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# Oral history interview with Peter Alexander, 2009 September 24-2010 January 19

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## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Peter Alexander on September 24, 2009. The interview took place in Santa Monica, Calif., and was conducted by Jason Stieber for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Peter Alexander has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. Funding for this interview provided by a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

### Interview

JASON STIEBER: This is Jason Stieber interviewing Peter Alexander at the artist's studio in Santa Monica, California, on September 24, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is memory card number one.

Thank you again. Let's start with just when and where you were born and the circumstances of your early life.

MR. ALEXANDER: Born in '39 in Good Samaritan, here in Los Angles.

MR. STIEBER: What month and date?

MR. ALEXANDER: February 27. Lived in—and I think this was a critical part—lived in Newport Beach from that—from the time I can remember, I think very shortly after I was born, we moved to Newport Beach. And Newport Beach is just a small town south of here and you—

MR. STIEBER: I've been there.

MR. ALEXANDER: You've been there. Okay. And it hasn't really changed very much, except it's got really white now. I mean much more so than it was then.

MR. STIEBER: Racially.

MR. ALEXANDER: Racially, yes. And everything else. It was a time—it was a small town where we lived on the ocean, set way back from the water, but we had a house and then there was a lot and a lot, then another house and you know, it was that—I mean, there was a lot—there weren't that many people down there. And it was sort of small town.

So it was ideal for somebody to grow up in a place like that because you knew almost everybody in town and you could sort of do whatever you wanted anytime you wanted. You just leave the house and go wherever you went. And—but being exposed to the water, I think, had a lot to do with what I do now, that is, being in the sun and the water and all that kind of stuff.

The other thing is that it was during the war and we had—every once in a while, you'd get a blackout notice because you know, there was fear of the Japanese, you know, coming ashore. And so then—and everything would go black and then the entire town would get drunk. [They laugh.] And that—my sense was, well, I guess that's the way adults behave. You know, that's the way it is.

I mean, I'll give you an example. It was that there was a lady next door named Dorcus and Dorcus was kind of a knockout, even to a 6-year-old. And I would—at 5:00, I could hear her walking across the sand dunes and I could hear the ice tinkling in the martini pitcher. And that was a typical, you know, attitude.

There was one time—and this is apropos of what I do. It appears that the events or the visual things—events, whatever—that occur up until you're maybe 10 have—they keep—they sit in your system in a way that other things do not. And I didn't realize this until much later, how indelible the visual memories of that time were and how they, in fact, affect virtually everything that I do.

And I'll give you an example. There was one night—it was about 2:00 in the morning and I think it was around 1946, so I was 7 years old. My parents had been out and they came home very late and they woke us up and they took us outside and we sat on the sand dunes and the entire sky was falling.

It was a meteor shower and I think it's even—you know, one could go back and find out which one it was. But it was—I'd never seen anything like it. That kind of light that was a result of that shower keeps repeating itself

again and again and again. I mean again and again and again. There was another thing—the—I can see you asked that question and I'm just going to go on forever.

MR. STIEBER: [Laughs.] Please do.

MR. ALEXANDER: I mean, well—

MR. STIEBER: Tell us a little bit about your parents, actually. Their names, what did they do?

MR. ALEXANDER: Okay. Marion Alexander was my mother. My father was Richard Alexander. He, since it was the war, he was in Washington a lot. He was on a—he was exempt from going overseas because he was in the food service business at the time, which meant that he, you know, he supplied K-rations to the troops.

So he was not at home and I think—for years—I mean I think I saw him three or four times up until time I was five. So that was an—that sets up a peculiar relationship there. What kind of questions—what is of interest about them? She was from Chicago. Dad was from here. On my father's side, my great grandfather—great, great grandfather came here in 1870.

MR. STIEBER: From where?

MR. ALEXANDER: From—he was a surgeon in the army. He was what they call a surgeon general and he came out to—when this was still a presidio and he was in charge of the, you know, doctoring, being the medical department.

MR. STIEBER: He came to California from somewhere else in the U.S.

MR. ALEXANDER: He came to California from—he was in Santa Fe.

MR. STIEBER: I see.

MR. ALEXANDER: And before Santa Fe, he was in, I think, Fort Laramie or something in Wyoming. And before that, he was in Philadelphia. But he and several other members of the family had gone to [The United States Military Academy at] West Point [NY] and they all became doctors in the army. And I think it was my great grandfather, the one who came out here—actually came from Santa Fe in a covered wagon. [They laugh.] I mean it was one of those.

MR. STIEBER: Was this on your father's side?

MR. ALEXANDER: On my father's side.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. ALEXANDER: And then also—but then another contingent of the family went to San Francisco about the same time. But they went around the horn from Virginia. So there was—and then they all—this is all relatively vague to me, but then somehow, they all wound up in Los Angeles. And that—this was a very curious place at that time.

MR. STIEBER: In the late—

MR. ALEXANDER: In the late 19th century, yeah. And I mean my father, for an example, my grandfather, who I never knew because he was killed by a streetcar in 1928. He had, for some reason, had various oil wells in the city—modest amount—it was not like [Edward L.] Doheny or any of that stuff. And he was a geologist, in fact.

And my dad said they used to drive around in his convertible and dad would sit in the passenger seat with a shotgun. And whenever they saw a dove, he would shoot the dove and they'd collect it and that was dinner. So I mean that's how wild the town—I mean that's how loose the town was. And I'm talking about areas that now are downtown Los Angeles.

MR. STIEBER: Was your father—when you knew your father, was he still that wild or did—

MR. ALEXANDER: It wasn't—wild is the wrong word. I think what we're talking about is that it was an open city. Certainly far more open than it is now. I mean, that's only—as a way of getting a contrast of then and now. Was he—he was a bit of a playboy, I think. He liked to sail. That's one reason we were in Newport because he sailed all the time. He kind of played a lot, come to think of it. And mother was a beautiful woman from Chicago and—

MR. STIEBER: How old were they when they had you? And do you have siblings?

MR. ALEXANDER: I have a brother, an older brother who I—in fact, I just spoke with who's in New York. He's an art dealer.

MR. STIEBER: His name is Brooke, is that right?

MR. ALEXANDER: Brooke, Brooke Alexander, yeah.

MR. STIEBER: And did your mother stay at home?

MR. ALEXANDER: She did. She was—sure, she took care of us—Brooke and myself because dad was not there. And I think that was very—it was very burdensome to her to have to do all of that. So I remember my relation with her at the time as being slightly this way and then when dad would come, it was just glorious—[they laugh]—you know, because he was never there, you know? How much of this kind of stuff are you interested in?

MR. STIEBER: All of it.

MR. ALEXANDER: What I was going to say was that there was one—during the war, Northrop and Grumman and whoever, they would build these—the planes and then they would go to El Toro, which was a base inland from Newport. And the test pilots would take the planes out over the jetty, which is right where we were and test them.

And as a result, it was like World War II. I mean, it was right there. They would dogfight, you know, they would sometimes—sometimes a plane wouldn't work quite right and it would blow up or something. And so as kids, I remember me and my buddies—we would sit on the sand and watch these things. And that was our version of what the war was—that and the blackouts, you know?

MR. STIEBER: And the drinking.

MR. ALEXANDER: And the drinking, yeah.

MR. STIEBER: Tell me about your brother.

MR. ALEXANDER: He was always older and better at everything than me. All of this didn't—at that time, it was much more benign because we used to play a lot together and we would swim, you know, and do all this kind of stuff.

MR. STIEBER: How much older is he than you?

MR. ALEXANDER: He's two years—22 months. But he was always the older brother and I was, you know, I was the kid. I was going to tell you about this guy—a pilot had to make an emergency landing and we could see smoke trailing out of the back. He was flying one of those—you know those ones that have those wings like this. They're made for the navy.

MR. STIEBER: Like a V-shaped?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, with the—the wings would fold, you know, but they would have that sort of, you know—I forget the name of it. But anyway, he was flying one of those and he came in and he had to make a crash landing on the sand in front of us. And there are about three or four of us watching all of this.

And the guy came in and dug—literally dug a trench with his—because he belly-flopped, propeller was bent and smoke was coming out of the cowling and he stopped almost right in front of us. And the guy stood up in the seat—he threw back the canopy and he stood up in his seat and he had these beautiful white teeth and this mustache. There's a cartoon character at that time called Smiling Jack and he looked just like Smiling Jack. [They laugh.] Silk scarf around the neck and he was throwing us chocolates from his—standing in his seat.

MR. STIEBER: After just having crashed?

MR. ALEXANDER: After having just crash-landed and I went oh, my God, this guy is some—[laughs]—so I don't know where that enters into what I do, but it was an experience I'll never forget.

MR. STIEBER: Well, it's one of these visual things that has indelibly marked your—

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, smoke, you know, and then seeing planes blow up, you know, over the ocean. I'm sure all of that stuff sort of came to play, or does come to play.

MR. STIEBER: Was there any art in your house?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, my mother was an amateur painter and she—it's all because of her that I do what I do and my brother does what he does. My father was sort of in the petroleum business and that was not of much interest to either me or to Brooke. I have a painting here that I did when I was seven and that was because of a lesson that I was—or lessons that I took that our mother sort of had insisted on.

MR. STIEBER: Outside of normal school?

MR. ALEXANDER: Outside of school, yeah, yeah. I remember—I actually remember painting the painting and I remember the teacher. She was cute.

MR. STIEBER: Do you remember her name?

MR. ALEXANDER: No, but I remember my third-grade teacher—[they laugh]—who's Ms. Robinson and Ms. Robinson was a knockout too. A lot of attractive young women down there.

MR. STIEBER: When did you start taking these classes outside of school?

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, I was seven and I think I painted—I think it was during the summer and I just did it one summer. And I may have done three or more paintings, you know? Maybe oil paintings. And they were pretty good. I mean kind of surprising for a seven-year old to be able to do that.

And then that interest or that—I loved doing it and I think the reason why my mother did this was she told me that when I was very young, I used to take clay and make little figures all day long. The other thing that—as I remember—is that my mother loved these little glass animals that you would get on Olvera Street. They were blown glass and they were colored and sometimes they were clear.

And she had—in the bedroom—she had a glass shelf in front of the window and she had these little glass figures on them. And I'm sure that that had a great deal to do with my infatuation with transparency and translucency and how light affects how we feel.

MR. STIEBER: Where did you go to primary school?

MR. ALEXANDER: Newport Elementary, which was sort of right on the beach. And that was until third grade. And then we moved to Chicago for a year and then came back here.

MR. STIEBER: Why did you move to Chicago?

MR. ALEXANDER: Business for dad—for something, I don't know. I don't know what it was. I didn't particularly care, you know. But the best part of it was that it was 1948 or '49 and we drove cross country and there are, somewhere in here, pictures of my brother and me driving cross country from 1949. And you know, that was an experience, too.

MR. STIEBER: For somebody of any age.

MR. ALEXANDER: Of any age. I mean, it was actually—it was one of my—it was fantastic. And we did those sort of thing—you know, we went to the crater in Arizona. You know, we went to the Grand Canyon, you know, and did those things. And I think as a result of that—Brooke went to Yale [University, New Haven, CT] and I went to Penn [University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia], but we would drive—we would, every summer, at the beginning and end of summer, we would drive across country. So we kept doing this.

MR. STIEBER: Together?

MR. ALEXANDER: Together. Back and forth. And I think our interest in it and the fact that we were so enraptured by it came from that experience in the early—in the late '40s.

MR. STIEBER: Do you have any particular memories of your year in Chicago?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. I used to—we lived very close to a golf course and I used to make—I used to make money picking up golf balls. And sometimes, a guy would hit a ball and I'd take the ball—[laughs]—and he thought it went into the rough and I would sort of, hey, you know, all kinds of stuff like that. And nothing—I don't think anything of significance. That was a brief time and—it was driving across country. That's what I liked.

MR. STIEBER: Did you have any art education in your primary school?

MR. ALEXANDER: Nothing beyond the kind of things that kids do. There was—no, the only, the only actual stuff that I did was the paintings and these little figures that I used to make. And I used to draw a lot. I used to want to draw a lot. And I think my mother saw this and that's the reason why she, you know, had me do the lessons.

MR. STIEBER: Did she make Brooke take the lessons too?

MR. ALEXANDER: No, she didn't. And I think—no, she didn't. He didn't—he behaved very differently than I did. I mean, he was a different person and I think she just picked up on that. He may have been a little bit irritated by the fact that he wasn't included. I don't know. I get little glimmers of that every once in a while, even now, but nothing of any significance. So then there was really no—I went to a—when we came back, Brooke and I went to a boys' school out here called Harvard School, and that was in 1951.

MR. STIEBER: It was in Los Angeles?

MR. ALEXANDER: In Los Angeles, yeah. Are we out of Newport Beach right now? Are we back in L.A.?

MR. STIEBER: Sure. We're back from Chicago.

MR. ALEXANDER: I mean, that's okay. We're back from Chicago. That's okay with you, right?

MR. STIEBER: Yeah.

MR. ALEXANDER: Okay. And unfortunately, the school, the closest thing they had to any kind of art activity was mechanical drawing. And so really, that entire time that I was in school for 6th through 12th grade, there was no art exposure at all. And I was kind of lost. I didn't know why, but school never meant much of anything to me. And then after I decided to go to Penn for architecture.

And the whole reason why I went into architecture was because of—to get a job. I had no idea how one makes a living as an artist, or what an artist does. I mean, there was never—let me back up a minute. When we were, I was 15, probably—14 or 15—mother insisted that we do a sort of a grand tour. And so we went to Europe. We went to, you know, London, Paris, et cetera. And I remember going to the [Museo del] Prado [Madrid, Spain] and seeing [Francisco] Goya's *Witches'* [*Sabbath*, 1832] and the garden of evil [*Agony in the Garden*, 1819]. You know, what's his name? You know?

