So you taught life drawing as well.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, when I first started teaching at State, I was teaching one painting class, which sometimes was a graduate class - a life drawing class, and I was teaching lithography at that point. I was still involved in the technical end of lithography. And so I taught litho for five or six years, I guess. That got boring after a while, for different reasons, partly because it's a complicated technique to learn - tricky to learn.

And so some students would never be able to really do it right, and other students would just be getting to where they had a certain sense of it - sense of skills - by the end of the semester, but then because of the way the program was set up, you know, you rarely got people who could come in and take a second semester. I mean, there were one or two that would do that because they were going to be printmaking majors.

And so you were always kind of bouncing along at the lowest level in there, and it's a process that gets out of hand very easily, because there's a lot of black magic involved in lithography - drawing on a piece of limestone and then processing the stone with gum arabic and nitric acid. And then when you print, you know, it's based on the antipathy of grease and water. So you keep the stone damp and run the roller over it, and then the ink only takes on the drawn parts, which is the greasy part.

And, of course, invariably, at the beginning of the semester, the students would forget to damp it, you know, so they'd go at it with a roller and it all just goes black. [Laughs.] And you have to say, no, no, you get it wet quickly, and then you run the roller very fast, and then it starts to lift it back off again. And if they did the etching part of it right, they would be still able to keep it going.

But, you know, it was a course that was more technical than aesthetic. You very rarely got into any kind of heavy-duty issues that went beyond just how do you do it.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you get involved in departmental issues and have to take a turn being department head or -

MR. BECHTLE: I managed to dodge that one. I was either on or chair of the HRT committee for a good part of it, because that seemed like something that was worth doing.

MS. RICHARDS: And HRT stands for -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, the hire and retention and tenure -

MS. RICHARDS: Ah.

MR. BECHTLE: And it also was served as a promotion committee for the art department. So it basically just involved gathering information on whoever was up for one of those things, and it seemed worthwhile to try and get your fellow faculty promoted and have some input on the people who were on tenure track and on the - so I chaired the committee a couple of times, for three or four years each time.

And then I was on it - I was one of the people who wrote letters and all of that for a fair part of the time that I was there, because everybody had to be on some sort of committee. The finance committee, that's a good one to be on, but I had no head for figures, and I didn't want to get involved in that at all. And there was an exhibition committee. That sounded like it would be interesting but a lot of work. And so I sort of opted for the HRT thing when I became eligible to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: You said you enjoyed the teaching. Were you teaching full-time primarily for financial reasons, or did you also continue after it was maybe necessary because it added another element to your life, the getting out of the studio, the isolation, the camaraderie, the actual feedback from students? I was wondering, you know, how it impacted your work in a positive way, and if you, in fact, did it for more than just supporting yourself.

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it was - thinking about doing it in the first place was all about trying to get someplace where I had a good kind of ratio of studio time to job time - you know, certainly better than working 40 hours doing something like design work, where you're basically using the same energy as you need in the studio. Being a Sunday painter isn't going to work, and teaching is a way to get out from under that.

So that becomes part of why one even considers doing it. Nobody earns a living out here on their work. Everybody taught, you know, [Wayne] Theibaud, [Richard] Diebenkorn, [William T.] Wiley, all - and some were able to leave it after a while and go on the sale of their work, but mostly not. And so the tradition was very different. Once you decided that you were interested in some kind of a teaching job in a university or college, art school situation, then that became a kind of career decision that other things would sort of flow from.

You know, there was a certain prestige to doing it, where in New York it's kind of the opposite. It's sort of like, oh, you're still teaching? But, you know, inevitably the social interaction - you know, particularly when I started, I was only a few years older than the students, and so it was like being back in school again, in a good way, because they had to do the work and I just had to look at it and talk about it and whatever.

There's always a lot of feedback, you know, both ways. I learned a lot from talking with students, trying to clarify my own ideas about things in order to connect with them, explain something to them. I started in the beginning painting classes evolving basically the kind of standard painting curriculum where you paint from observation.

But, you know, I was able to sort of structure it in such a way that I could get into a lot of issues of composition and a lot of issues of color by the kind of things that I set up. It was a lot of things on tables, but I would paint various objects different colors than they normally came and use colored papers and use floodlights to light them in sort of dramatic ways and create colored shadows and talk about how the color changed because the light color was changed - you know, the difference between the light that was coming in from the windows, which was north light and very blue that created blue shadows where the incandescent light was blocked out.

And, you know, it was all very obvious; you could see it, and I was just trying to get them to be able to see color and see that just naming it wasn't enough. You know, something isn't always the color you think it is. A yellow box turns green in the shadows, and if you think yellow, you're not going to get there, but if you look for its reflected light color, you can manage to do it.

So learning to paint, at least at that stage, is just learning to see. The old cliché is, you know, still active. And it was always wonderful to get that sense that somebody was getting it, that all of a sudden they could figure out the perspective of something because - not because you've taught them anything about vanishing points or horizons or anything like that [but because they could see the relationships].

And I said, look, you can see it; you can measure it; you can hold your pencil up and you can see what the angle is, and you can see how big this is to that and how far this is from that. And it's actually easy, you know, once you start to understand it as a two-dimensional plane and not an object which we know is three-dimensional, and you realize that that square box that you're looking at, if turned a certain way, maybe one side of it is a slightly less square rectangle, but then maybe the other side of it that's adjacent to it is very thin and you hardly see any of it.

MS. RICHARDS: Does this approach to teaching reflect a teacher who you studied with who you thought was exemplary, or did you create it yourself?

MR. BECHTLE: You know, I think I basically -

MS. RICHARDS: Put it together yourself. Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

Besides teaching, have you been interested in writing about art or curating? Have either of those things -

MR. BECHTLE: Not particularly. I hate writing. I mean, I can do it, but I don't love it. It's too linear. I mean, every once in a while, I think it would be interesting to curate a particular show or something, but it's not something that I was interested in pursuing to the extent of actually getting involved in it. It's another time trap.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of time, is there anything else - hobby or sports or political involvements - that you dedicate a certain amount of time to on a regular basis?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, not really.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about collecting. Are there any things that you collect?

MR. BECHTLE: Not so much anymore. I think that, for a while, I collected people's prints - prints of one sort or another. You know, I was interested in buying, kind of, old master prints that were quite affordable back in the 1960s and '70s - you know, sort of like 19th-century lithographs. You could get stuff by really well-known people - [James McNeill] Whistler or [Richard Parkes] Bonington, that sort of thing.

But eventually I stopped because they all - they'd just sit in drawers, and there's no wall space in here to put stuff up. And so anyway, I stopped.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about your relationships with galleries. I don't remember - I think you talked about your beginning affiliation with OK Harris, but maybe you could just quickly go over that again, and then talk about your approach to finding gallery affiliation, and what were you looking for in a dealer at that point?

MR. BECHTLE: I suppose I was looking for anybody that was in New York [laughs] at that point.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did it end up that he would become your dealer?

MR. BECHTLE: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: How did it end up that Ivan Karp -

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, well, he saw my work somewhere. I think it was a show that opened at the Milwaukee Art Center [Milwaukee Art Museum, WI], and it was one of the early shows of contemporary realism, both Photorealism and eyeball realism.

But, you know, I'm not sure that - I think it was an important enough show that he - there were several artists, I think, that he showed that were in the show, so he probably went to the opening. And I had the painting that Berkeley [Art Museum, University of California] has right now, the Thunderbird, the guy standing by his T-bird, and a couple of others - fairly large paintings.