MR. STIEBER: [Hieronymus] Bosch?

MR. ALEXANDER: Bosch. Thank you. And numerous other paintings. I don't remember what they were, but I had never really been affected that way by pictures. And I didn't even know I had, until oftentimes, these images of these pictures would come back. And I was fascinated by the retention and the impact that these images had.

MR. STIEBER: The retention in your mind.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. I mean, the fact that the mind was insistent on seeing it again, or, you know, making it visible again. And so I got a little sort of bleep out of that, but didn't really do much about it, or didn't pursue it.

MR. STIEBER: Is that the first museum experience you remember, the Prado?

MR. ALEXANDER: It's the first museum experience I remember. There were times when I went to other museums. It just happened there. I think it was, probably, it had a lot to do with the paintings that I was looking at, which is kind of an affirmation, isn't it?

MR. STIEBER: Yes.

MR. ALEXANDER: You get quality, that's what happens.

MR. STIEBER: [Laughs.] So why did you choose Penn?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, one, because they had to take me. I was a legacy. And I was not a student. I was a C student.

MR. STIEBER: Your father went there?

MR. ALEXANDER: No, I had a—my middle name is Houston and my grandmother and grandfather were first cousins. This is going to tell you the whole fucking story, right here. And she was a Houston. And this is all—there's a building there called Houston Hall, which is a commons. And that was given by a relative of mine.

MR. STIEBER: Now, your grandmother and grandfather, the Houstons, were on your father's side or your mother's side?

MR. ALEXANDER: My father's side. Yeah, all the incest and all that shit came from my father's side. I think my mother came from a completely different background. And it was closer to the earth. And I think that's one

reason why my father married her, was because—I don't know what went on in his side of the family, but it was—my grandfather and grandmother met out here and there weren't a lot of people around in those days. So they tend to sort of gravitate, you know—that incest stuff. I don't know. I'm supposing this. I don't really know much about it, but other than that they were first cousins.

MR. STIEBER: So relatives of yours, on your father's side, had given a building to Penn.

MR. ALEXANDER: To Penn, yeah. And so I applied to Penn and various other places. And Penn very graciously took me. At that time, you could do a five-year program in architecture at Penn, so I went in as a freshman and started architecture. And it was an absolute revelation. I remember I went: Oh, my god. These people are kind of like me. And I never had that feeling, ever, during the prior six years, or from grade seven through 12. And that was a godsend. I was in heaven.

Architecture is taught like an art form, in that you're given projects and then you do whatever you've got to do to solve the problems. You don't have clients. You don't have budgets. You don't have building departments. You don't have all those other things that one has to deal with in reality. So it's seen as an art form and it's taught as an art form. That is, one really doesn't have a lot of responsibility to those issues that I'm talking about. I mean, there's a lot of, sort of—there's a lot of talk about moral responsibility, but not necessarily about mechanical responsibility. And I loved it. I thought it was great.

So anyway, I was there for three years and then I went to London, to the Architectural Association. Most of this was the urging of my mother because she, as you can imagine—anybody who insisted that we do the grand tour, which we did several times subsequent to that time I described, was interested in that arena. Brooke went to school in London, I mean, in England. He did his final year—or he repeated his last year in high school and went to a place by Shrewsbury for a year. And that sort of—so what that meant is that he can only get his shoes in London.

MR. STIEBER: Do you remember any particular teachers, either at Penn or at the Architectural Association?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. At Penn it was a woman named Nowiki, whose husband was an architect of note who died very young. And she was my first year and she was an inspiration. I attribute a lot of things to her because she was the first person that I ever—she represented art and architecture to me, which I had never known, certainly in school, in any way. And so that was a revelation. And I thought she was fabulous.

MR. STIEBER: Do you remember her first name?

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, God. No. I don't. I don't even know if I ever knew it because she was Madam Nowiki. N-O-W-I-K-I. Louis Kahn was there at the time and he was certainly influential. I mean, he was sort of the—it was sort of Kahn's school, so to speak. The whole experience at Penn was fantastic. I loved every minute of it. We studied—I mean, the classes were in a 19th-century building and grades, freshman through graduate, were all in one room, which was separated by, sort of, low—you know, the ceiling must have been 50 feet high, something like that. And it was 200 feet long. It was this fantastic room.

And because we were all in the same room, you were always exposed to what everybody else was doing and it was fascinating. And you'd have, you know, a lot of interaction. Then the chance came to go to the AA in London. That was the Architectural Association. And I was perfectly happy at Penn, but how could you resist going to London in 1961, right? So that's what I did.

MR. STIEBER: Was it on an exchange program?

MR. ALEXANDER: No, it was just—I just applied, you know, and just did a transfer. And I was 22, 21 or 22. And I mean, it was sort of a gilded life, really. I mean, I had income from the family—you know, a small amount, just to get by on. But it was a huge amount by English standards. And I had a car over there and so I'd spend all my weekends in Paris, or wherever, and did a lot of driving around Europe and things like that, and around England.

So that was fabulous. I didn't get much credit. So then I came back and I was feeling guilty about, you know, not having done very much and so—and then also, my father said: "Okay, I've paid for four years. Now it's up to you." So I had to pay the tuition and I went to Berkeley because, for obvious reasons, it was very inexpensive. And it was—so I did that for a year and then I got drafted, or was going to be drafted, so I joined the marines.

MR. STIEBER: You graduated and then you were drafted?

MR. ALEXANDER: No, it was because of a—at that time, there was what was called the Berlin—it was the Berlin, it was the wall went up. And so that was a big deal. So then they called up—the draft was still in effect. I had mediocre grades, as you can imagine, and I had been in school for a period of time. I was unmarried and all the rest of it, so I was loose and I was hot property for the draft.

MR. STIEBER: How old were you?

MR. ALEXANDER: Like 21, 22, something like that. So I tried to get into the Merchant Marine—or not the Merchant, but the Coast Guard. You know, all those other alternatives. But I couldn't get in, so I joined the Marines, in the Reserves. Okay, we were—

MR. STIEBER: Well, before we move on to your military service, I want to make sure that we have the chronology of your higher education down. So you entered Penn what year?

MR. ALEXANDER: Fifty-seven. September, '57.

MR. STIEBER: And then you went to the AA?

MR. ALEXANDER: I was at Penn for '57, '58, '59. And then, so 1960 I went to London. And came back, so it was in '61 that I went to [University of California] Berkeley and then I joined the Marines. But I was, you know, Reserves, so all I did is I went to boot camp, down here at Camp Pendleton. And then that whole process, I think, is like six months, or something like that. And then I went back to school and I went to SC [University of Southern California, Los Angeles], I think, mostly because it was close. And I didn't have to pay the tuition, for some reason. Or else, it was not a significant amount of money, or else somehow I could make money—I was making money to pay for it.

In '61, I proposed an idea to Westways—you know Westways magazine? It's the *Automobile Club* magazine. The house that I was living in was not far from SC and that's the house that my great-grandfather built in 18—it's one of these old Victorian jobs. And it was still around, still in the family. Nobody was really using it. My grandmother had died. She was the last one in it. So I bought it from my father. Good price, but at any rate, that was very close to SC and it was very close to the Automobile Club.

So I went to the *Automobile Club* with the proposition that I would do a drawing a month of interesting—what I thought to be interesting buildings in Southern California. And then they would, sort of—I did pen and ink drawings. They were large, like this. And I was sort of skillful at it. And then they would drop it down to a page and, you know, every month they'd print it with a little sort of thing, telling a story about this building. That was my first venture into art commerce, so to speak.

MR. STIEBER: And you did that while you were at SC?

MR. ALEXANDER: I did that while I was at SC, yeah. And that lasted just over a year. And I was in architecture at SC and I was just about ready—no, I was working for—even when I was still at Penn, I was working in the summers for Neutra, which was a very enlightening experience. I was just a gopher. I was just a kid, you know. I mean, I was what? Well, whatever it was, 19 or 20. Yeah, it's when I was at Penn. But it was enlightening because I got to know him, a little bit, and how the mechanics of his family worked and the office and all that other stuff. And I didn't like it. I didn't like him either. I mean, he was a really good architect, but as a person, whew.

MR. STIEBER: How many years did you work for him?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, it was in the summers. For two summers, I think.

MR. STIEBER: Okay.

MR. ALEXANDER: And then, after that, I worked for another firm, called William Pereira, which was a larger firm. A completely different aesthetic than the Neutra aesthetic. I mean, he was commercial. He was, sort of—he did the airport and, you know, various other buildings in town.

MR. STIEBER: So you worked for Neutra while you were at Penn and, also, while you were at SC? Or were you done with Neutra by the time you got to SC?

MR. ALEXANDER: No. When I was SC, I didn't work for Neutra. When I was SC, I think I worked in the summer for Pereira.

MR. STIEBER: Do you remember any particular students that you went to school with? Or did you make any lasting friendships?

MR. ALEXANDER: There's an architect named Jon Jurdy in town. Now, Jon and I were in the same class. That was at SC.

MR. STIEBER: Were you good friends?

MR. ALEXANDER: No, there was sort of a group of sorts that, kind of, hung out loosely. And he was one of—and we were kind of in a loose group of myself, a guy named Phil Brown, who's also an architect, Jon Jurdy. I don't remember. John Hadley, a guy who—that's all I can remember. I don't—

MR. STIEBER: Do you remember seeing any art or exhibitions while you were in college?

MR. ALEXANDER: Good question. There was—the Museum of Natural History was the art museum at that time, which was down in Exposition Park. And I remember seeing an exhibit of Philip Guston. But it was early Guston. It was his abstract expressionist Guston. And I think I was always sort of astounded by his touch. I much prefer his later paintings then I do to those paintings because his early paintings were actually very beautiful, but there was a kind of vacuity to them. But I liked his touch. And I remember seeing that installed at the museum there. But nothing really affected me the way that experience at the Prado did, with the witches and the Bosch, *Garden of Earthly Delights*. So that was that.

MR. STIEBER: What lessons did you take away from architecture school? Did you finish at SC?

MR. ALEXANDER: No. I was six months short of graduating and I was working at Pereira's. And I had been given a project to design. It was the first real design project that I'd ever had. And it was, because I was so young and so naïve, I worked on weekends. I worked at night. I did just everything I could possibly do to make this thing wonderful, right? And after about three months of this, it was pulled because of reasons that had nothing to do with anything, other than those things sometimes don't happen.

And I was driving home from the office. The office, at that time, was on Wilshire Boulevard, not far from the county museum. And I almost hit a tree and I thought, what is this? And it's because I realized the idea of my life being affected by arbitrary decisions. I didn't want to put myself in that position anymore, meaning I didn't—what had happened to me was, in fact, an inseparable part of architecture. That's the way it is. That is, projects come and projects go. Some are realized; some are not.

And I think it was that aspect of it that really troubled me. And I was surprised by the degree to which I was troubled, or I wouldn't have almost hit a tree. And that's the thing that sort of woke me up. And so the next day I went to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] and into the art department. And the only really art experience I'd had up until that time were these drawings that I did for Westways. So I spent one year as an undergraduate, for the right credits and stuff.

In fact, I had to talk my way into UCLA, too. They didn't want to take me. But I remember I had to do to the dean of admissions's office, or I got an appointment with the dean of admissions. And he had one of these bookcases with books everywhere, you know, a big desk and all that sort of stuff. Leather chairs, you know. And we were talking, me and the dean of admissions.

MR. STIEBER: Do you remember his name?

MR. ALEXANDER: I don't.

MR. STIEBER: Okay.

MR. ALEXANDER: But I remember, on the bookshelf behind him there were two volumes of [Eugenène Emmanuel] Viollet-le-Duc. Now, you know who Viollet-le-Duc is?

MR. STIEBER: I don't.

MR. ALEXANDER: No, of course not. Nobody knows who Viollet-le-Duc is. But I knew who Viollet-le-Duc was. And I know it's because I knew who Viollet-le-Duc was; that's how I got into UCLA. [Laughs.] Viollet-le-Duc was a 19th century French architect and he did these discourses on architecture, at some length. And Kahn used to refer to him every once in a while. So there you go.

MR. STIEBER: This was an M.F.A. program?

MR. ALEXANDER: No, this was getting into undergraduate because I still hadn't gotten a degree yet. So then I went from there into the M.F.A. program, into M.A., then M.F.A. at UCLA. And I majored in etching because of my drawing experience. And that was, you know, that was the extent of my, you know, really exposure. But I took all those classes that one takes. You know, the painting and the drawing and all that kind of stuff. And I sort of mumbled along, I guess, in that arena. And it wasn't until I did the castings that things started to have an effect and that was the resin pieces that I was doing. And that was it, right there. That's when everything sort of started.

MR. STIEBER: How did your family react to the news that you were leaving architecture behind?

MR. ALEXANDER: Fine. They were great. They said, sure. I think one of the reasons was that it was preceded by my little foray into commerce, with Westways, because that was producing an income. They would pay me $100. This is 1961. They would pay me $100 for the drawing, for the first publishing rights. Then, somebody in the magazine, inevitably, would see the drawing and want to buy the drawing. And I'd sell the drawing for $300. So $400 was enough to pay for—at that time, I had a wife and one child. It would pay for whatever our expenses were. We could live on it. And so that was fun and I liked that.

MR. STIEBER: Tell me your wife's name.

MR. ALEXANDER: Clytie. C-L-Y-T-I-E. And I met her at UCLA and we had two girls, Hope and Julia.

MR. STIEBER: And when did you get married to Clytie?

MR. ALEXANDER: Sixty-four.

MR. STIEBER: All right. Tell me about her.

MR. ALEXANDER: She was terrific. She was very vivacious.

MR. STIEBER: Was she a student at UCLA?

MR. ALEXANDER: She was a student at UCLA, yeah. And we were married for 17 years, 18 years. I should never have been married, never. I don't think young men should be married, not at that age, and particularly not during the '60s. That was a bad time to be married. And particularly if you were like me, it was a bad time to be married. She was great. She was a great mother. She was very tolerant of me, which required enormous tolerance and I'm sort of grateful to her for all of that, for many years. But it was not a match made in heaven.

MR. STIEBER: But she was there—17 years is a long time to be married.

MR. ALEXANDER: It's a long time, yeah.

MR. STIEBER: She's there in the background for a lot of what's going to come next in the story, so don't forget to mention her, or Hope and Julia, too.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: So you graduated. You got your M.F.A. at UCLA and you graduated.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. When I was still a graduate student, what happened—the resin, I mean, the resin, for example, came about because of surfing. When I was 13, I started to surf and at that time—that was 1951, '52—and there were no, there were very few surfers out here. In fact, you could go to Malibu. You could leave your board leaning up against the fence and come back the next day and find it because nobody wanted it because nobody knew what to do with it. I mean, except for maybe—literally, I mean, 30 people, maybe 40 people in this whole South Bay. And that was fantastic. I mean, that was back in the water again.

But what I was going to say is that I was doing a project at UCLA, a sculpture project, and I remember the resin in the bottom of the Dixie cup, from glazing my surfboard. And I thought, I bet I could cast—whatever this project was—I bet I could cast it in resin. So I started experimenting with resins.

And the resins at that time were—you could only cast very small sections of it because it would get very hot. I'm going to show you one of those early ones. It was cast in layers; like, each layer was maybe three-quarters of an inch. And then, as the layers would start to set, I would take an eyedropper and drop in a little bit of this dye, this white. And that would sort of go phew, like this, and get feathery like the real thing.

MR. STIEBER: Like a cloud.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. So that's what—that was early '60s, or mid-'60s.

MR. STIEBER: So you did your first resins while you were a student at UCLA.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yes, I did. And in fact, I did my first show when I was still a graduate student at UCLA. And I did it in New York, so, I mean, that was a precursor of things to come, to what's happening now, where people—I mean, for me it was a fluke. But as you know, now, there are dealers who go to graduate schools and pick up, you know, kids.

MR. STIEBER: So your first solo exhibition was in New York?

MR. ALEXANDER: Was in New York.

MR. STIEBER: While you were in graduate school?

MR. ALEXANDER: While I was in graduate school, yeah.

MR. STIEBER: What was the gallery?

MR. ALEXANDER: Robert Elkon.

MR. STIEBER: And what year was that?

MR. ALEXANDER: Sixty-eight, I think. And it was—I didn't have any idea how to deal with it. I mean, here I was in graduate school, you know, and I was getting some smoke blown up my butt there because of the resins. I mean, that was—I was sort of unawares of the art world in L.A. at the time because I just was.

The people who were teaching at UCLA were mostly painters. There was a group of wonderful guys, mostly, but painter types who were sort of attached to figuration and Matisse and that territory. Sam Amato was one and Ray Brown. I think Lee Mullican was there. And also [Richard] Diebenkorn. He, in fact, was one of my—what do you call it? When you're in graduate school, you have—

MR. STIEBER: Advisors?

MR. ALEXANDER: Advisors, yeah. He didn't talk very much, but it was nice to know him. And I remember I visited him at his studio a couple of times. But also, at this same time, I met Nick Wilder, who had a gallery. And I met Maurice Tuchman, who was the—who had come out here from the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum, New York City] to take the curatorial job at the L.A. County [Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA]. And then I also met Bill Wilson and Bill Wilson was a critic for the *L.A. Times*. He wrote a lot of things. Art critic. And I met him—in fact, my introduction to the art world was about this same time and I could be specific. You know, it was in the late '60s. And there was an exhibit at Cal State L.A. called "Small Images" [1967] and it was an open competition. And I entered one of these boxes that I had done.

MR. STIEBER: A resin.

MR. ALEXANDER: A resin piece. And the jurors were Bill Wilson, who was the critic, and Billy Al Bengston. I think they were so impressed by that piece that I had entered. But I had met Bill before, the critic, and I don't remember under what circumstances. But I had met him because he had been to the house, downtown. And what happened is that Bill took Bengston down to the house when they finished jurying the show and I met Billy for the first time.

MR. STIEBER: To your house? They came to your house?

MR. ALEXANDER: To the house, yeah. And it was really Billy who introduced me to the art world. And that was the art world of Larry Bell, Craig Kaufman, you know, Ed Ruscha, Ken Price, et cetera, et cetera. And that was, like, oh, my gosh. What is this kind of stuff? You know? Because they were, I mean, I knew of them but I certainly had never known any. I hadn't met any of them.

MR. STIEBER: Had you gone to any of their exhibitions?

MR. ALEXANDER: I must have. I must have, but I don't have any particular memory of it because I think at that time they were showing at Ferus [Gallery, Los Angeles]. And I wasn't really too involved—I mean, I wasn't. I may not have, come to think of it. I may have been so, in a way, naïve that I just sort of, you know, fell into it. And I think the sequence was—the Fullerton deal, or meeting Billy, the show in New York came later, after that. I mean, in terms of the—

MR. STIEBER: After the "Small Images" show?

MR. ALEXANDER: "Small Images," yeah. I think that sequence was that sequence, meaning "Small Images" and then the show in New York. But it was all while I was still in graduate school. And then what?

MR. STIEBER: So Billy Al Bengston introduced you to the art world?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. So then that was party time, you know, and all this other stuff. There were no—it was a very close group because there was nobody else, meaning there were no museums to speak of and I think still at the time, the county had not been built. It was maybe under construction. So the art museum was still in

Exposition Park.

There were very few collectors. You could count them on one hand. So then the group itself sort of—everybody performed for everybody else. That was the only audience you had. I mean, I'm exaggerating, but in reality there wasn't very much. I mean, I remember as an example we were at—we, meaning a group of us—Joe Goode —

MR. STIEBER: Hold on.

[End disc one.]

MR. STIEBER: Okay, so it was party time with the boys.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, I wouldn't say it was—it was middle of the day, so it wasn't really, you know, that big party but it was, like, we were having lunch and stuff.

And I remember Billy was there, and at the end of the meal, Billy said, "I'm going to pay for it." I think the total bill was $30 or something. And Billy said, "I'll pay for it." He said, "I sold a drawing today." And he sold one for $300. And that was a big deal. So he could afford to buy lunch of whatever it was.

That just gives you a context of things. I remember my first—I went to an exhibit of Larry Bell's on La Cienega. And either it was still Ferus or it was Irving Blum. Maybe it was—I think maybe it was just Irving because Irving sort of took over Ferus. And I remember—this, again, was the introduction to the art world. This was the beginnings of all that. And I remember being approached by a very attractive blonde who was beautifully endowed and was exposing a fair amount of it. And she came up to me and she said, "Hi, I'm Glow Bell."

MR. STIEBER: [Laughs.] Glow Bella?

MR. ALEXANDER: Glow Bell, Larry's wife, and her name was Glow. I said to myself—of course—I said, "This is heaven. Glow Bell, what a wonderful name." And she was beautiful and funny and everything one would want—and married to Larry—and so on.

I'm just trying to recall events or something of significance that was happening at the time and I—unless there was a specific question, there's nothing I can remember.

MR. STIEBER: Well, what was going on in your personal life at the time? How was your introduction to the art world affecting your personal life?

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, I was impossible. I mean, it was—poor Clytie, God.

MR. STIEBER: Did she come with you to openings?

MR. ALEXANDER: She would. In the beginning, she was a participant and a very supportive participant. And then as things started to get—things changed. I remember, too, it was the '60s and that had a significant—I mean, there are things that we would do—or that we did—that I look back on now and I go, oh, my God. But I don't know whether it's because I'm much older and the times are much more conservative or—but it seemed perfectly logical at the time, whatever was going on and whatever I participated in.

MR. STIEBER: When were your children born? Hope and Julia?

MR. ALEXANDER: Hope was '65 and Julia was '68.

MR. STIEBER: So as things—

MR. ALEXANDER: They were great. We were living downtown at the time in the old house. And then I think around 1970, I remember—we used to camp out. We used to camp out in Baja. We'd go down to Baja and camp out on the Sea of Cortez, which is absolutely magical.

And so we found—for some—we found some land up in the Santa Monica Mountains, and one summer, instead of going down to Baja, we decided to go up to the land and camp out there, which is what we did. And then we decided not to leave. And we started with a campsite. And then I put in some water and we had a few amenities. And then it started to get cold and then it got difficult. So I started to build—so I built a house. No permits or any

of that stuff. I just built it because we needed some shelter for the winter. And I think what we had done by then was I had sold the house downtown.

MR. STIEBER: What year was this?

MR. ALEXANDER: This was 1970, ‘71. Let me think. No, it must have been later—‘72—‘71, ‘72, something like that because I was still casting—I still had the studio down—I built a studio downtown. There was a carriage house and I sort of turned the carriage house into a studio.

MR. STIEBER: This was at your—at your house?

MR. ALEXANDER: At the house downtown, yeah, at the old family house, yeah. And in fact, there was a film—PBS did a film on me [ “Artists of America” series, 1971]. If you could ever find it, it might be of interest because that will tell you a lot about the times. And they did this film on me and so I was kind of hot shit, you know, but I was so young.

MR. STIEBER: So in ‘70, ‘71, you left Los Angeles briefly for Baja.

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, we would go down for two weeks or something. You know, it was not a big deal. I mean, it was just to go down and camp. But I think what happened is we left the house downtown and instead of going to Baja, which we usually did at that time, we decided to camp out up at Tuna to the property.

The property was five acres or six acres on top of a hill overlooking the ocean. And if you went up Pacific Coast Highway just after Topanga Canyon—[telephone rings].

[Audio break.]

MR. STIEBER: So we were talking about your property in Tuna.

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh yeah, that. So I had $5,000 and that was all I had to build a house. So I went down to Union Station. I mean, there’s a—I knew they were tearing down a huge train building at Union Pacific where they fixed trains. And you can imagine the size of that. It had been built I think in the ‘20s or ‘30s, had huge pieces of lumber, just magnificent things. And they were giving away all this wood so I went down there and got a whole bunch of stuff in a truck, brought it up and that’s what I used to build the house with.

Do we care about the house?

MR. STIEBER: Yes!

MR. ALEXANDER: We do.

MR. STIEBER: Especially if it was a working environment for you at any point.

MR. ALEXANDER: It was, yeah. And so because of my enormous ego, I felt that I could build a house even though I’d never built one before. And because of whatever architectural experience I had, I felt I was qualified to do it.

Well, that was a mistake because there’s a lot of difference between what you get and what you get. So it was absolutely fascinating. So for several months, I was there every day building this—it was a wooden tent is what it was. I mean, for example, the glass: We couldn’t afford glass so we used Visine on the windows. But it was better than—

MR. STIEBER: Visine?

MR. ALEXANDER: Visine plastic, yeah, vinyl. It’s a transparent vinyl material which you staple to the frame. [Laughs.] Then, the house appeared in the *L.A. Times* and it got an award for—I don’t know, I think because it was built out of greens. This is 1972, ‘73. Because it was recycled materials and because it was—it was this tower, is what it was: 16 by 16 by 16.

Well, we were very happy. It was better than the tent. Let’s put it that way. And it had all these sort of odd things about it but it worked. But the problem is, is that it appeared in a spread in the *L.A. Times*, which I can

find it for you, maybe.

The building department got really pissed off—the Malibu building department. And they said—the guy who was in charge of the department said he was going to get a bulldozer up there and tear it down. Well, he had a heart attack on the Sunday night before he was supposed to order out the bulldozer. Nobody else cared as much as he did so I went through all the machinations of what it took to make it legal, and then they were happy. But the biggest problem was that I was stupid enough to get it in this magazine, and then they saw it.

MR. STIEBER: Were you approached by the magazine? Or did you contact them?

MR. ALEXANDER: No, it was—there was an architect, Carl Day, who I was working with at the time who engineered the project. And of course, I changed it as we went along because of the size of the members that I got from Union Pacific. But it all worked. But he knew somebody who was involved with the *L.A. Times Magazine*. So I think it was that—that was the connection. And then they approached us wanting to photograph it and do all the other stuff, which they did.

MR. STIEBER: What street was the old family house on?

MR. ALEXANDER: Estrella, E-S-T-R-E-L-L-A. It means little star.

MR. STIEBER: And the property in Tuna was on which road?

MR. ALEXANDER: Tuna Canyon Road. Addresses were not in evidence on Tuna so we just chose our own, which was 3233. I was 33 and Clytie was 32. So that's when it happened. So that—well, if I were 33, then it would've been 1972 that we were there.

MR. STIEBER: You didn't live in that house full time, though.

MR. ALEXANDER: I had a studio in Venice at the time. And this goes back to the other part of it. There were three of us who bought a building in Venice in 1970, I think: Ron Cooper, Jim Ganzer and myself. And Venice at that time—well, here, the down payment was a used pick-up truck. I mean, that's what it was like at the time.

And I think we paid $75,000 for the building. And the building was—I think it was probably 15,000 square feet, which was a significant size. It had been originally a gondola repair shop when Main Street—it was right on Main and Westminster—when Main Street at that time was a canal. And so the gondolas used to come in, they'd go right inside the building and then they'd repair them. But that's how old it was. And at the time, it was used as an automobile repair shop. So we split it up and did what we did and had this great studio—or studios.

MR. STIEBER: So you split your time between that studio—

MR. ALEXANDER: So I split my time between the studio in Venice and Tuna Canyon. I did that until 1976, in which I'd built a studio up there, which was a bit of a mistake primarily because once you are not visible and it's a—even though it would take 15 minutes to get there, it was sufficiently far enough and high enough on the hill that you didn't have a lot of visitors and it was not easy to get into town. It was an effort to do it, which meant that you were sort of not very in evidence. And I thought I could get by with it but you cannot. I couldn't. I mean, that was just ego operating there and it was very misplaced.