So I got this letter sort of out of the blue sort of saying that he was opening a new gallery in SoHo after being at Castelli [Leo Castelli Gallery, NY] for 10 years, or whatever. And he said, "I think your work would be very happy here." So I called him up and - you know, I had never dealt with anybody that had that kind of New York quick, you know, speech patterns. It was like talking to Jimmy Cagney, you know. And I said, "Oh, sounds great; I'll come back and talk to you." And so I did, and so I decided to join the gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: As years went by, did you feel that it was positive for your work to be seen in the context of other Photorealists or other realists - the group that he assembled?

MR. BECHTLE: At the beginning, I think it was - you know, there was a certain camaraderie about it, and there was also - I mean, the Photorealist tag hadn't been invented yet, and I think - I mean, my sense of it, I knew Dick McLean out here; I knew Ralph Goings, and Ralph was someone that Ivan had been watching for a while, and so he had just almost automatically come into the gallery when it opened in 1969.

So, you know, it was nice to be in a situation where you were associated with people like that. [Malcolm] Morley was there, and Duane Hanson was there. I think the gallery evolved in ways that ultimately became problematic to not just to me but to a lot of us. But I think when it first opened in 1969, there was a real edge to what was being shown, and there was a kind of energy about it, and it was kind of like the place to be in terms of a gallery in New York at that time.

You know, and then eventually - I think one of the things that changed it was that the original space was not terribly large, and it was being leased, of course, and the opportunity came up to buy into the space that's - where it's presently located and has been for a long time.

So it got bigger. It got to where it was probably financially advantageous to be in the bigger space, but nevertheless it was a fairly large amount of money that had to go out every month for staff and all of that. So it became necessary to sell more art. And there was always a fairly high standard in terms of the quality of the work, professionally, but it was like the interesting art began to be seen other places, and OK Harris didn't change as the art world was changing.

It didn't, sort of, keep trying to get new people who were out on the edge. I mean, it kept getting new people, but they were basically people who did things within this relatively narrow range that Ivan was interested in, which had to do, to some degree, with Americana and the kind of American vernacular. And that, in 1969, was rather startling to see, but by, you know, 1980, a lot of stuff that happened, it was very different from that, and when you saw the shows at OK Harris, you wouldn't even be aware that any of that stuff had happened out there.

So that was an issue; the fact that it became sort of where you went to see the Photorealists, along with Lou Meisel, meant that there was a certain context that the work was being seen in that seemed very predictable, and it seemed like it was - you couldn't think about it in a different way, and so - I thought about leaving the gallery any number of times, and I could never figure out any place that I wanted to go that I thought would want my work. It was sort of like the places that I knew would want my work, I didn't want to go. [Laughs.]

So I just kind of kept with the status quo until the opportunity came up with Barbara Gladstone, and that sort of started - she started getting interested about 1999, I guess, or 2000.

MS. RICHARDS: She had a drawing of yours in a group show. Was that at the beginning?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it was a group show that was sort of - "Drawing 2000" - sort of a Millennium-themed show.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were at OK Harris, did you initiate having a show? I mean, did you call Ivan and say, I'm ready for a show, or did he expect you to be ready under certain regular periods?

MR. BECHTLE: It was negotiated. Usually, you know, he would say, you are on the calendar for the next - you would know that it had been like two years since the last show, and he would be thinking in terms of something, and then you would just sort of wait until you got the word that there was a space a year ahead or a year-and-a-half ahead, and you would just think yes or no. You could say, well, it seems a little too close; let's do it a little

later than that.

MS. RICHARDS: At the same time, you started showing at the San Francisco gallery, Paule Anglim -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you initiate that, wanting to have a showplace in San Francisco?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I was interested, yeah, in having a place to show locally. I'd shown sporadically at John Berggruen [Gallery], but I never quite felt comfortable there, mainly because the gallery doesn't really have a group of its own artists, and the range of work that is shown, in some ways, it had a wider range at OK Harris, but in other ways not.

And so Paule [Paule Anglim Gallery] has been around for a long time, and I'd always - liked a lot of the artists that she showed.

MS. RICHARDS: It's a very eclectic mix.

MR. BECHTLE: It's very eclectic, yeah, absolutely. And that was one of the things that I really liked about it. And I like Paule. At some point in the early '90s, I guess, late '80s, she just approached me, you know, and would I be interested in showing there? And I said, yeah. And at that point it was possible to do the two, you know, galleries easily. I mean, Ivan was all for it. He thought it was great, and he's always been very amenable to, you know, working with other dealers, and very generous in terms of discounting, and he would often absorb whatever discounts were made.

And it seemed like I would have a show in New York, and maybe half of the show was sold but the other half was still available, and so it was possible then to take that as a core and send those things to San Francisco. And then do maybe another half-a-dozen works over the course of a year or so - drawings or watercolors or whatever - and be able to have a show here. And then the same thing would sort of happen, that there would be a lot of work that was leftover. And so we would send that off to New York, and that would be the core of the next show in New York.

But more recently, you know, since the museum retrospective ["Robert Bechtle," SF MoMA. February 12-June 5, 2005], I don't have anything leftover unless I specifically try to hang on to it, like I did with this. So it's a little bit more of a problem trying to think in terms of producing work for both places at the same time.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you get involved in the installation when you have a show, wherever, the gallery shows, in planning it and actually -

MR. BECHTLE: Mostly not. I mean, I did at SF MoMA. I was able to work with Janet Bishop right from the beginning in terms of what was going to go - what things we would eventually actually use in the show, and then as it got closer, we had a mock-up and sort of worked with it to see how - start putting the show together and so on, right through the hanging and -

MS. RICHARDS: But normally with gallery shows -

MR. BECHTLE: Normally the galleries -

MS. RICHARDS: You let the dealer decide.

MR. BECHTLE: I usually - yeah, because they know what they're doing. They know the space, and they do a good job. If they didn't do a good job, then I would be more concerned about it.

MS. RICHARDS: What about involvement in marketing issues with either gallery, deciding what image should be on the announcement card, what form the announcement would take, the text of the press release, any other kinds of involvement in that aspect of the show?

MR. BECHTLE: Mostly I let them do it. Sometimes there is - they'll say, we're going to use such and such a work on the card, and if I objected to it, I'm sure they would change it, but usually they make good choices. I have no reason to complain. The press stuff, I mean, that's all - let them deal with that.

MS. RICHARDS: At times when there was a lot of demand for your work, did you discuss who would be the ideal purchaser, who might not, and - or did the dealer consult with you and say, you know, I'd really like to hold off selling this to this person because we want to sell it to that place?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. Well, sometimes it definitely comes up. Yeah, Ivan would do that sometimes, you know, say that we're going to take a discount on this because this is a really important collection to be in, et cetera. And

Barbara does the same thing, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: So she's discussing with you, or he is discussing with you, in terms of your earning less money but not in terms of the strategy of who should have your work?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, yeah, with the idea that - I mean, she knows the collectors. They both would know the collectors. And so, you know, I suppose it could be a question of my saying, no, don't do that, but I think they both are - it's to their advantage to place work as well as possible with, you know, collectors that are important to work with or collectors that will perhaps, down the line, donate the work to a particular museum or something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it a difficult moment for you to leave OK Harris and go to Barbara Gladstone?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it was difficult, in a way. I mean, when it actually came to the point of making a decision, it all came about somewhat unexpectedly. It shouldn't have been unexpected, I guess. But I didn't hesitate about doing it, but I - Barbara called, and she had been putting me in various shows and in various things that had been going on for three or four years.