So that was not a great time for me but I loved being there and I loved being out there, outside. It was at that point that I started to do the sunsets. There was a late '60s—it was the rise of minimalism and, as I recall, the rise of rhetoric, of which there was a lot of that—art theory and all the rest of it. And I said—in essence, I felt there was something wrong with this; the fact that you have to explain pictures or that you need words to go along with the pictures was somehow not appropriate.

So I started every day when I was doing constructing—bang, bang, bang—I would stop around 4:00—and this was in the fall—this was September—and I would do these little pastels of the sunset, which we could see. We were, like, that way over the ocean and west.

There was a combination of motives. One was the absolute gorgeousness of these sunsets that were presented on a daily basis. There was the issue of time which I was fascinated by. And in terms of the art world, I felt I had to do something that was sensual and kind of dumb, meaning something that did not need any description. And so I chose to pursue the sunset idea because it was such a dumb picture, so to speak; it didn't require a lot of

figuring out. And I did them in pastel because it was stuff you touched.

One thing about resin is that you don't want to touch it. You don't want really anything to do with it except when it's finished because it's this terrible material that gives you these absolutely gorgeous results. So that's how the sunsets started. Yeah, go ahead.

MR. STIEBER: Can you remember any particular art theoretical writing which galled you or which made you really think about the role of art theory in the art world? Or was it just the general climate?

MR. ALEXANDER: It was more the climate. It was more—it was much more the climate of it all. I used to read Artforum and I actually cared. And I'm sure that that had an effect because I was looking at these pictures of things that were being done and they had long explanations as to why and what. And I just didn't respond to it. It was visceral. I just didn't understand. I could embrace it as an idea but I couldn't—it wasn't of interest beyond that other than an idea.

And then the sunsets, if I were doing—you want autobiographical stuff more than anything; more than me talking about the sunsets.

MR. STIEBER: Well, you can talk about them. We want to talk about that too.

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, no, no, no, no, no, no, I mean, I could tell you everything about—well, not everything. I could go on one path, which would be about the art. And then I could go on another path, which is about biography.

MR. STIEBER: Let's focus on biography today.

MR. ALEXANDER: Okay. [Laughs.] That's what I thought you were going to say. [They laugh.]

Let me bring up another instance that was occurring at that time. In fact, this is when we still lived downtown. And I'm sure it may have been an impetus to our going up to Tuna Canyon. I was still at UCLA and it's when Julia was born, so that was '68. And one day, two guys arrived at the door in suits and briefcases—knock, knock. We're from the Treasury Department. Can we come in? Yeah, sure.

There was a—Venice and to a certain degree, a fair amount of UCLA, there was a lot of—this is the end of the war, Vietnam—it was enormous antagonism towards the government because of Vietnam. And the government was sort of cracking down. I remember Larry—Larry was friends with Jane Fonda.

MR. STIEBER: Larry Bell?

MR. ALEXANDER: Bell, yeah. And Jane Fonda was truly persona non grata because of that episode in, you know, in Hanoi. And so anybody who was associated with any of the artists out here got hit by the government. But what happened, these guys, these two guys from the Treasury came in and they described to me every move I had made in the previous two weeks. They had been following me. They thought that I was a shooter. Johnson was coming to town and they thought I was going to assassinate him. [They laugh.] Now, I don't know why. I don't know—I mean, that could have been total bullshit in itself. That is, they—

MR. STIEBER: Did you even own a gun?

MR. ALEXANDER: I owned a shotgun, but that's all. That was from dad's days. And I was—when in the Marine Corps, I was a sharpshooter. Maybe they found that out. I don't know. But they thought I was a shooter. Or at least they told me that they thought I was a shooter. And a few people got killed on Venice Beach. Venice Beach at the time was a—in the late '60s turned into sort of a nude beach. Can you imagine? I mean, could that happen today? [They laugh.] I mean, it's so far away from it happening today. That gives you some sense of what things were like in the '60s in L.A.

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. ALEXANDER: And I think some—a couple of girls got killed or something like that. And everything started to change dramatically. And I think that was part of the impetus to go to Tuna Canyon, to make a move there. And it was—it was paradise for several years; it was absolutely wonderful. The girls loved it. Clytie and I loved it. It worked out. I could go down to the studio.

But the '70s were not unlike these days in that there was very high—the economics of art-making was not in

your favor. We had the oil embargoes and you had huge, I think interest rates went up to 18 percent—things like that. So you had inflation and everything that was negative to the buying of art. And I remember that being a very lean time almost the whole decade and at the end of which, we—Clytie and I got a divorce.

MR. STIEBER: Did you have any other work during that time besides art-making?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. I got on a—I was involved with a LAICA—Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, which was formed as an alternative space. And I was on the board.

But also I got involved in a works—a government project that—this was because of Johnson where they would fund people to go out and give talks to various schools. So I would go out and give lectures at—oh, I went to CalArts [California Institute of the Arts], I went to UCLA, I went to—the interesting thing about it was that the CalArts was the worst place that I went to because of the arrogance of the students. The Cal State Fullerton, for an example, was fantastic because they were people who were interested in listening to whatever it is I had to say. And apparently I had something to say at the time because I was a little bit older than the students.

So that was income. And I think Clytie started collecting and selling quilts. She was very early in on that phenomenon. But there was basically no money. I mean, I remember—I remember it being really—we couldn't pay phone bills, we couldn't pay water bills, you know, that kind of no money and no assets other than the house, which we finally got—I think at one point, I did get a loan on it, sort of a survival loan. And I was paying 18 percent interest on the loan. I mean, that's the only one—the only kind I could get.

MR. STIEBER: And you had the—but you also had the building in Venice?

MR. ALEXANDER: Which we sold. In fact, that was the thing that gave me the impetus to build a studio up in Tuna Canyon. And then we sort of lived on that money for several years.

MR. STIEBER: When did you sell the building in Venice?

MR. ALEXANDER: Seventy-five, I think. Sold it to a consortium of—it was Mike Medavoy and Hollywood types—Jack Nicholson. I mean, you know, we never saw them, but they were their—it was their minions that put it together. And they bought it—well, we bought it for 75 [thousand dollars] and they paid us for 450 [thousand dollars] for it. And that was, what, four years later, five years later. So that was a lot of money in those days. Not a lot, but it was more than—certainly a lot more than whatever I was seeing or anybody else for that matter.

MR. STIEBER: So you built the studio in Tuna Canyon.

MR. ALEXANDER: Built the studio up there in similar circumstances, meaning, you know, for practically nothing. And it was great for a while. I sort of imagined myself doing sort of Hudson River School-esque landscapes—oil, you know, big things. And it never sort of came to fruition. I think I made an attempt at one and then it never—then it sort of fell apart. It didn't work for various reasons.

MR. STIEBER: Tell me about exhibitions that you were in between 1968 and the time that you built the Tuna Canyon studio.

MR. ALEXANDER: I have to look at a bio. Let me find it. So 1970? You said between when and when?

MR. STIEBER: Sixty-eight and '75.

MR. ALEXANDER: Okay, '68 was Robert Elkon. That was the first one. And then there was one in Houston with Janie Lee. One in Minneapolis with Locksley/Shea—that was a show. And then Nick Wilder in 1970; '71, Michael Walls, San Francisco; 1972, Jack Glenn here in California. Seventy-three was in Munich at Art in Progress and one in Kansas City. Okay? Those are solos.

MR. STIEBER: So despite living in Tuna Canyon, you were actively exhibiting?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. And then the group shows—just a minute. The "Small Images" show—the one I told you about?

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

MR. ALEXANDER: That was 1967.

MR. STIEBER: And then Robert Elkon in '68.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, right. So that sequence was right. And in group shows, there was—I won't—there was—in '67, there was one in San Diego—University of California. There was Seattle Art Museum. Cal State Los

Angeles. Flint Institute of Contemporary Art in Michigan. And then the one—that was ‘67. And then in ‘69, there was one at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, “New Materials and Methods.” I mean, you can—

MR. STIEBER: Do any of these stand out to you as particularly successful or difficult?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, the group shows were not about commerce, so—as shows that—I didn’t pay a lot of attention to it. I mean, it wasn’t—let’s see, in ‘69, there was the Whitney, there was one at the Walker. That was a big one—the one at the Walker. That’s when I first met Judd.

MR. STIEBER: Donald Judd.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, that was, what, ‘69; ‘69 was a hot year for me. I mean, threw as the Art Institute of Chicago, Milwaukee, the Whitney, you know, all that stuff. In 1970 was one in London and Chicago and Nebraska and New York. That’s enough, right?

MR. STIEBER: What was your brother doing at this time? In the late ‘60s, early ‘70s.

MR. ALEXANDER: He was working. He left L.A. in ‘65. He went to Yale and studied the classics and then he worked for my father briefly. And then he realized that was awful, so he—

MR. STIEBER: What was your father’s business then?

MR. ALEXANDER: He was petroleum products. He was manufacturing—light manufacturing in the petroleum industry, the oil business. And he was good at it—Dad was. He was very good at it. So—Brooke.

MR. STIEBER: So he left in ‘65?

MR. ALEXANDER: So he left in ‘65 and he went back and he worked for Marlborough. And that’s where he met his future wife, Carolyn.

MR. STIEBER: Marlborough Gallery?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. In, you know—

MR. STIEBER: In New York. Yeah.

MR. ALEXANDER: And then eventually he left Marlborough and started working for an operation called Editions Alecto, which was an English firm that published prints. And he was sort of the representative over here. And then he eventually got into his own publishing business and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera and so on. And he incrementally moved from a very tiny place on, I think, 71st and Lexington to, you know, where he is—you know, the usual American story, right? [They laugh.] Get bigger and bigger, you know. And that’s what he does now.

MR. STIEBER: What relationship has your career had to his career? Has there been any overlap? Do you ever have to deal with each other?

MR. ALEXANDER: In business?

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

MR. ALEXANDER: No. That was—when I was—there were times when I had some money and then times when I had no money. And he was always very supportive. Whenever I’d come to New York, I’d stay with them. And if there was any way that he could buy something, he would. And I would sometimes give them things—you know, it was a supportive relationship. Let’s put it that way.

But the idea of us doing business together was out of the question. Not so much for me. I mean, I would have liked to have done with business with him, but he couldn’t do it with me. And I understand why. He was smart not to do it. It’s too loaded. There was too much stuff. And we were too close together in age. I mean, we were only, you know, about 22 months. So that didn’t work.

MR. STIEBER: So let’s go back to the Tuna Canyon studio. What kind of space was that like?

MR. ALEXANDER: Like this. Again, it was—well, it was a pole building. And a pole building is simply a building where you put columns in—telephone poles—and you put them far enough in the ground—which is not a lot, six feet or something—and they are sufficient to absorb any lateral force, any seismic force because they’re stiff enough and so you can build a building like that without putting any walls in-filled.

So what I wanted to do was to do—I did this pole building and I found out about that from looking at agricultural

magazines. And this guy came up and that's what his specialty was and I think for $10,000, he put in the poles and a roof. And that was the start of it. And then we did a slab and I think I had running cold water and that was it. And walls. And that worked out for a while. But I think it was the lack of money that really had a—that really brought us down as a couple. That was part—I mean, you know, there are other things too. But I think the money really was the kicker because it was very difficult.

MR. STIEBER: Where was she originally from—Clytie?

MR. ALEXANDER: Montreal. Although she was—she's American. Her father was teaching at the School of Social Work at the University of Montreal. And he was a wonderful guy. But I think politically, I think that Clytie and I were different, which I didn't really know until later on. And you know, having—it's rare that one can have strong political differences and get along. I mean, the example—I mean, the difference between Democrats and Republicans today is—astounds me that it is so polarized. And there's no bridging.

MR. STIEBER: So what were the differences between you and Clytie?

MR. ALEXANDER: I don't think she liked my arrogance. [They laugh.]

MR. STIEBER: I mean the political differences.

MR. ALEXANDER: I think it had to do a lot with her father was into social work. He was the dean of the School of Social Work. That says it right there, doesn't it? And I was this arrogant fuck from—you know—shuckin' and jivin'. [They laugh.] So that was sort of what it was.

MR. STIEBER: And the children—Hope and Julia—also lived in the house in Tuna Canyon.

MR. ALEXANDER: In Tuna, yeah. And they loved it. They loved growing up there. The schooling was good. Their friends were good. It was a wonderful condition for them. And both girls are here in L.A. They both have children. So meaning I'm a grandfather twice. And I see them often. Talked to both of them yesterday. So we have a very good relationship. I feel very fortunate about that.

MR. STIEBER: Is the house still there?

MR. ALEXANDER: No, it burned down.

MR. STIEBER: Oh no.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, it burned down in—well, what happened is that when we separated, Clytie got the house. She got everything. I came away from the deal with $5,000 and a car and my clothes in the back of the car. [Laughs.] It was that—I was 45.

MR. STIEBER: What year were you separated?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, if it was 45, then it was—

MR. STIEBER: Forty-five—'79?

MR. ALEXANDER:—'79, '80. No. Well, 45 would have put me at '85—1985, '84. If I were born in '39. So that's when we did the—I was out of the house for several years. I think what happened is that's when we got the divorce was in, you know, when I was 45. So somewhere between 42 and 45. I went to India in the—it was in the early '80s. I had an opportunity. Lynda Benglis was an old friend and we were close because of—the Venice studio.

MR. STIEBER: Your Venice studio?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yes. Right across—there's an alleyway in the middle of the studios. And right across the alley—which nobody used the alley; we blocked it off—but Ganzer had a studio and Lynda was living in his studio. She rented it from him for a period of time. And that's when Lynda did that famous photo that she did, you know. Have you ever seen that?

MR. STIEBER: With the dildo?

MR. ALEXANDER: Of the dildo. She did it in that studio. And I had a studio which was right next door, just an alley away. [They laugh.] And there's a picture of it in here. This one. Which—this was a grease pit. See this thing right here?

MR. STIEBER: [Inaudible]—that in because that's interesting.

MR. ALEXANDER: The studio in Venice—the one that Cooper and Ganzer had—my part of it was this old portion of an auto repair shop and which had—before they had lifts, they had things like this.

MR. STIEBER: The grease pit.

MR. ALEXANDER: Grease pits. And so there was a grease pit. And I took the grease pit and etched acid, got all the grease out of it. And then turned it into a pool, a warm pool. And in those days, it was not uncommon for people to come in and just sort of take everything off and jump in the pool. And plenty of them did do that. And that's how—that was the nature of those times. And that's when Lynda was across the street.

MR. STIEBER: We should go back to that. [Laughs.]

MR. ALEXANDER: We should go back to—thank you very much. I mean, these girls—these are—again, it has more to do with what the times were like. They were girls that I would not know particularly well, but you know, I would—we had met. They would—there was a big sliding door here. The alley was here, right? And there was a big sliding door the size of that. And it would be open for air and these girls would walk in and say, can we swim? Sure. You know, and off it would come and they'd jump in. And this would go on and on and on and on. And it was not uncommon.

MR. STIEBER: So that's how you met Lynda Benglis?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. That's how I met Lynda because Lynda was living next door.

MR. STIEBER: And she swam in your pool? [Laughs.]

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, she swam in the pool along with many others. But Lynda and I always had a platonic relation. That's one reason why we're so friendly now. [They laugh.] I'm sure it has something to do with that. In fact, she was just staying here last week. So back to—how did Lynda come up? I was talking about this studio—

MR. STIEBER: Her famous picture—

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, India.

MR. STIEBER: India, yes.

MR. ALEXANDER: Through Lynda, who started seeing a guy named Anand Sarabhai, who was Indian from Ahmedabad. And they have a foundation where they invite artists over and they'll put you up and give you all the materials you want and all the labor you want for which you split whatever you produce, you go 50/50. And [Frank] Stella—when he did his bird series, they originated at the Sarabhai Foundation. And Rauschenberg was there. I mean, there's a whole slew of sort of heavies. And I felt very proud to be included in that group. And that was really all through Lynda. So I went—that was in the early '80s. And I remember I went there for several months.

MR. STIEBER: What city in India again?

MR. ALEXANDER: Ahmedabad.

MR. STIEBER: Ahmedabad.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, which is not a small town. It's about 3 million people.

MR. STIEBER: Small for India perhaps.

MR. ALEXANDER: Small for India. Yeah. I mean, there's a whole—the Sarabhais were just amazing.

MR. STIEBER: Describe your experience in India.

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, I flew to Bombay and Anand—and I was—oh, no, I went to New York. Lynda met me in New York and the two of us flew to Bombay. And Anand met us with a driver and we went through various—Elantra and—I don't even remember their names. All these—the caves and the—some architectural wonders. He took us to all these things.

Then we eventually went to their place in Ahmedabad. And when we approached the—they have a compound that is surrounded by this brick wall. And we're talking about maybe 15 acres in the middle of this town surrounded by a wall in the original spring for Ahmedabad is in their property. And so you—Ahmedabad is geographically, latitudinally the same as Los Angeles. So the climate is very similar to this: sort of, semi-desert, arid. And the Sarabhai place was a jungle because of this spring. And you know—you know, monkeys—

MR. STIEBER: Birds.

MR. ALEXANDER: Ah, man, just unbelievable. And I remember when we approached it, the gate, there was a guy with a gun—you know, a guard. And the gates opened, you know, big brass gates with a big S on them. And they—[They laugh]. And we came in and to the left was the palace that his grandfather lived in—a 300-room palace. And then the rest of the family lived in this compound.

One of the things that was most interesting was that the Anand family live in a house that Corbusier had designed in the '50s. And I had seen it in the book Progressive Architecture—or magazine, Progressive Architecture. And I thought it was a wondrous place because he had done it with barrel vaults and there was a roof garden that was—oh, must have been six feet deep, if not more, with big trees, sort of, growing out of it. And that was the Sarabhais'.

And I had always looked at it in sort of wonderment that anybody could live like this. And then here we go 20, some-odd 30 years later—I'm staying in the guest room of this place. And that was a big thrill for me. And they were wonderful. They were wonderful hosts. And I was supposed to stay there for a month, but it dragged into, I think, four months because it was so commodious. And I did a bunch of work there.

MR. STIEBER: What kind of work did you do?

MR. ALEXANDER: I had left—I had just finished working on the Velvets in L.A. and had a couple of shows with those, of that ilk. They were big tapestries which Clytie, in fact, sewed. And so then I just took that information and I was hoping that I could sort of continue it in India. But they didn't have any velvet—[laughs]—oddly enough. Or it was not readily available or whatever it was or it wasn't the kind I needed or whatever. So I used mosquito net and did a bunch of pieces on mosquito nets, which were not without interest. So that was India.

MR. STIEBER: So you came back from India?

MR. ALEXANDER: I came back from India.

MR. STIEBER: In the early '80s?

MR. ALEXANDER: In the early '80s. And I think I had a studio—or I came back. I was still pining away for the family. But it wasn't going to happen. So I had moved out of the studio in Tuna and Laddie Dill was living his studio in Venice. And so he offered that to me and I took it over. And that was sort of a godsend. I think I had been living on couches and various other things for a while before that materialized.

MR. STIEBER: And where was that Venice studio located?

MR. ALEXANDER: It was on Wavecrest and Speedway, right off the boardwalk.

MR. STIEBER: And you moved in there in 1980—

MR. ALEXANDER: Three? Maybe? I think—something like that—'82, '83. And then I was there till the late '80s. And that was—actually that's when I started painting was there—actually painting, you know, with paint. Everything up until that time had been fabric or had been drawing or had been materials other than what you paint on canvas. So I did that.

One of the things about—I don't know how significant an issue it is now, but I—you know, every generation brings certain things to the table. And the next generation usually discounts it or they don't care—rightfully so. Or whatever the significance is of what the prior generation brings, the second generation is going to throw it out the window. And that's what's so funny about these things that we are so attached to that are totally meaningless or they only mean something to a very small group of people because they were present at a certain time.

I mean, an example of that would be [Clement] Greenberg, who was—sort of ran the show. In some ways, it was wonderful because you had one guy dictating modern art. But all he could think about was thin paint, which meant that everybody did thin paint. What? [Laughs.] You know, who gives a shit? Right?

MR. STIEBER: It's very arbitrary.

MR. ALEXANDER: Completely.

MR. STIEBER: Yeah. So when you got back from India, what was going on in the L.A. scene? What was the—you know, where were you exhibiting your work?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, I mean look at my bio and I'll tell you. [Laughs.]

MR. STIEBER: What were your impressions?

MR. ALEXANDER: I don't—I was grateful to have a place to live in and work—that was the studio. It was the end of the '70s. And it was—[President Ronald] Reagan had just come in, right? In the early '80s. And we were in a lousy financial state up until—what?—'83, right? Wasn't it up—including '82.

MR. STIEBER: Right. There was that big recession in 1981 and '80—yeah.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. And then Reagan came in and everything changed. And then it was sort of uphill. I remember the '80s as being very optimistic, if not, in fact, outrageous in their own way. And that was—there was a lot of cocaine. [They laugh.] And I mean that was everywhere.

And I was with this wonderful girl. I met her at—there was a place—a restaurant called the West Beach, which was on Venice Boulevard about a block away from the beach. And that became a hangout for a lot of the Venice artists. They would use it sort of as a living room, so to speak. And you'd do business in there. I mean, you know, you'd do a lot of different things in there. And I met this wonderful girl—

MR. STIEBER: What was her name?

MR. ALEXANDER: Hally Miller. H-A-L-L-Y M-I-L-L-E-R. And we hung out for several years. She was great. It was through her, in fact, that I did this—we did a—let's see, Hally was—it was '85 when I first met Hally. And we were together until '87 or '88, probably—'89.

And one of the memorable things we did was I got a Winnebago and turned the back of the Winnebago into a studio, which was about the size of this table. And we went to the national monuments and I did a series of paintings this big of the national—you know, like, you know all the ones. The Grand Canyon and Lake Powell and the mountains, the hills, you know—Monument Valley. Things like that. So we sort of toured around and did that. Had a great time.

MR. STIEBER: A lot of ink has been spilled over Barney's Beanery.

MR. ALEXANDER: Barney's was active when I first entered the scene. And that's because everything was focused on La Cienega. That's where—the only art commerce in town was La Cienega—and Beverly Hills. I mean, not the only, but the only one that, you know, I knew anything about. And as a result, Barney's, which was great, you know, close—and that was Kienholz. And that was all before my time. I mean, I didn't really—I didn't know—I knew Kienholz, but I didn't know him then. But people were still hanging out at Barney's.

But that shifted when—well, for me it certainly did because I became, you know, a West side guy from living in Venice. And there was no—so the place we found was the West Beach as opposed to Barney's. And I'm sure they were just the same. It's just that, you know, geographically different.

MR. STIEBER: So all the artists who lived in Venice hung out there.

MR. ALEXANDER: A lot of them. A lot of them did, you know, either more or less. But you could certainly—I mean, you would walk into the place and you'd know at least half the people there, which is good and bad, but you know—I mean, it was a wild time.

MR. STIEBER: Even in the '80s.

MR. ALEXANDER: Even in the '80s, yes.

MR. STIEBER: [Inaudible.]

MR. ALEXANDER: We're looking at this wonderful picture of me in 1985.

MR. STIEBER: Very handsome.

MR. ALEXANDER: Very handsome, very dapper, very—you know, as good as it gets, right?

MR. STIEBER: Playboy.

MR. ALEXANDER: Playboy. Nice shoes, though. [They laugh.] He had nice shoes. Against a wall, probably eight-by-eight of roses that are real roses. And so Lisa decided she was going to photograph maybe 10 artists in front of this wall and because they were roses, she didn't want them to wilt, so she set the times up—bam, bam, bam, bam—like that.

And I had an 8:30 on a Monday morning. And I had been at the West Beach the night before in that outfit. And

the glasses and the coffee cup were an extension of that evening. [They laugh.] So I remember walking down Speedway. It was not far from where I had a studio. I remember walking down Speedway, you know, with—kind of like this—[laughs]—you know, and that was why I was sitting that way with—the way I did.

MR. STIEBER: Well, your hair still looks perfectly coiffed.

MR. ALEXANDER: Just perfect. [They laugh.] It actually wasn't coiffed. It was just like this, except it was curly.

MR. STIEBER: I think we need to change the—

MR. ALEXANDER: Tape?

MR. STIEBER:—tape. But I haven't—I didn't—I forget to read my little spiel here: This is—this was Jason Stieber interviewing Peter Alexander at the artist's studio in Santa Monica, California, on September 24, 2009 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is memory card number two.

[End disc two.]

MR. STIEBER: All right. This is Jason Steiber interviewing Peter Alexander at the artist's studio in Santa Monica, California, on the 24th of September, 2009 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is memory card number three.

Okay, so we're to 1985. You're exhibiting regularly.

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, it appears. And if you look at this—

MR. STIEBER: According to your bio.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, yeah. Right. All over the place.

MR. STIEBER: You're dating Hally Miller.

MR. ALEXANDER: Hally Miller, yeah. Actually Hally Thacher—that's what she's—her real name is Hally Thacher. She was married to a guy named Miller and she uses the name Thacher now, as in T-H-A-C-H-E-R.

MR. STIEBER: Are you still in contact with her?

MR. ALEXANDER: No. I wish I were. But we had a—I ran into somebody else and that sort of killed Hally. That was a tough one. I'll have—always regret the way it happened. It was not very nice and it was me. Any rate—

MR. STIEBER: Well, you've stated that for the record. [They laugh.] Maybe she'll read it some day.

MR. ALEXANDER: Maybe someday she might read it. Yeah. Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: What sort of work were you doing at this time?

MR. ALEXANDER: That's when I was painting for the first time and I remember wanting one—here, let's find out. These pictures, these jungles were from India. What happens—this is about a year—what's the date on these? Eighty—

MR. STIEBER: Eighty-six.

MR. ALEXANDER: Eighty-six. I think I had been back—I was in the studio in Venice on Wavecrest and I had a dream and in the dream, these paintings appeared in the dream and the dream told me what the image was, the color, the material—which in fact was wax mixed up with indigo and so they're all one color, white and indigo and various degrees of transparency—and even how to make it which I made them with my hands.

I mixed the wax—it was like mashed potatoes—on the table and mixed in the color and then I take my fingers and go—[makes noise]—and that's how these paintings were made. I made 10 of them and that was it.

MR. STIEBER: Finger paintings.

MR. ALEXANDER: They were finger paintings. But they were—what was fascinating was the degree to which it was all in a dream. The entire picture—I mean, from beginning to end—was already there. So that was an episode that occurred at the studio on Wavecrest in about '86.

MR. STIEBER: Did you have any particularly good friends besides Lynda?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, yeah. Most everybody who was—had been friendly in the ‘60s were still friendly in the ‘80s. Some people had moved—Larry went, Larry moved, he went to Taos. Ken Price had moved. But the ones here were Billy, Chuck Arnoldie, Laddie Dill, Lynda.

MR. STIEBER: What gallery was representing you at this time?

MR. ALEXANDER: Corcoran. Jim Corcoran.

MR. STIEBER: Talk a little bit about your gallery representation since—from 1968 onward. Were you happy with your dealers? You don’t have to talk about it. [Laughs.]