And, you know, she had come here to my studio, calling out of the blue, and I knew who she was, but I really -

MS. RICHARDS: Was that early? I mean, right after -

MR. BECHTLE: That was in the '90s, I guess, the sort of late '90s, and she was out here, and she had gotten interested in my work because, I guess among other things - what's his name, the sculptor, Charlie [Charles Ray] - it'll come to me in - I'm having a senior moment. But she wanted to make a studio visit because she was up in San Francisco, and so she came over, and we talked.

Yeah, so she came over to the studio. You know, we spent an hour sort of talking and so on, and she said she was interested in the work. She sort of phrased it saying, well, maybe we can do something, I don't know; I'll have to think about it, you know.

And so then while she was doing the drawing show, she asked if I would put a work in, so I did that, and she sold the work out of her show. And then there was a show, I don't know, maybe a year or two years, later that Gregory Crewdson curated that was kind of on the theme of an American vernacular that was called "American Standard," using the title of a plumbing supply company.

MS. RICHARDS: Where was that show?

MR. BECHTLE: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: Where was that show?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, it was at Barbara Gladstone's.

And then she nominated me - she was on a sort of jury to pick some artists for an award that came from a foundation in New York [Francis Greenberger Foundation]. So she - it was for under-recognized artists, and so she chose me for that.

So I should have had some - yeah, I knew she was interested, you know, but I didn't have any idea that she was really considering me for the gallery. But, I don't know, a year or so after that then she called and said that she thought that I should join her gallery. And I said, "That sounds like a good idea." [Laughs.]

So, yeah, sort of like, I guess, when I was first meeting up with Ivan. I said, "Okay, I'll come back, and we'll talk about it." But at that point, it was settled in my mind. There were some things I wanted to kind of clarify.

And then, after doing that, I knew that I needed to move very quickly, while I still had the nerve to do it, and so I immediately went downtown and talked to Ivan and -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, you went to New York to finish the discussions with Barbara.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I went to New York to talk to Barbara. Yeah, we had lunch and sort of discussed it more thoroughly than just on the telephone. And so, yeah, it worked out. I talked to Ivan about it, and, you know, he was cool. He said, "I know it's not personal; it's just business." You know, it happens all the time.

So I still go in there. Every time I'm in New York, I go in and, you know, schmooze with the staff, and I saw Ivan last week when we were there.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it a different - I mean, most artists of your generation talk about the gallery - if they've been with a gallery - the gallery of that time as being almost like a family.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And there was a - and you go in at the holidays, and you see each other at your shows - I mean, maybe not so much when you're not living in New York -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: - and that galleries today are sometimes very different. I mean, of course, you hadn't been there for 30 years at Gladstone, but -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah. Well, I think that's true to some degree, but there's a - I mean, with OK Harris, the staff stayed the same for years. A lot of those people have been working there since, you know, 1970 or sometime in the '70s. And so, even not being in New York, you see them enough that there is a very strong connection. And they're all nice people; people who are fun to, you know, be around and talk to and so on.

My sense at Barbara's is that there's an attempt to sort of create that sort of family, but the turnover there in the staff is so much faster. There are people coming and going all the time, new people coming and - people who leave after relatively short periods of time. You know, nobody is around for 30 years. So it has a bit of a different feel, but it's not that - I think it's the circumstances - you know, a high-powered position that they're in, so it's harder to be kind of easygoing and -

MS. RICHARDS: The pressures of the art world are different.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, they're different pressures, I think.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you feel about having your work in a totally different context, the group of artists?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, that's the good part. That was the question that Barbara had for herself, you know, was how this work looked in the context of her stable of people. And I think originally, she was also concerned about whether she would find interest for the work among her collectors, whether she could actually sell the work. And so she seemed to have answered that to her satisfaction before making an offer.

So I see it as a very positive step, you know, and that's really the main reason for making the move. It's not because I was dissatisfied with OK Harris's handling. It was sort of that the range of what was shown there was a little too predictable, and so the work was seen only in the kind of -

MS. RICHARDS: The audience for your work was much more than -

MR. BECHTLE: And the audience was very different, yeah, at a lower level in terms of collectors.

MS. RICHARDS: And critical.

MR. BECHTLE: It didn't originally start out that way. There was some really major collectors. But those were people who have long since gone.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there particular artists at Barbara Gladstone whose work you're especially interested in and you've had a chance to meet the artist?

MR. BECHTLE: Have I? No. [They laugh.] I mean, I've met a number of people that - and I don't even know who all of the artists are. There are artists who - like Anish Kapoor. I've never met him, but I've known his work for a long time, or -

MS. RICHARDS: Balkenhol?

MR. BECHTLE: [Peter] Schjeldahl is someone whose work I like a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: What about Stephan Balkenhol, a realist sculptor?

MR. BECHTLE: I didn't realize that he was in the gallery. Yeah, no, I like his work. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I think he is. He was.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. I should be a little more -

MS. RICHARDS: Have you let the gallery keep your archive, or have you always kept your archive, records of

sales and reviews and all that?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I've kept most of that. I think that there is stuff that is at the gallery, but I would - I'm not sure what OK Harris has now. I mean, they gave me all of the, sort of, published stuff that they had collected over the years.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you give it to Barbara, or you keep it?

MR. BECHTLE: I just kept it. It seemed like if they want it, they can certainly have it. Sales stuff, I'd always gotten a copy from OK Harris for everything, copies of the invoices with the collectors' names and prices and all of that. And I get the same thing from Barbara.

MS. RICHARDS: When you bring your work in - I'm looking at this painting right here, and there's a silver frame on it - have you - I mean, some painters don't put frames on their works at all. Have you felt just kind of casual about that, allowed the dealer to make the decision, or have you dictated exactly how each painting should be framed?

MR. BECHTLE: Mostly I've done it, so -

MS. RICHARDS: Mostly you've framed it?

MR. BECHTLE: I've mostly framed them, yeah, because I don't like them to go out of the studio without something on it to protect it. At some points I would just nail a shipping frame, you know, just plain pine stripping around it. And then the gallery just shows it that way, and then it goes off and lives at somebody's house that way. I can't remember now if any came back for the retrospective with shipping frames on them, but, you know, it kind of takes me aback.

MS. RICHARDS: So you didn't mean for them to be permanent.

MR. BECHTLE: No. No. So I sort of evolved this particular frame with the aluminum facing on it some years ago - so they would go out of the studio with that kind of frame on it. And then, more recently, I've been doing a frame that doesn't have the aluminum on it. It's maple and has a slight - what do you call it? It's like a float that's painted black, and then the maple is just waxed natural wood, and the face of it is kind of a quarter round.

MS. RICHARDS: You order these? Someone makes them?

MR. BECHTLE: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: Someone makes them for you -

MR. BECHTLE: No, I just make them here. You know, they're easy to make. I have a table saw. It's more of a hassle to go track down the lumber than it is to actually make them. It's not that hard, but I do it so seldom. It's like a painting goes out maybe six months or more - so sometimes I forget where the lumberyard is that I get the material from.

MS. RICHARDS: Switching to the critical response to your work, first, kind of general question. Have writers sometimes taken what you consider the wrong approach, so that out there in the archives, or whatever -

[Cross talk.]

- or in the cyberspace, there are wrong conclusions that you would like to correct at this time about meanings or anything that is somehow passed down that's been wrong? You know how sometimes things get written, and other people take that on and think it's right.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I mean, there are things that are sort of floating around out there that seem like - they become received opinions, certain terms. Maybe we're talking about - I guess I was talking about the term "neutral" and the supposed coolness and lack of emotional resonance that the paintings got tagged with kind of early on. I'll see that turn up in some more recent thing, where obviously somebody is just regurgitating it rather than thinking about it, you know, with a fresh eye.

Things that have to do with the subject matter often - again, it's not that it's necessarily wrong; it's simply that people will sometimes just pick up from what has already been written and not rethink it.

[END CD 4.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Bechtle on February 9, 2010, on de Haro Street in San Francisco, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

And these ideas about subject keep getting regurgitated.

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I think, yeah, sometimes it seems like too much emphasis gets placed on the subject matter without even thinking it through, the subject matter. People will sometimes tune into the idea of automobiles, you know, and take it in the most obvious way, you know, the automobile as sort of the symbol of American culture, a symbol of American moving about, mobility, and the paintings with antique cars in them. And, of course, the cars weren't antique at the time the paintings were made.

And I think that, you know, it misses the point by sort of concentrating on those things; it tends to miss more important issues that have to do with representation, that have to do with light and how one goes about making a painting and using contemporary material to work from and, you know, maybe putting too much emphasis on the specifics of the subject matter. And yet the paintings are really done trying to use the specifics of the subject matter to kind of camouflage the more universal meaning.

So I shouldn't be complaining, I guess, because I am setting it up that way.

MS. RICHARDS: What is your reaction when you get a negative review?

MR. BECHTLE: I don't read it [laughs] again. No, it depends on the review and whether I think they are, you know, whether I think they get it. And if it is somebody that seems to have a valid point, I will certainly think about it. But I really - I like it when there is a review that seems to pick up on what is going on in the work in, you know, a kind of clear-cut, you know, open-minded way. And I think of a review that Peter Schjeldahl did in the New Yorker, when the retrospective opened, that gets it. One of his phrases had to do with seeing, you know, the stuff that is always seen, but seldom noticed.

And I thought that was very poetic, but, you know, he really got it. And he did a couple of reviews way back when he was writing for the Village Voice that were also pretty perceptive.

MS. RICHARDS: Has he ever spoken to you about your work?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, a little bit. I met him a number of times and enjoyed him. He is a very funny - he has got a wonderful take on stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you - sorry, go on.

MR. BECHTLE: No, I was thinking - oh, I know what it was. It was a review that was in Time magazine of all places. There was a review of the [2008] Biennial at the Whitney [Museum of American Art, NY], not this most recent one but the one before, that I had some work in. I can't remember exactly what they said. But it really kind of nailed down, you know - because my work looked so strange in the Biennial. But it also looked really pretty good in that. And, you know, the Time magazine review picked up on some aspect of what was going on and in the work that was in common that I thought was very perceptive.

So, you know, it happens. The more perfunctory ones where people just kind of talk about the old cars and stucco houses.

MS. RICHARDS: What about the label Photorealist, or Hyperrealist, or any realist labels? How do you feel about that?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, I don't know. I am stuck with it. I guess I like, if one has to have a label, Hyperrealist better than Photorealist, but it doesn't matter. I mean, I think of my connections, really, as being sort of realist in the long Western tradition of domestic realism. So the lineage, as it goes back to the Dutch 17th-century pictures and the Impressionists. It is part of that. [Henri] Matisse and, you know, [Pierre] Bonnard and Hopper, we talked about.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think - have you already experienced, yourself, that after a number of years, you read your work differently, you see your work differently? And do you think or hope that viewers will do the same? And how do you react when the reading changes, the interpretation, what knowledgeable viewers or critics see as the important points?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, well, it is hard to -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you see your work differently if it is something you did 20 years ago?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, of course. I mean, different, but I see its connections and try to play off of that difference to some degree. That is one of the reasons for sort of revisiting a particular kind of image that I had done months before or several times before.

I mean, there were images where - well, the first paintings that had cars in them were sort of about what a crazy thing to do to paint a painting of an automobile. And that sort of quickly morphed into, well, this becomes a kind of still-life situation. You can put the car in front of this house, and it is like the bottles on the table. And so it kind of went along like that for a while.

It looked like they were portraits of the cars, because the cars were very large in the context. Gradually, I was known as the guy that painted cars, so I started backing off from that a little bit to turn them into kind of landscape paintings, where the cars were kind of minor presences. So, you know, now I can go back and I can paint one of those paintings with a car as a very big part of the painting, which is kind of what I am doing now [because they are now part of my personal image bank].

And it will be a different painting from the ones that were done in the 1970s. And, you know, I am sort of curious what the difference will be. I have no idea. But I know that my thoughts about it are different. The painting technique has evolved in a somewhat different way. Hopefully, it becomes maybe a more weighty experience than it might have been in the 1970s. I have no idea.

Revisiting, as opposed to simply doing the same thing over and over.

MS. RICHARDS: Sometimes you do a painting, or more often a drawing, that is a second or third version of the same intersection - or maybe it is slightly different. So for example, Covered Car - Missouri Street, 2001, number two. There were two of those. When you are doing one, after you are done, you say, "You know, I would really be interested in seeing what this would be like if I did it from a different angle or a different time of day." I mean, what goes into thinking about doing a second or even a third version of an image or a place?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, sometimes it is just looking at the source material, and later on, I might see it differently and see that if I crop differently or made some kind of changes, it would also be an interesting image. Sometimes it comes up very fast. There was one watercolor there I was working on a few weeks ago that I had cropped a certain way. And then while I was working on that watercolor, I started thinking about making a much more severe cropping of it. And so I did that - not with an elapsed time, you know, coming back to it weeks or months later. But I went into it as the next work right after having finished the first one.

Sometimes it is something that has to do with the gathering of the material. There is a particular intersection here in the neighborhood of 20th and Arkansas Street that I have used many times, you know, photographed from different corners and slightly different cropping, sometimes with a figure walking across, sometimes with many cars on the street, sometimes with no cars.

And it is partly because there is a row of houses a little way up the street that sort of continue all the way to the top to where they end as it goes up a hill. And these are houses that were all built at the same time, so there is a kind of uniformity to them that I find, you know, sort of fascinating. The places I have photographed in the neighborhood tend to be places where that sort of thing exists. You know, there are lots of places in the neighborhood where the houses are all from various times and styles plopped right next to each other. And I always avoid those.

MS. RICHARDS: Too much personality?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, it just becomes another thing, you know. I kind of like the starkness of the stucco houses that are built right out to the edge of the sidewalk, or, you know, in the case of, say, Berkeley or Alameda, there is a little patch of lawn out there, but where there is a certain sparseness to the garden, if there is one. So it really - the painting really becomes about the play of light on the stucco surfaces. I mean, that is why I like the stucco houses. You know, it is not just because they are charming.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Those paintings, in particular maybe, also have that sense of emptiness, of stillness, of a kind of urbanness that, again, can create an uneasy feeling, a poetic feeling. You were, in fact, maybe consciously quoting Hopper in Early Morning [Crossing Arkansas Street - Early Morning, 2002]?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You can't help but imagine the connection with the Hopper painting. So those places have particular power in them.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I think so.

MS. RICHARDS: They give you that opportunity.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I think - I mean, I grew up in a neighborhood in Alameda that was like that. It was all stucco houses built at the same time that had tile roof trim and that sort of thing. And as I was growing up, I was much

more - I mean, I sort of hated it because all the houses looked alike.

MS. RICHARDS: The conformity issue.

MR. BECHTLE: The conformity of it and - I don't know. It all seemed very modest and my ambition was to move to Berkeley, where the trees are bigger and the houses have shingles on them and all that.