MR. ALEXANDER: No, no—I’m trying to think. I’m trying to imagine how I felt. There always was a certain amount of—I mean, that’s what’s going on here. There was always a certain amount of this stuff. My problem was that I had a family so because of that, I had to have revenue and the revenue—I couldn’t rely on the dealers for revenue. So then my alternative to that was to sell things myself, which I did.

Normally, I would tell them about it and numerous dealers from around the world would come through the studio and I, obviously if I had an opportunity to sell something, I’d sell it. But doing that, it sets up an antagonism inevitably with the dealer, even if you don’t have what’s called the world rights or, so to speak—or geographic rights. It still sets up a conflict. So that was my relation to dealers, almost entirely. There was always that aspect of it which was I needed revenue and they couldn’t provide it or it couldn’t be done.

Now, it wasn’t necessarily the fault of the dealer. It was simply the way things worked and the way I worked, which is that I would make a—I’d do a project. And this is a perfect example, of these paintings—

MR. STIEBER: The India paintings.

MR. ALEXANDER:—the India paintings, and do 10 of them and that’s it and then there wouldn’t be any more. So by the time that people understood those and they could sell them, I was off to something else and this has been sort of consistently the case. So you can’t blame a dealer for that because most—I mean, if an artist stays within a certain realm of similarity of object-making, it’s much easier because then you don’t have to worry about trying to explain it.

MR. STIEBER: Why do you think you—no, I don’t want to ask you that question yet.

MR. ALEXANDER: You want to do that tomorrow?

MR. STIEBER: Tomorrow, yes. So was—Robert Elkon was your first gallery representation?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. And that was really through Nick Wilder. Nick and I, I think, did one or two shows but Nick and I had a real problem because of the reasons I was just talking about. In fact, Bob Elkon—he was very connected to Castelli and it was really Castelli who sold out my show in New York in the late ‘60s. He sold it to all the hotshots from Italy like Agnelli and et cetera, et cetera. I mean, that was—it made a big dent in New York at the time and I was much too young to be able to deal with it. I though, oh shit, this is easy. Fuck. [Laughs.]

MR. STIEBER: Was it ever as easy as you thought?

MR. ALEXANDER: No. No. No.

MR. STIEBER: How long were you with Elkon?

MR. ALEXANDER: We did two or three shows. I think we did three shows so it was probably three, three years, four years. I think when I—when I stopped making the resins, which was in ‘72, that’s when Elkon and I sort of fell out and I started doing sunsets and the sunsets were not very well received. Took a long time for those to make a dent to anybody.

MR. STIEBER: When is the next time that you had gallery representation after Bob Elkon?

MR. ALEXANDER: In New York?

MR. STIEBER: Anywhere.

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, I think I always had it here. I’ll have to look at the biography but after Nick, I think I was with Jim Corcoran here. I have to look—I don’t remember.

Mizuno in 1980.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, Riko Mizuno. Okay.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. But she—Riko was—I mean, we—do you know Riko?

MR. STIEBER: No. But I have her number. I need to call her. She's Los Angeles.

MR. ALEXANDER: She's as good as it gets. I'll give you an example of what Riko—she did a Kenny Price show and this is probably around the same time. And Riko said to a collector—and at that time, it was difficult selling Ken Price pieces—and she turned to the collector and said, "You buy, I fuck." [They laugh.] That's Riko.

MR. STIEBER: Wow.

MR. ALEXANDER: I know. She's good. She was really good. And she had some of the best shows in Los Angeles at that time, in the '70s, '60s and '70s.

MR. STIEBER: Her gallery was downtown in Little Tokyo, is that right?

MR. ALEXANDER: It was on the turnaround. She had one on La Cienega for a while. There was a little walkway and there was Riko and somebody else and the space she was in was always—somebody had had that gallery. I don't remember what the sequence was of who had it but Riko wound up with it and that's when she had that Kenny Price show. But she did a show—it had Moses, Chris Burden, Vija Celmins—all the people who—a lot of really good artists.

MR. STIEBER: Chris Burden.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: So how did—

MR. ALEXANDER: I guess I showed at James, too—with Corcoran, because it shows in '81 I had a show with him. So I was with him through the '80s.

MR. STIEBER: And your studio was still at—

MR. ALEXANDER: I didn't get the studio on Wavecrest until '82 or '83, I'm not sure. Oh, it was '82, I guess.

MR. STIEBER: Right, because that's where you met Lynda.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. No, no, no. Lynda was in the old studio on Westminster, the one with the pool. That's where Lynda was and then after India, when I came back from India, then I remembered—I was sort of flailing around for a while and then I got Laddie's studio and that must have been '82 or '83, I was with Laddie. I mean, I had one on Wavecrest.

MR. STIEBER: And how long were you there?

MR. ALEXANDER: Until '87, I think, when I got a great lease deal over in the Marina on another studio that was—it had a 10-year lease. And that lease went up and then I built this.

MR. STIEBER: So you were in Marina Del Rey after that.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. It must have been '90—1990 to '99 because it was 10 years.

MR. STIEBER: And then you built this.

MR. ALEXANDER: And then I built this.

MR. STIEBER: And you've been here ever since.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: So have you ever been remarried?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, why yes. [They laugh.] I'm surprised you asked. Yes. Married—what's her name! [They laugh.] Claudia! In '96. We got together in the early '90s and then we've been together 17 years; been married for 12. And we have a son who is now 11.

MR. STIEBER: So he was born in—

MR. ALEXANDER: In ‘97, yeah.

MR. STIEBER: And his name is Peter?

MR. ALEXANDER: His name is Pietro because his mother’s maiden name—her name still—is Parducci, so that was a nod to the Italian side.

MR. STIEBER: So Pietro.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. P-I-E-T-R-O. And he goes by Pete, as you can imagine. And I don’t recommend a son in any way—in any name at all similar to your own because it gets—it’s just too confusing. It’s better if it’s Sam or something like that. But those kind of decisions at that time get confused by other issues.

So that brings us up to the ‘90s and that’s been that way ever since. And, yes, was that a life-changing event? In some ways, it was—being remarried and having a son. I don’t know if—what affect it’s had on my work other than certainly most everything I’ve done since then has been more upbeat than not and I think that explains itself.

MR. STIEBER: Optimistic.

MR. ALEXANDER: The glass is surely half-full.

[Side conversation.]

[End disc three.]

MR. STIEBER: All right. This is Jason Stieber interviewing Peter Alexander at the artist’s studio in Santa Monica, California, on January 19, 2010 for the Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution.

Thank you for waiting—[laughs]—several months for this second interview. It’s very kind of you.

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, your health is much more important. [They laugh.]

MR. STIEBER: So like I said, last time we talked, we started at the beginning and went forward. So let’s start with today and what you’re working on at this very moment. You said you’re working on these—

[Cross talk.]

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, and the resins are taking—well, the resins, I got back into the resins. No, hold on. Let me start with why I left the resins. Is that a good reason?

MR. STIEBER: Sure, yeah, absolutely.

MR. ALEXANDER: The primary reason was I got toxic poisoning from the material.

MR. STIEBER: Which forced you to drink mass amounts of vodka.

MR. ALEXANDER: Which I told you that vodka story, yeah. And you may laugh but housepainters had more—less so now because of the change in paints, but that was very common with housepainters. They would get toxic poisoning from the lead in the paint and so they drank a lot of vodka, which I found out afterwards.

MR. STIEBER: Really, do you know what causes that? What the chemical process is that—

MR. ALEXANDER: No, no, but it’s a good question. Some people laugh when I tell the story—you know, how absurd this is—and other people get it right away. They understand why one sort of tries to adjust—you know, self-medicate your own toxicity.

MR. STIEBER: I mean, to somebody not in the know, they might sound like an excuse for drinking but yeah.

MR. ALEXANDER: Of course, but the reason why I find it so interesting is that I never drank vodka and the only one that would do it was vodka. Scotch wouldn’t do it or whatever else, but it was, like, specifically vodka.

MR. STIEBER: And what symptom did that ameliorate? Did you—

MR. ALEXANDER: I felt good.

MR. STIEBER: You just felt good, okay.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, because before, without using it, say, there was an anxiety and a constance of discomfort in a sober system, let's put it that way. And then the vodka would alleviate that. Not because I'd necessarily get drunk but the combination would make it all feel better, you know?

MR. STIEBER: Right. So you left resin work for that—

MR. ALEXANDER: I'd stopped doing the resins. It was also I had been doing it for maybe five or six years and what happens with the material is that it is—it's brutal as a material in its raw form but it produces such extraordinary beauty. And so you've got—you're always balancing those aspects. And what happened is that the raw form finally won out and I couldn't deal with it anymore because it's smelly, it's sticky, you can't touch it, you don't want to touch it and it's all about that final thing.

MR. STIEBER: And you made all of your own forms in those early—

MR. ALEXANDER: I made all of my early molds and because they're geometrics, the molds were very simple. I just made them out of a quarter-inch tempered glass. It was simple, not a big deal.

MR. STIEBER: And where did you get the resin, the raw materials?

MR. ALEXANDER: The resin, I used various manufacturers and finally wound up with the best resin that I had used was made by Pittsburgh Plate Glass, PPG. And I would get it in 55-gallon drums. And, you know, that was that.

MR. STIEBER: And your dyes?

MR. ALEXANDER: The dyes, there are numerous opaque and transparent dyes that are available for polyester epoxies and all that whole territory of synthetics, oil-based synthetics.

MR. STIEBER: So you had a number of companies that you would go to for those things.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, and now, the most recent dyes I've gotten for this project, I got online. The whole package of availability has changed fairly dramatically. And the resins that they use today are a more sophisticated version of what I had, meaning they are clearer, they're less sensitive to sunlight, et cetera, that kind of thing. But they still smell awful. And it's sticky. And all those qualities are the same.

What happened was that there was a show in Paris about Southern California. It was about this whole era.

[Side conversation.]

And so they had a piece of mine in this show that was like that—

MR. STIEBER: The long wall—

MR. ALEXANDER: The eight-foot piece that hung on the wall. And it was black, similar to that. And the hanging mechanism was always sort of questionable. And I'll show you the one I'm talking about.

MR. STIEBER: Curt, for the record, what is your last name?

CURT KLEBAUM: It's K-L-E-B-A-U-M.

MR. STIEBER: Thank you.

MR. KLEBAUM: The name of the show was "Los Angeles: 1955 to 1985."

MR. STIEBER: Thank you.

MR. ALEXANDER: This is the mechanism I'm using now which is sort of—and what I had before, it's actually cast into the piece itself.

MR. STIEBER: It's inserted into the resin itself.

MR. ALEXANDER: And what happens, on the piece that they had, it was the opposite. What you did is that you made a hole—you put a nail in the wall and then there was a hole in the piece and you find the hole and you stick it in. It was not a great system. And the point is that they hung it improperly, it broke and—

MR. STIEBER: During the installation of the show?

MR. ALEXANDER: Before the show actually opened. It happened just before. So it was never really publicly seen.

MR. STIEBER: And it was one of the pieces that you had done in the ‘60s.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. There are some other aspects to this which are only sort of—which had nothing to do with the resin but it has to do with what the [Centre] Pompidou [Paris] did.

The piece that I loaned them was loaned by me through Franklin Parrasch in New York. And when it was broken, I was never told about it. And at the end of the show when they took it down, Craig Kauffman had a piece that was broken also—similar circumstances. But that was owned by the L.A. County, so it was loaned by the county, so then that caused a sort of turmoil. And then the issue of mine breaking came up at the same time, which it did not before. So I was a little bit pissed for obvious reasons but it turned out fine. And the deal was they said they would pay to have another one made. And I said, okay, let’s make two of them and I’ll take one and give one to the Pompidou, which they were very pleased by. They haven’t gotten it yet but—

MR. STIEBER: Because you haven’t made it yet or because of their—

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, it’s because of—we started casting in a new material which was urethane. And these bars had never been made in urethane. And the guy who made the bars was in New York and they made casts on several of these and they weren’t quite right and the urethane started behaving oddly after the fact. So that’s why this one is here and I’m doing a temporary hanging to find out if it’s going to behave okay.

So what was your question?

MR. STIEBER: Ultimately, the question is, what brought you back to these cast-resin pieces?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, at any rate—oh, I know, I’m just talking about the ins and the outs that don’t really matter that much.

The Pompidou has not got a piece yet. But they will. And that’s because of the difficulty—what we’ve run into trying to make them. That seems to be solved, the making of them, but what happened is that I found a company downtown that has been making mannequins for 75 years and they have a facility where they do one-offs.

How much of this do you want to know?

MR. STIEBER: A lot. What is the name of the company?

MR. ALEXANDER: Greneker, G-R-E-N-E-K-E-R. And they’re mannequins. And they have a shop down on 11th Street in downtown L.A. And they pride themselves on their one-offs. And their one-offs would be something for Disney—a one-unit kind of thing for Disney—or something for Universal or what have you.

And so I called them up; I found them online and I called them up. And I explained my problem and said, “Can you cast some things?” And they came down here and got very excited about—they’ve never worked with a circumstance like this and they got very excited about it.

And so I set up shop down there and worked with one particularly guy. So I go down and I mix the color and he does everything else.

MR. STIEBER: What’s his name?

MR. ALEXANDER: His name is Beto.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, he’s listed in the Tim Nye catalog?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, he has a piece named after him.

MR. STIEBER: Oh, I saw that and I want to ask you about the names of the pieces.

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, most of the names of the pieces come from the street names that are where—very close to where Greneker is. It’s all from Greneker area. They’re just street names.

There we go. That’s Beto. And that’s—he was so thrilled.

MR. STIEBER: How is that spelled again?

MR. ALEXANDER: It's an abbreviation. It's B-E-T-O.