But at a certain point in the early '60s, you know, I started getting interested in that stuff again and realized how unique it was - not just that particular neighborhood, but that particular style of architecture, which is throughout California. It doesn't really exist quite like that anywhere else.

MS. RICHARDS: The value of traveling brings you back.

MR. BECHTLE: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: The value of traveling is making you appreciate your own -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, right. No, no, it is true. You appreciate - yeah. And it was just that. And all of a sudden, I realized that I should paint what I knew and grew up with because that was just - it was as interesting in its own way as the streets of Paris. And there was more reason for me to paint Alameda than the streets of Paris, because that is where I grew up. And there is an authenticity to it. Paris, I am a tourist.

MS. RICHARDS: Hearing you talk about painting what you know reminds me of how often novelists talk about learning a lesson that they needed to write about what they knew.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there writers whose work you are particularly interested in, or who have been important to you?

MR. BECHTLE: In that sense, you mean?

MS. RICHARDS: In any sense, but it could be about the fact that they are writing about their personal lives in a certain kind of American setting that seems to resonate with your paintings.

MR. BECHTLE: Well, you know, there is [John] Updike and the other, [John] Cheever, somebody named Dreiser.

MS. RICHARDS: Theodore Dreiser.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, Theodore Dreiser, you know, that was not because of that connection so much, but because of the kind of almost deadpan, no-inflection style of writing, very descriptive and poetic in its own way and dramatic in its own way, but not overtly so. And that kind of stuck with me. That was actually a kind of influence. I mean, I read the, what was it? The famous one - American Tragedy [New York: Boni & Liveright, 1925], I guess, as a part of a lit course that I took a Berkeley when I was taking some summer session courses there in, I guess, 1960 or '61. And it kind of stuck with me as something that I began to see happening in my own work. And I have thought of it as a, you know, kind of a literary influence.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: Have there been exhibitions of your work that you think were - before the retrospective - that were really important, or group shows in which your work was included that you felt were really significant for your career, for the development of your work?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I think there were quite a few group shows that I would say were important, some fairly recent, some way back. I think I had mentioned one that was at the Milwaukee Art Center that was an early accumulation of contemporary realist work. That was kind of a groundbreaking show. I mean, it was very important to have been in it. And I can't remember now the name of the person that was the main curator. But he came out here looking. He came to my studio on the recommendation of Wayne Thiebaud, because Wayne knew what I was doing at that point.

So it was really the first - I mean, the really first gathering was Linda Nochlin's show she did at Vassar [College, James W. Palmer Gallery, Poughkeepsie, NY] called "Realism Now" [1968], I think. But I think the Milwaukee show, which went on to two other museums in the Midwest, was important. Yeah, it was documenta -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I wanted to ask you about that - documenta [Kassel, Germany] in 1972.

MR. BECHTLE: In 1972, right, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you go to -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, yeah. We did.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that the first significant presentation of your work in Europe?

MR. BECHTLE: I think it probably was. I think it probably was. There were a number of big group shows of American realist painting, contemporary realist painting, in Europe. But I think they came after and maybe were spinoffs from documenta, the documenta thing.

MS. RICHARDS: And then the recent - you went to Berlin for that exhibition at Deutsche Guggenheim.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, at the Deutsche Guggenheim ["Picturing America: Photorealism in the 1970s." March 7-May 10, 2009].

MS. RICHARDS: Where they recreated, I believe -

MR. BECHTLE: Well, yeah, it was - it was sort of based to some degree on the documenta exhibition. But they didn't really recreate it. I looked it up when they were talking about it to see who might be in it. And as it turns out, there were a number of artists that were in the documenta show that were not at the Deutsche Guggenheim. I mean, Jasper Johns, for one, was -

MS. RICHARDS: A special section of realism.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. And there were a number of European artists. There was [Gerhard] Richter was in it. There was a French Pop painter whose name I don't remember. And a couple of other - I think a couple of other Americans. And then the Deutsche Guggenheim show included a couple of people who were not in the documenta show - Charles Bell, for one. He wasn't in it, but he was in - and Audrey Flack was not in the Guggenheim - I mean, was not in the documenta show, but she was in Berlin.

I mean, I don't object to them, you know, being in the Guggenheim show, because they certainly deserve to be there. But I thought, you know, that some of the logic of how they put the show together was fuzzy. It was all from that period except for a couple of works, so none of this was new work. It was all from the early '70s. And that was nice because it was nice to see how well the work had held up. It was much more interesting than I thought it would be, you know, because I knew all of those paintings from way back.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you experience the German audience and press reading your work? How did they see it at this long 30 years later?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I have no idea. [They laugh.] That is hard to ascertain. Most of what I received back from the museum was stuff that they had written themselves. And so it was all kind of puff, press stuff. And what was actually written in German, I have no idea.

MS. RICHARDS: It wasn't translated for you?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I don't recall even getting, you know, like newspaper articles. I think they probably didn't send them out because they were only German and nobody bothered to translate them. I mean, that is a lot of work to translate them. So I have no idea. There was a symposium of sorts for a couple of hours, I guess. That was well attended. There were people there, you know, who introduced themselves or who asked questions of the panel. But they were all English speaking and quite comfortable with the whole thing. And, you know, they seemed very - interested in the whole enterprise right from the beginning.

So I have no idea. There is a certain - every once in a while, I will hear little things about some artist that has known my work for a long time that is, like, a younger artist coming out in Europe, you know. I have no idea where they have seen it or -

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you if you are aware of the influence of your work.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, a little bit, but not greatly - I was kind of stunned when Ewan Gibbs, the one who did the drawings of San Francisco, the one that came out here [SF MoMA] -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I saw them yesterday.

MR. BECHTLE: Because, you know, he is quite young. He is in his 30s, I guess. And he is very enthusiastic. These people just kind of come out of the woodwork every once in a while. And so if there is two or three, there must be more.

[Cross Talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: So do you get e-mails from people?

MR. BECHTLE: No.

MS. RICHARDS: I guess you don't have your own Web site, so that -

MR. BECHTLE: No, I don't have a Web site. Oh, God, that is for - it is bad enough having an e-mail address.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to your work, I wanted to ask you about a specific drawing that I find remarkable, and kind of unusual, a charcoal drawing that you did in 2000 called Rockridge House. And I don't know if you remember this.

MR. BECHTLE: I do -

[Cross Talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: There is a kind of a pentagon-shaped, flat house.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, and it has a picture window that is kind of a pointed arch.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, sort of curved, and this, kind of, trapezoid driveway. And it is a very interesting, unusual, center frontal composition. Were you aware that it was an unusual composition that you were looking at? Or is it just my seeing it differently?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, no. I mean, I was aware of it. That is why I took the photograph and why I used it. I have actually - I painted a watercolor of it years ago. And then the drawing was one of the ones that were made as day for night. It was from a daytime image that the night scene was invented. So all of the, you know, where the lights were on in the windows and whatever it was on the driveway and all that was just made up.

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe that adds to its power.

MR. BECHTLE: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe that adds to its power in some way.

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I think it probably does, yeah. You know, I was interested in the sort of night scene thing. I actually had been interested in it for years, but I could never quite figure out how to approach it technically. And I would put off dealing with it, you know, and then forget about it. And then finally one of the things that I thought that I could do would be to take day shots and turn them into night scenes. But I had never tried it. And then finally, I decided, well, why not just see what happens?

And so the kind of mysterious quality that night imposes on everything, you know, slightly romantic, slightly threatening, edges dissolve, shapes become more massive and so on. When I started looking for a material that seemed like it would lend itself to that, I came across, you know, the print of that particular image.