MR. STIEBER: B-E-T-O. So you set up shop down there.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah—[inaudible]—and me set up shop but it isn't nearly as anal as this place but it's pretty messy down there.

But the point is that I go down and the group of people that I work with—there're maybe 20 people down there and they have a facility that they have. They have a welding guy; they've got a sandblasting guy; they've got somebody who can make crates. They have everything you could possibly want, so it's a great deal. And I really like going down there and mixing the color.

MR. STIEBER: But originally it was just to do this—

MR. ALEXANDER: It was just to do that and then I started thinking about other possibilities that had never really been realized 40 years ago. So I thought, well, let's play with this aspect of it. And that's where I got back into it. So that's a long explanation as to what the resins are about.

MR. STIEBER: Just eight minutes. [They laugh.] So what were some of the things that you felt were unresolved from your working with resins in the—

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, color. Color was one of them. I always played in a very muted—sort of closer to clear with slight nuances of tone. And then here, I'm getting into something—

[End track one.]

MR. STIEBER: So color.

MR. ALEXANDER: Color. Color and density. What I did before, the earlier pieces were all clear. And I've never done anything that had sort of that atmosphere, and that's how these differ as the color and the atmosphere. And then the bars are—same thing with the bars. I'm having a wonderful time with color, which—

MR. STIEBER: Maybe the wall-hanging pieces.

MR. ALEXANDER: The wall-hanging pieces, yeah. And there's a group of six that worked out that I'm waiting for them to finish up down there which means, though, they'll finish them and put them in crates. They have their own little sort of coffins they go into. So they look like really important objects.

MR. STIEBER: Tell me a little bit about your color-mixing, what that process is like.

MR. ALEXANDER: Okay, I've got a mask on, there's a tub of resin in front of me and a plastic container, which is just the amount that you'd use to cast into the mold for the bars. And what I'll do is I'll take out a small container of the non-dyed material and start to mix color in it and then start getting the idea where I want to go with it. And I'll just start to mix and put in a little bit of green, put in a little bit of yellow, put in da, da, da, da, da. And the issue to get that kind of—

[Side conversation.]

MR. STIEBER: It gets a little bit more translucent?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, it gets much more translucent on the edges. That's the issue of the pieces. And one would think but it's harder to do that than you imagine, meaning in terms of what you're working with is how dense can this color be, still give me transparent issues and not see the hanging mechanism in the back? So that's what you're playing with.

MR. STIEBER: And so you make these little studies, essentially, of these color studies right? Do you keep any of those or did they—they don't get cast; they're just—

MR. ALEXANDER: No, some of them do get cast but they get cast into little containers. And when I first started using the resins, I used to make meticulous notes of how many drops of dye went into this particular mix. And I don't do that anymore. I'd just as soon do it and I don't really want to replicate any color. It's much more fun to

do it—each one is new.

[Side conversation.]

MR. STIEBER: I think one of the things that's interesting about these new cast-resin pieces is how they pick up some of the same visual issues that are in some of your drawings and paintings. And I'm thinking particularly about your Alaska [1988 series], those gouache paintings. I was looking on your Web site and was looking at some of your different series. And they look a lot like these pieces. They have the sense of translucency and—

MR. ALEXANDER: Ice.

MR. STIEBER: Ice, yeah, yeah.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, no, you're absolutely right.

MR. STIEBER: The way that light travels through air or travels through ice or through glass or through resin seems to be an enduring—or through fog.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, well, that's the atmosphere. It's like as if you took one of the sunsets—say, a pastel sunset that I did in the '70s. You took a chunk of one of those pastels, you'd get that. That's what you'd see.

[End track two.]

MR. ALEXANDER:—is it worth doing? Are you just imitating? Are you doing something for the market or is it an actual sort of—or are you inquisitive about it? And you always have to deal with the critical aspect of, oh, you're just remaking old pieces because there's a—there now is a market for it, which is true.

But that's the one perception and then the other one is still—you're still experimenting. And I feel as if I'm in the latter part. That's what I feel when I go down to Greneker is that I look forward to see what's going to happen. In that way, it's like every other thing that you do. You always wonder, what if? And it's all about what if.

MR. STIEBER: Did you enjoy a good market for these resin pieces when you first started making them?

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, I did. I did. Yeah, I was—a lot of that was because I was in a group and you get that group's sensibility operating, it has a lot of weight. I mean, it has more weight than the individual might have if—certainly if you're starting out. And I didn't really—I came into the group—I think we talked about this, didn't we? But I came in sort of bass-ackwards. [They laugh.] I came into it because I was at UCLA and I was a surfer. And so I knew of resin from surfing. And so the idea of using resin came to me just from surfing, not from looking at other—anything else.

MR. STIEBER: Well, let's talk a little bit about your relationship to this group, this group sensibility. You have been connected, of course, to the Finish Fetishists, which I always thought was a very awkward name for a group, but—[inaudible, cross talk]—[laughs]—

MR. ALEXANDER: The names meant—when I was going through this, your questionnaire, I was looking at the name of Finish Fetish because in this review that Peter writes, he discusses Finish Fetish and Light and Space. And he actually makes a difference—he differentiates between Light and Space and Finish Fetish. And apparently I'm in Finish Fetish—[they laugh]—in this show. Turrell is Light and Space, as is Irwin. Fuckers. [They laugh.]

But who's what and why to me is a total mystery. I mean, I don't why I'm in Finish Fetish or why would I be in Light and—you know, I mean, neither one of them—they don't make a clean connection. How's that? To me. I mean, to, is this what it is? You know what I mean?

MR. STIEBER: Or rather, there's not a clear differentiation between the two.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, or a clear elucidation or a definition of, you know, we got to—

MR. STIEBER: So taking the two things together. Let's say that there's no—

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, let's not.

MR. STIEBER:—line between them. What would be your definition of this sensibility?

MR. ALEXANDER: I was—I'll tell you, I am a big fan of [Johannes] Vermeer. And one of the things that I always,

when I look at Vermeer paintings, I always feel as if I'm underwater. As if I'm in a place that is safe, warm and not mobile. I mean, it's there—I mean, it's—

MR. STIEBER: Not fugitive maybe.

MR. ALEXANDER: Not fugitive. Thank you. Oh, you're so good Jason. [They laugh.] And it's a place that's safe. It's a place that gives me great pleasure. And that's what the boxes were. I mean, I saw them as something a—a place that you could go into and be in. And that light would surround you. You would be enveloped by that light. Okay. That's what they were to me.

MR. STIEBER: Right. As if you were underwater.

MR. ALEXANDER: As if I were underwater. Or as if I were, in these cases, as if I were sort of floating around in some sunset some place. But it's a place. And it's a place or a feeling. So the surface because of the material, I always thought this was something you looked into. If it's something you looked into, then that surface had to be not—it couldn't be an imposition. I mean, or it couldn't impede that looking. So that's why the surface is the way it is. That's why it's smooth. That's why it's as nonexistent with no fingers as possible. Now, define—does that help? I mean, it doesn't—

MR. STIEBER: Yes. Here's a question: Would you ever allow a curator to put a glass box over one of your pieces on its pedestal?

MR. ALEXANDER: No. No, I would not—no—because it impedes the observer, the viewer. I mean, you can't—it stops you from the inquiry. It's too much of a—it becomes too Tiffanized [ph], so to speak. And that's not the desire. I mean, they're Tiffany enough—particularly these—with the lights going—

MR. STIEBER: Yeah. [Laughs.] Well, there is something that's very pleasure-oriented about them. So and not—but that's something that I don't think that we should shy away from.

MR. ALEXANDER: No, not at all. No, no, no, no, no, no. Pleasure is a very, very important aspect to it. I mean, I was thinking what's interesting is to look at, what these say underneath everything is that it is possible—or what they—the question they ask: Is it possible to have an object that has properties that can affect us somehow?

And it does it—and these do it in a kind of a naïve way, as opposed to I'm thinking of sort of, say, Jeff Koons. Say, his—you know, one of his rabbits, right? That asks the viewer—or takes the viewer to a place that's very, very different than where these would take you. And these are highly romantic and naïve in a way, in the fact that you ask this object to do this.

MR. STIEBER: But they also seem stripped of any kind of polemic, which I think—

MR. ALEXANDER: Because they're so unassuming? Because they're—of their form?

MR. STIEBER: Right.

MR. ALEXANDER: And because of the expectation of what that form can produce?

MR. STIEBER: It seems to me that they invite rather than confront.

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, absolutely. No, no—it's all about, huh. Like, huh? [They laugh.] Rather than, you know.

MR. STIEBER: Well, so as spaces that people can enter, is there any link between your experience in architecture and your experience making these pieces?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, without a doubt. I mean, these were designed—or they were—the form certainly came from architectural influence. And it was the desire—the form came out of a desire for a certain kind of simplicity or directness. There are numerous pieces that were made by others at this time out of resin that were, say, spherical in nature, which don't really allow penetration. They're more about optics or other things.

MR. STIEBER: Reflection.

MR. ALEXANDER: Reflections and what have you.

MR. STIEBER: Were you thinking specifically about Craig Kauffman?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, no, Craig's bubbles—I was thinking more about some of DeWain's work and there were others at the time who were doing casts. Doug Edge, for an example—he was doing some castings. And I never quite understood why he dealt—why he used resin to do what he did because the fact that it was clear, which

his were, he would impede the clarity by the surface. So I didn't understand what was the priority. And this is—I'm really commenting on the different takes on the material. That's really what it is.

MR. STIEBER: So let's go back to architecture. And let's talk about Neutra now. In our last conversation, you had talked about it in pretty negative terms, so let's—was there anything positive that came out of that experience?

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh yeah, no—I'm being very unfair because really what I'm doing is I'm judging Neutra generationally. And I was—I judged him—he came out of that sort of Austrian heroic mold. That's what the man was and most of his peers, I think, were probably not unlike that. I didn't know Schindler or any of those—any of the others.

But maybe that was sort of the expectation of—you know, it was the Frank Lloyd Wright stuff, you know, with the hat and the cape and all that shit. And the fact that you are the king. And everybody is sort of deferential to you. That I didn't like that as a relationship. Not necessarily—he was that way with me, but I was sort of—I was way down on the totem pole and it was sort of expected anyway from me. But he was that way with his wife. He was that way with his son and everybody. He was sort of imperious. And that's the part that I really disliked.

But when I would—every afternoon what I would do is I would—I told you this story, where I'd take drawings up to him and he would color them while he was resting in bed. And then we would talk. And sometimes he'd talk about the building that he was rendering or what feelings he had about it.

And I'll give you an example: He was doing a school in Puerto Rico and there was a very, very limited budget. So what he had to do was to provide air conditioning but with no air conditioning. So the question is how do you do it architecturally? And so you set up a wind system and you set up shades and—so there are a lot of aspects or things that you can do that are not mechanized that can take care of climate.

And he was very keen on this. And I learned a lot of that from him—or at least a place to focus or a place—that door and that door—the reason why they're there is because that's the air conditioning because the west is that way and the west wind comes through there and out this door. So just—

MR. STIEBER: You just leave them open—

MR. ALEXANDER: I just leave them open in the summertime.

MR. STIEBER:—in the summertime, yeah.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. And that came from Neutra as an idea. I mean, it's fairly obvious, but a lot of people don't think about it. He was doing a project; it was a competition in Berlin and it was a small opera house of sorts or some kind of a music thing. And it was located in the middle of tall buildings and he was diddling it when I was with him one day.

And he said, "This has to be a jewel because it's a very modest building, but you see it all around from up above." So the unique aspect of it is that's how you perceive the building. So he said, "This has to be in every way a jewel." And I sort of liked that idea, of realizing the point of view of how people will see this building. And that didn't occur to me that that was an important point of view. But it is.

MR. STIEBER: From up above.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah. Yeah, because you're always looking at it the way, you know—

MR. STIEBER: From the street.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, from the street. Yeah. So simple and obvious as it may be, it never occurred to me until I got it from him. So does that say anything about—

MR. STIEBER: Yeah, I think so.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah? I mean, I don't want to—his grandson came by and interviewed me. And he did a film—he did a film on Neutra. And unfortunately, I lost contact with him. He was a terrific kid.

MR. STIEBER: Do you remember his name?

MR. KLEBAUM: Was it Dion?

MR. ALEXANDER: It wasn't—no, Dion's the son.

MR. KLEBAUM: No, it was the son of Dion.

MR. ALEXANDER: And Dion is the one who was damaged—poor fucker—by—but I think, I guess it must be Dion's son who I spoke with. I mean, I could—I don't know how I would find it, but you know.

MR. STIEBER: It's okay.

MR. ALEXANDER: But he did do the film and I think it was done and somebody commented to me about it not long after we did the interview. So it's around, somehow.

MR. STIEBER: Tell me a little bit about how you travel. Some of your series seem to be named after trips that you may have taken where the light may have affected you in a certain way and—talk a little bit about that.

MR. ALEXANDER: It was not—it was all unintended that I find myself a—sort of, [J.M.W.] Turner did this a lot, meaning he was always packing off someplace with his little watercolor kit. And I always liked that idea, that is, that you could go somewhere and it would affect you in a way that you would—it would make you want to do something, some something.

And what happened is that I found myself going to Baja. We would camp out at Baja and I'd go down there and I'd take a watercolor set and do things. And then the Alaska trip is a perfect example where I made a deal with Princess where I traded them a painting for a suite, you know, on one of their Alaska cruises. And it was fabulous because all I had to do—I just brought in my pads with my watercolors and I'd sit there and look out this window and there would be glaciers. And I'd—so it was wonderful—

MR. STIEBER: From the boat.

MR. ALEXANDER: Plein air. For me—[they laugh]—that's the kind of plain air I like, you know, which is sort of, you know, lots of things warm and soft—[they laugh]—you know, all around you. And I did the—and those were some of the most beautiful drawings I think I've ever done. And they were a product of being there at that place.