MS. RICHARDS: Photographic print?

MR. BECHTLE: The photographic print, the xerox. And decided this one might work. So it was one of the first ones that I tried. It wasn't the first, but it was near the beginning. And there were several that - there was one in particular that was probably one of the first - you know, very close to the beginning, where there was, kind of, a massive tree that fills the whole thing and then the image area. And I think there is maybe a little bit of a light on it, a window in the house that is behind the tree. But the house just becomes another big black shape. And so it is almost abstract. It is so simplified. There is no detail in the tree except a little bit where the top of the tree is being lit by a streetlight that is not in the image. And then there is a bit of a shadow on the building.

MS. RICHARDS: So there is a very - that abstract -

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it is very abstract.

MS. RICHARDS: It almost verges on the surreal, if you think of the strange lighting of [René] Magritte with the streetlights on, but the sky blue.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, those are favorite paintings of mine and influential.

MS. RICHARDS: The Magritte.

MR. BECHTLE: You know, I wasn't trying to copy them, but I was certainly thinking about that issue. You know, if you have a night scene, then how dark should the sky be? How much control you have by the value of the sky as to whether it seems like it is really night, or if it is just twilight, or if it is early morning, whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: Or if it is an indeterminate time.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it is indeterminate. Yeah, because sometimes nature does that. You know, I mean, we read those paintings as being, you know, kind of strange, you know, because of the street and the streetlights and the trees and everything is so dark. But, you know, there is a certain point, maybe in the fall especially, where, you know, the sky will be that kind of really bright, but dark, blue just after the sun has gone down, yet the trees and the buildings are all quite dark by then. It just lasts for a few minutes. But it is there in real life.

MS. RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about your working with the self-portrait. It is something that has gone - it is a subject that you have used throughout your work, to the present, in different ways with more focus on you and less focus. You are just part of the picture. You are the central image. What keeps bringing you back to using yourself, the image of yourself?

MR. BECHTLE: Easy model, someone that is available.

MS. RICHARDS: But since you take photographs, of course, you could take a photograph of anyone.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, a photograph could be anybody. Yeah, yeah, no, that is true. Yeah, I don't know. I did, I guess, self-portraits occasionally, you know, way, way back as a student, just to see what it was like to do it and would revisit that periodically. And I guess there - part of it was that it was, you know, it was a handy model if I was working from life, and I could just sit down and draw myself in the mirror. And I would do that sometimes when I was traveling.

But eventually, it sort of became a category, you know, that became, you know, like a thread that runs through the work that I can always make use of that. And it is almost sort of mandatory that I make use of it to kind of keep the thread going, you know, to kind of make it a bona fide category within the work, that it is not just a one-off image, but that it is, you know, something that repeats itself, like the cars can repeat themselves; the houses can repeat themselves and so on.

There is a certain - there is a certain vanity about it, I am sure. There is a certain mortality that one acknowledges by doing that. I think of a self-portrait - a real self-portrait - as something where you look in the mirror, rather than look at a photograph, mainly because, I think, in order to do that with a mirror, you end up kind of - you have to concentrate and scrutinize much more. With the photograph, you can be a little more distanced from the whole experience, because in the photograph - you want to get a reasonable likeness, but it is not any more difficult to do than painting the hubcap.

MS. RICHARDS: It doesn't present a moment for self-analysis or -

MR. BECHTLE: No, not really. Yeah, not really. I think if you are staring at yourself in the mirror, there is much more self-analysis.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever wanted to do a self-portrait looking in the mirror?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, I have done them. Yeah, every once in a while, usually as drawings.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about vanity. When you said that, it made me think of - maybe vanity, maybe not, but the sensation that you might get doing a self-portrait that links you to the tradition of artists doing self-portraits. I think about the whole series of Rembrandt and [Edgar] Degas and all the artists who have done self-portraits that have become very important works.

MR. BECHTLE: Right, yeah, sure. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think there is a certain - I see them sort of connecting up that way to a degree, but not in the same way that, you know, Rembrandt -

[Cross Talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: But most of - just taking the Photorealists - I can't think of any who have put themselves in their work. Maybe a little bit secretly in a reflection. [They laugh.] But I don't know -

MR. BECHTLE: Well, yeah, I think you are right. I think you are right.

MS. RICHARDS: So that links your work with a tradition of realism.

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I remember something that Ivan said, because I had done - he didn't like the figure paintings that much. I mean, you know, he would say that he didn't like them. Sometimes, you know, I would send a figure painting, and he would say, well, we are going to have a hard time selling that one. And he said something about - it was a figure painting that had a self-portrait in it. It was something about he thought - this was early on - he thought that a man with a beard is an interesting person and an interesting subject, but not a part of modern art. You know, kind of like, don't do that. [Laughs.]

I mean, he would never say, don't do that. One of the first in the group of slides that I showed him when we first met was a painting that I had done from a snapshot that Nancy, my ex-wife, had made. And I was carrying Max [Bechtle's son] on my shoulder and with nice shapes and things in the background. But he said that he liked all of the work, except maybe the man with the baby on his shoulder, and then, you know, people with beards are interesting and not a part of modern art. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did his -

MR. BECHTLE: And then at the end of the letter, he said: "P.S., Maybe I have changed my mind about the man and the baby." [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did he sell it?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, eventually. Well, actually, no, maybe not. Maybe it was sold before then. I mean, it may have been something that was - it was right at that transition. But it may have been sold out here. I can't remember.

MS. RICHARDS: There is a series of paintings that you did that are called North Adams Studio, meaning that you spent some time in North Adams, Massachusetts. What brought you there? And how long did you stay there?

MR. BECHTLE: We were there on two different occasions. Whitney got a fellowship at the Clark Art Institute -

MS. RICHARDS: In Williamstown.

MR. BECHTLE: In Williamstown, yes, winter-spring, I think -

MS. RICHARDS: There is something '05, North Adams.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, well, the paintings were done after. So it was - I think it was in 2001. Yeah, it was 2001. Wait a minute, it was 2002, I guess. It was the spring after 9/11. I just rented an office space in an office building downtown in North Adams to use as a studio. And it was kind of neat. It was an old 19th-century building. It had two huge windows at one end of the room.

MS. RICHARDS: You feel like you are in a Hopper? [Laughs.]

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it was like a Hopper. Yeah, yeah. And it had kind of a neat view of, you know, a parking lot and a K-Mart and a New England church out the window. So I took a bunch of photographs.

MS. RICHARDS: Again, with yourself?

MR. BECHTLE: With a self-timer, yeah. I had an idea I was basically stealing from a Diebenkorn drawing that I knew that had a figure silhouetted against the window in a very dark room. You know, it was all very flattened and abstract; that is simplified in the drawing. And I actually hadn't seen the drawing for a long time. And I still haven't seen it since doing those paintings. So I am not sure how close I got to it. But I just liked the idea of the situation of shooting in the room. What was facing into the room would be dark because of the backlighting of the window. And so I just did different poses sitting in a chair, standing.

The window had Venetian blinds on it. They were these thin blinds. So I did some with the blinds up, some with the blinds closed all the way down, some with the blinds halfway down, but open so you could see through them. And they were sort of neat. And so I ended up doing a number of drawings first and then doing two paintings from the setup. But the paintings were done here. Wait a minute. One of them was actually started in Westport, and one of them was done here and finished in Westport.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you think about - were you conscious of a different sense of light there? I mean, you had already worked in Westport, which is the Northeast already, but different than San Francisco.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it wasn't so much that. I was basically thinking of them as being akin to the Broome Street paintings, in that it was the use of the interior to indicate a space or an area that I didn't feel comfortable using as an exterior space. It was kind of the same. I wasn't going to photograph Williamstown or even North Adams. Have you been there? Yeah, it is pretty neat. It is kind of a neat town just architecturally. It is too bad they sort

of botched up the downtown by urban renewing one side of the street. Luckily, they didn't do the other side, so I was in that set of buildings that was in the un-urban-renewed side of the street.

We went back oh, I don't know, a year and a half, maybe two years later, because they asked Whitney to be the [Robert Sterling] Clark Professor [of Art History] at Williams [College, Williamstown, MA] for one semester. It is a, you know, rotating chair that they invite visiting art historians to teach. But that time I just painted - I didn't re-rent the studio because we were going to be there for a slightly shorter time. I should have just rented another office in North Adams. But I turned a small room in the house that we were given to live in into a studio. It was about a fourth the size of this space. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Like 10 by 10?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, just about.

MS. RICHARDS: Linda Nochlin, who you mentioned before, a perceptive writer about your work, wrote something just a couple of years ago saying that your recent work had an elegiac quality in subject matter and color. Do you agree with that assessment? Did you speak to her at that time when she was - I think that was for a catalogue.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it was for a catalogue at Barbara Gladstone's maybe. I think it is an interesting - yeah, it is not something that I had talked to her about. I mean, she basically - she made it all up. [They laugh.] I mean, it was her interpretation of the work, but she has known it for a long time.

MS. RICHARDS: When you feel like taking time off and looking at art, do you regularly go to museum exhibitions, gallery shows in San Francisco or, of course, in New York when you are there - do you consider it an important use of your time now?

MR. BECHTLE: It is harder here to make time because it seems - I always have the best of intentions, but it is hard to sort of break out of the rhythm of working. So I see much more when I am traveling. You know, people that I talk to in New York sort of are in the same boat, you know. I mean, I will have seen all of the big shows and so on. And they are always saying, "Oh, yeah, I have got to go see that," you know, or, "I missed that one." And that is what I say here. I miss things quite a bit, but I try to go, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you tend - in terms of contemporary art, do you tend to seek out and follow and look at works by artists whose practice is similar to yours, or not at all?

MR. BECHTLE: I am pretty eclectic in my taste. And actually, Whitney is very much on top of a lot of, you know, new stuff. So I will very often see stuff that I wouldn't see normally if left to my own devices. And, you know, in some cases, I am very skeptical, and then gradually, if I keep an open mind, I will come around, and there will be things that, because of her enthusiasm about it, and she will explain certain stuff or say, well, this is doing such and such, and I will go along. And usually I find myself not only agreeing, but then starting to look at this person's work in the future and seeing it kind of evolve.

And that is one of the things that I am interested in, is seeing how artists' work evolves over a period of time. So I will very often make it an issue to go see a show by someone whose work I have been following for a long time.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there anyone whose name comes to mind you want to mention?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, it would be - you know, it could be anybody. It could be, you know, my colleagues, like Ralph Goings. You know, if Ralph had a show in San Francisco, I would be right there. And Richard McLean. There are various younger artists. There is actually a young sculptor named Mitzi Pederson that was a graduate from CCA. I had no idea.

She was in the Whitney Biennial, and her work was - there were several floor pieces. They are made out of ephemeral materials and tend to be - they are very abstract, and they look like something you would see, perhaps, in the corner of a workshop where you put the scrap pieces or something.

And I thought they looked great in the Biennial. I liked the way my work looked with that. And so I have sort of paid attention to her work. She is actually - she is one of the artists that shows at one of the galleries that is part of that little group that I was talking about that I am going to be curating.

I mean, it is stuff that in a different situation, I probably wouldn't have noticed it. But somehow, because it was in very close proximity with my own work, I saw that they played off of each other very nicely. So I became a fan. I look forward to her shows.

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of new developments in contemporary art, where artists don't even have a studio practice, or their studio practice is radically different, like Mitzi's, what do you think is the future of painting?

MR. BECHTLE: I have a feeling it will always be with us. [Laughs.] Yeah, I don't know. People have been - you know, they have been talking about the death of painting for the last 50 years. When I first heard people talking it down, I was sort of upset. But it doesn't bother me particularly anymore. I mean, it seems like paint is such a [basic material]. It is so basic and [so capable of complexity] that all the technological stuff that goes on really just adds to what is possible out there. But it doesn't cancel out what is already there.

You know, I am sort of fascinated by the various practices that people come up with that are different. And I am kind of amazed at the inventiveness of a lot of it. But I don't see it as necessarily being threatening, you know, to painting as a practice. But in one sense it is, of course. It is like if all the new talent goes into these alternative things - there will always be people painting, but then not necessarily be of any importance. So it is heartening, you know, to see good painting out there, that there are still out there people who respond to it and engage with some of the issues of it and so on.

You know, 500 years of stuff to wrestle with - more than that really, but, you know, certainly in terms of Western art. It has been 500 years.

MS. RICHARDS: Of oil painting.

MR. BECHTLE: And, you know, every painter I have known is tuned into that whole thing, the fact that you are always wrestling with what has been done, and you have this basic material that you can, in a sense, do anything with it. And so the onus is on you to come up with something that isn't what has already been done, but is somehow informed by it and is - new, and makes some kind of sense.

There is always going to be somebody that is going to come along and do something with the old material that nobody has thought of yet.

[END CD 5.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Bechtle on February 9, 2010, on de Haro Street in San Francisco, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc six.

What you were just talking about leads me into the next question, which is, what would you say are your current issues and concerns in the painting you are doing? And are they in any way different than they were five or 10 years ago?

MR. BECHTLE: I am not so sure they are any different than five or 10 years ago. I would say they are different from going way back. Yeah, I think they are essentially looking for a way through the process to come up with images that have some kind of emotional resonance.

MS. RICHARDS: Another way of asking that question might be - what are your greatest challenges now in the work?

MR. BECHTLE: In a way, the answer is sort of the same because, you know, the challenges are sort of inherent in the process, the choosing, thinking about subject matter, choosing images, making use of images that seem to have a reason for being painted, trying to set the process in motion, so that as one goes through it, there are little discoveries to be made, epiphanies that happen. But, you know, that has been the case all along.

The thing is that it is - the process of painting is so - in some ways, it is so simple, you know, and it is so direct. And yet, it is also, at the same time, complex and ambiguous. And even though I might be working from a photograph, and therefore I can see, or think I see, what the end product is going to be, it doesn't work out that way, you know. In the end, it is always a surprise, the painting. If I am doing it right, the painting is going to have some quality that is different than anything I have done before, even though it is the same category and the same process in getting there. I don't know. It is sort of interesting to think about it.

I think any painter would probably say that, unless they are only talking about particular projects. But if you are talking about the practice, they are really going to say that they have always been doing the same thing and that is what it is all about.

MS. RICHARDS: So that is what you would say keeps you going, seeking these new insights?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, I think so. It is sort of the same, but endlessly different. Each painting is a different - each painting is the possibility of not making it.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean the possibility of failure?

MR. BECHTLE: Oh, yeah. At the starting point of a new painting, there is always a question of, how can I do this? How can I make it work? The fact that it has a process that - every artist works out a kind of system for how they

go about making work. And so as you enter with the beginning stages of whatever system you are using, everything is possible, including failure. And yet the system leads you to the next step. And when you get to the next step, the possibilities are closed down somewhat, and perhaps the chances of failure are somewhat less.

And, you know, it gradually evolves to the point where you feel like you are really in control and you are kind of - you are kind of cooking, you know. It sounds funny to talk about this kind of painting in those terms, those sort of Abstract Expressionist terms. But I think it is not that different.

And then when the painting is finished, you know, it sits for however long before you see it again, perhaps goes out of the studio. But when you see it, maybe it tells you something that you didn't see when you were working on it. And you have no sense that you could ever paint it again. You know, it is like the idea of doing a new version of a painting just finished seems impossible. It would have to be another - I could do another version that is doing, making some sort of drastic changes or just using the framework of the painting to make a new one. But to actually sit down and copy a painting that has already been done seems totally impossible.

MS. RICHARDS: When you think about the works that you are going to do after this painting, I wanted to ask you about what you had in mind. Are you thinking in terms of your next show? And when you are thinking about shows, do you want it to be a carefully orchestrated, in a sense, group of works that went together that you thought in advance, I am painting for a show and this is what should be included? Or is that not in your mind whatsoever, and you are going from one work to the next without a thought - any thought to what it will look like in a show?

MR. BECHTLE: I think it is in the back of your mind, even when the show time might be several years in the future. But there is a certain element of just going from one picture to the next on the basis of maybe trying to do something that is quite different from the one that you just finished, so you are not, kind of, repeating yourself in that sense. But I think as a date firms up, and as you get a little closer to it and maybe there are fewer choices possible as to what new work might be, that you have to think about how it is going to relate to things that are already done.

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of subject matter, or how many paintings versus how many drawings or works on paper?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I don't think the - I mean, other than the basic decision that it is going to have drawings or it is not going to have drawings. The number of drawings is kind of irrelevant.

MS. RICHARDS: So it is the subject, it is the imagery that you are thinking about.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, it would be the imagery and that there should be some relationship between them. Although since the work over the years has an internal logic to it, that is not so difficult to envisage or to pull off. And works that are done without even any thought given to putting them together in a show, if you do gather them together, they look just fine.

And, you know, if the show had two drawings and six paintings, that would be okay. If it was, say, 12 drawings and four paintings, that would be okay, too. It almost wouldn't matter. You know, it would depend a little bit on how you use the space in the gallery and how the pieces related to each other. But the relationships would be - I don't think have to be fine-tuned. They don't have to have, you know, four pieces that are all of the same intersection or four pieces that are all cars or, you know. In some ways, it is better not to have it that prescribed.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there anything you have always wanted to do that you haven't done? [They laugh.] Kind of a dream project or a really problematic thing that you have got to tackle one day and you haven't?

MR. BECHTLE: Probably there are.

MS. RICHARDS: Not something on the top of your mind.

MR. BECHTLE: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: Not something on the top of your mind.

MR. BECHTLE: No, not too much. I mean, sometimes I think, well, you know, I should make a couple of really big paintings. But -

MS. RICHARDS: What would be really big?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, I mean, you know, the biggest paintings I have done have been about six by eight feet, which is not that big really. And I think I did a couple of large paintings just to, sort of, prove to myself that I could do it. And once they were done, there seemed no point in doing it again. But there might be, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have a sense that the size of your paintings is related to maintaining a kind of an intimacy, a kind of a human scale, with the scale of yourself painting and the length of your arm and the height?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, yeah, sort of the human scale, where somebody is standing across the room, under life-size, but big enough in the image that it seems maybe larger than that. I am not particularly interested in going over life-size like Chuck Close, for example. I mean, that is just another set of issues, which are great, but not my issues.

Yeah, I don't know. I like a painting that feels big enough that it is not just a little, comfortable piece, something that in a house will command a wall. And partly by the nature of the subject matter, I think it will command a fairly large wall in a gallery space as well. And occasionally, I like to do a small painting just because it seems like it is going to be faster. It usually isn't. But mostly they tend to be in the same size range, which hasn't really changed that much over the years.

The format that I usually use - this painting of Whitney and me at the table is actually more horizontal than I usually use. But if you cut off about a fourth of it, you get a rectangle that is close to maybe - slightly elongated - close to a 35-millimeter format. And I have sort of stayed with that, going slightly more square sometimes, slightly more elongated sometimes.

MS. RICHARDS: Usually horizontal?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, usually horizontal, almost always horizontal. Something that came up when I was talking with this young English artist -

MS. RICHARDS: Whose work is mostly vertical.

MR. BECHTLE: Gibbs, whose work is mostly vertical, yeah. And he took a bunch of old photographs that he gave me and was saying, "Well, these are sort of my interpretation of some things that you might paint." But they are all verticals, you know. And I never use the vertical.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you think that - now, with some of your images in the streets - on the steep streets, one can imagine the relationship to Thiebaud, but Thiebaud's are mostly vertical.

MR. BECHTLE: That is true, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that conscious that you are taking - that your work would not be vertical, because really you are after a completely different kind of issue?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I don't think there is a conscious comparison with Thiebaud; we are painting the same neighborhood, but, you know, our approaches are so different that horizontal and vertical is not going to make any difference. And I am not quite sure. I guess horizontal seems more like we see. You don't see vertically unless you move your head. But horizontally, you know, you sort of sense, you know what is out here. And so it seems like your field of vision tends to - so it seems like a horizontal painting makes less of an issue of its horizontality than a vertical painting makes of its verticality.

MS. RICHARDS: I can see that.

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah. I mean, it is like a round painting. there's no reason not to do round paintings, but it is such a dominant shape that it is always a "round painting." It can't become, you know, just simply an object that has an image on it like a horizontal painting can.

Yeah, interesting, you know, if I were interested in doing full-length portraits, which is a category that I have really never done very much, other than the full-length portraits that are in these images, but like Whistler or [Edward] Burne-Jones or somebody like. I mean, that demands a vertical format. It seems absolutely right for those paintings. But I guess I am not interested enough. I have thought about it, but I have not been interested enough in doing the vertical portraits to actually do it, except as student work way back.

Yeah, I love those Whistlers that are at the Frick [Collection, New York, NY].

MS. RICHARDS: You had an opportunity to see them recently.

[Cross talk.]

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, actually, you wouldn't think it, you know, from the look of the work, but Whistler is a favorite artist, that I like looking at a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: What aspect of his work?

MR. BECHTLE: Pardon?

MS. RICHARDS: What aspect of his work?

MR. BECHTLE: Well, actually, the formality of it and the abstraction, particularly in the little landscape pictures and so on. He was kind of one of the first ones to paint 20th-century pictures, even though he was in the 19th century. His patterns and -

MS. RICHARDS: What about his focus on tonality?

MR. BECHTLE: Yeah, well, and the tonality and his color, which was, you know, sort of playing with tonality. It wasn't bright color, but it was definitely an issue. But I think the insistence on the artificiality of the art, you know, as a way of getting it read as both the picture of something - someone - but also as a two-dimensional surface that was flat. He is kind of the predictor of [art critic] Clement Greenberg. Flat is good.

But, you know, those are issues that really don't come up. I don't suppose painters really cared much about [flatness] - in Caravaggio's day, they were trying to break the plane of the canvas and be as three dimensional as possible. Flatness probably at that time just seemed old-fashioned, like the early Italian stuff. And that dynamic of the, kind of, staged space going back, but also coming out holds sway really until Whistler. You know, and all of a sudden, there is flat.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there anything else you want to talk about before we conclude?

MR. BECHTLE: I think I have probably said as much as I can think of.

MS. RICHARDS: All right. That is terrific. Thank you very much.

MR. BECHTLE: My pleasure.

[END CD 6.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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