The Miramar was another example of going somewhere. I probably got into the idea of going somewhere when I had a studio. It was after my divorce, so it was in the early '80s. And I was in a studio—I was in Laddie's studio, which he had left. And it was so claustrophobic. It was a wonderful studio in many ways, but one of the negatives was that there was no air around you because of whatever reason.

And so then I'd go to hotels to get out of there for weekends. And I'd go to the hotel and I always felt as if I had to justify the cost of the hotel, so I'd bring my pads and do something from the hotel window. And this sort of went on and on and then I would—there would always be other aspects.

There was one time in the mid-'80s. You asked the question; you're going to get an answer—in the mid-'80s. There was this wonderful girl I was with who—and we decided—or I said, "Let's do a national monument tour." So I said, "I'm going to get a Winnebago and set up a studio in the back of it"—one of these small ones, you know. And the studio was the size of this—half the size of this table.

And so I had these little paintings and we went off to the Grand Canyon and Monument Valley and, you know, to Lake Powell and all those places. And it was fantastic. And wherever I went, I'd do these little paintings. Never showed them, but I have them right here.

MR. STIEBER: What about India? Tell me about India because—

MR. ALEXANDER: It was exactly—it's all this—another time, a few years later than this, I went to a place in Mexico called Isla Mujeres, which is an island down by Yucatan and—for a couple weeks. And I'd sit down there and do these drawings, these watercolors and it would be heaven. There was no nothing, other than just that. And that was what you did.

MR. STIEBER: Just the work.

MR. ALEXANDER: Just—yeah. Yeah. That and eating and, you know, all the other stuff, you know, you do. [They laugh.] You know, but it was wonderful. And I would do this periodically because it was such a—I could get so much done away than I could here because of all the shuckin' and jivin' you do.

MR. STIEBER: Right. Well, that's a good segue. What is an everyday day at work in the studio here?

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, now because of age and all the rest of it, I work out three days a week usually—three or four days a week. Then I'll come here and usually I have breakfast with Frank or usually it's Frank.

MR. STIEBER: Gehry?

MR. ALEXANDER: Gehry. And we'll do this maybe two, three times a week. And that's always interesting because

he is such a luminous sort of character and he gets everything that most of us kind of want in terms of attention. You know what I mean? If we want a lot of attention, you know, that's where you—he's the guy who gets it. And it doesn't do anything. I mean, that's one of the things that's interesting about being around—beside the fact that I enjoy him enormously, but—

MR. STIEBER: It doesn't do anything to his personality.

MR. ALEXANDER: It doesn't do anything to his—no, no. And it does nothing to give him pleasure. I'm sure that if he didn't get it, its absence would be felt strongly. But the fact that it—this wave of stuff—[laughs]—is always coming in, you know. And it makes me—it makes one wonder, what's the value of that? If in fact, the attention that one gets—does it push you on? Does it allow you to go to places you would not go because it gives you a sense of confidence? So there's those aspects of the public that I can get a point of view on from being with him.

This is a long answer to your question. Then—Curt is here on Tuesdays and Fridays and Tuesdays and Fridays are usually lost to business, to some kind of aspect where you have to focus on something other than this. If I'm working on a project or an idea, I'll come in and start painting right away with great pleasure and sort of abandon.

But it comes in spurts. As an example, the piece I—the painting I did for Disney [Disney Concert Hall, Music Center of Los Angeles, 2003]was recently one of the longest, most focused spurts that I've had because it was like three months of every day almost—five, six days a week—where I came in here and painted this painting because it's a huge painting.

MR. STIEBER: What's the name of this project?

MR. ALEXANDER: It's the Disney Hall project.

MR. STIEBER: Okay.

MR. ALEXANDER: You want to—do you want to see it?

[End track three.]

MR. ALEXANDER: That was the—that corner—because it's a 40-foot painting, so I didn't have any wall long enough. So I had to do a corner and that was where the problem was in the painting, so I mean, I could sense something was not working. So I took it over to Frank's studio or his offices and he has a lot of big walls. And I finished it over there.

But that—to answer your question about working—that was another time of enormous pleasure because you lose yourself in it. And it's all so masturbatory—[they laugh]—that you can't—it's what it is. And it's difficult to share that aspect with others. I mean, they don't really care anyway. I mean, how can you excite another to the degree that you are excited—you know—[laughs]—

MR. STIEBER: Making a thing.

MR. ALEXANDER: Making it. [They laugh.] You know, so—[laughs]—

MR. STIEBER: You know, we've considered adding video to these interviews. [They laugh.] And I think with you it would have been a good idea.

MR. ALEXANDER: There we go. [They laugh.]

MR. STIEBER: Great. Let's talk a little bit more about Frank. How long have you known him?

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, forever. I mean, since—that's part of the uniqueness of this group, so to speak. It was a time—we talked about all this, didn't we?

MR. STIEBER: A little bit, yeah.

MR. ALEXANDER: You want me to repeat?

MR. STIEBER: Sure.

MR. ALEXANDER: Shall I do it again?

MR. STIEBER: Just in case. We don't want to miss anything.

MR. ALEXANDER: We don't want to miss anything, do we? [They laugh.] Because it was here, not in New York—

because it was the ’60s—where we were in certain ways immune from the politics. I don’t think we were as affected by the politics of the time as a place like New York. And we’d go to the beach all the time. You know, oftentimes maybe four or five of us would meet at Chuck’s studio on Brooks—or Frank had his offices there also—and we’d just walk down to the beach—

MR. STIEBER: Chuck?

MR. ALEXANDER: Arnoldie. And jump in the water and bodysurf, you know, or whatever. And some girls would come along. And this would be on a Tuesday at 11:00. And that was not uncommon. Venice was a tiny little place. In 1969 Ron Cooper, Jim Ganzer and I bought a building in Venice on Wavecrest. Anyway, it’s in Venice, right on Main Street, about 15,000-square-foot building.

MR. STIEBER: But that was your Wavecrest studio?

MR. ALEXANDER: That was the Wave—no, no. The Wavecrest studio came later. This was actually on Westminster, which—it’s still there. And the down payment was a used pickup truck. So that tells you something about how—what it was like then and what it is now. I mean, can you give the owner of a building a used pickup truck as a down payment on a—[they laugh]—you know.

MR. STIEBER: And did the owner hold the mortgage? What was the—

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, yeah. The owner—it was a guy. He was a wonderful guy.

MR. STIEBER: No bank was involved. It was—

MR. ALEXANDER: There was no bank. No, no. There was no bank. Or was there? No. No. He just held it because—obviously, because we gave him this pickup truck. And it was—

MR. STIEBER: Do you remember his name? If not, it’s okay.

MR. ALEXANDER: No, it’s not that far removed because they have—that same family owns Lincoln Fabrics on Lincoln Boulevard. And it’s a notorious—and I don’t mean that in a pejorative way—fabric house. And there’s a family who owns real estate in Venice. And that’s one—and this was one of them.

The reason why this guy—they’re brothers. They’re a bunch of brothers who owned real estate. The guy that we got it from is dead now. But the reason why he wanted the pickup truck, it was a four-wheel drive. He lived in Malibu on a ranch and he had a lot of sort of exotic animals and he had to get access to them sometimes, you know, so that was a—but the building itself used to be a gondola repair shop when Main Street was a canal and so that’s the origins of the building.

MR. STIEBER: You bought this building with two other guys.

MR. ALEXANDER: And we bought the building with two other guys. And we did it up. You know, we cleaned it out and everybody had their studio. Why did I bring this up? Do you remember?

MR. STIEBER: We were talking about Frank Gehry and—[inaudible, cross talk]—

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh yeah, and all that. Well, but that’s just an example of how loose it was. Ed Moses was—somehow he got connected with Frank or Frank got connected with Ed. This was probably in the mid-’60s. And Frank became very attached to artists because he felt there was more in common with them than with architects. And everybody was a—never mind, I won’t go into this. [They laugh.] But—

MR. STIEBER: You can use whatever language you feel is appropriate. [Laughs.]

MR. ALEXANDER: All right. And it was such a small community—I mean, the Venice community, which was literally, you know, 15, 20 people, if that—that you always wound up playing poker or you’d go to parties or you’d do this and that. There was a lot of social interaction. Because we were not in New York, we were unaffected to a degree by the aesthetic that was coming from New York. So you were allowed—you were given permission to do other things.

It was a wonderful time. It was a wonderful time. I really—I was thrilled when I became—the scene existed before I came along, but when I gained membership, so to speak, it was very—it gave me great pleasure to be able to do that, to do that with these guys because I admired some of them enormously—like Kenny Price or Billy or Larry or Irwin—you know, all these guys were active before I was.

MR. STIEBER: I’ve always wondered what the relationship of certain women was—women artists—was to this circle because I think women had a very difficult time accessing the scene in New York and also possibly in Los

Angeles.

MR. ALEXANDER: Oh, no, it was all the same—yeah. Absolutely. Alexis Smith was visible at that time. Lynda Benglis, who because she's from New Orleans, her sensibility is much more like L.A. than it's like New York, so she was a big favorite. And she came out here and she had a studio right next to the one I had on this building. And she was—her presence had an effect, I think, on everybody, one way or another because she was such a—she's such a vital, interesting person. Alexis Smith is similar. But there were not many ladies around.

MR. STIEBER: I always think of Jay DeFeo and Sonia—

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, she was certainly before that. And well, look—yeah, well, okay, so there was Jay and she was in San Francisco and who else was there up there?

MR. STIEBER: Oh, Sonia Gechtoff—I can never pronounce her last name—or spell it. [Laughs.]

MR. ALEXANDER: I know her—

MR. ALEXANDER: She's still around up in—[inaudible, cross talk].

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. I know the—

MR. KLEBAUM: There's Helen Pashgian.

MR. ALEXANDER: Who?

MR. KLEBAUM: Helen Pashgian.

MR. STIEBER: Yeah.

MR. KLEBAUM: How'd she get in there?

MR. ALEXANDER: How did she?

MR. KLEBAUM: Yeah, I mean she was in there. And then—[they laugh]—

MR. STIEBER: We really need the video camera for the record.

MR. ALEXANDER: Well,—no, Helen—I mean, Helen did some really beautiful things. And she was—

MR. KLEBAUM: But she wasn't really a Venetian, was she?

MR. ALEXANDER: But she was sort of out there somewhere.

MR. KLEBAUM: Pasadena.

MR. ALEXANDER: She was Pasadena. And she had her own scene. I mean, she—her family was—

MR. KLEBAUM: Judy Chicago.

MR. ALEXANDER: Her family were Armenian rug people in Pasadena. And so she had a real clique out there. Anyway, so she was not—she was peripherally connected. But I'm trying to think of what other women were—

MR. KLEBAUM: Judy.

MR. ALEXANDER: Judy Chicago. Right. Judy Gerowitz.

MR. KLEBAUM: Lita Albuquerque.

MR. STIEBER: Lita Albuquerque.

MR. ALEXANDER: Lita Albuquerque. They all changed their names. Right—Judy Chicago and Lita Albuquerque.

MR. STIEBER: But neither of them was really in the California scene.

MR. ALEXANDER: Judy was. And in fact, Judy was in that Pompidou show. But Judy was never a very—

MR. STIEBER: You can say it. [Laughs.]

MR. ALEXANDER: No, it's not—

MR. KLEBAUM: She wasn't friendly.

MR. ALEXANDER: No, Judy—she was always very friendly. I always liked Judy.

[Off mike.]

MR. STIEBER: Let's see here.

[Side conversation.]

MR. ALEXANDER: There was Judy and Lita.

[End track four.]

MR. ALEXANDER: We—[they laugh]—we were all—[they laugh]—feminism started in this era. Right? I mean, it became—surfaced—it didn't start; it just surfaced to a far greater degree than ever before. And all my men friends were hated by their wives or girlfriends because all of the sudden they were seen as these pigs who—you know, all—you know the story. It's not nearly as vicious now as it was then. But then it was like it was—I mean, I'm sure it's what contributed to my divorce. I mean, I was an asshole anyway, but I'm sure that it didn't—it exaggerated things.

MR. STIEBER: You want to pause?

[End track five.]

MR. STIEBER: I want to ask you about the relationship of work—between representation and abstraction in your work because you seem to move between the two quite easily. Can we talk about that a little bit? What moves you to paint a scene, for instance, and is that a—is there a different impulse when you're moved to just paint color or light?

MR. ALEXANDER: Good question. The sunsets, which were early '70s, came from a desire to make a picture. And a picture had to have all of the classical aspects of picture-making. It had a horizon line; it had an image that was identifiable. It all alluded—all the pictures that I've done allude to picture-making, to the process of picture-making, which is a historical idea. And the sunsets—that's why I mention these here because these are abstractions of the sunsets that I did in the '70s.

MR. STIEBER: The big cast resin pieces?

MR. ALEXANDER: The cast resin pieces. And to me, they're—the process is different, but the pleasure of—or what they exude—the pleasure that these objects, whether it be the pastels or the resins—is the same. I don't see any difference between abstraction and figuration. I mean, I remember when I—in the '60s, there was a huge issue of that because abstraction was gaining a foothold, probably, that it never had had before.

I mean, you always had it—you know, going back to [Wassily] Kandinsky and so forth, but it was gaining a kind of weight. But I don't know the difference, other than the conscious choice of wanting to work within an image, which either can be an enormous advantage or a disadvantage. Does that help?

MR. STIEBER: It does.

MR. ALEXANDER: But it doesn't answer your—you had an answer to this.

MR. STIEBER: I did not have an answer.

MR. ALEXANDER: You didn't.

MR. STIEBER: It always seemed to me that—

MR. ALEXANDER: And I keep thinking about what's this big deal about figuration and abstraction? And you realize the more you do it, I don't think there is any beyond what I just said.

MR. STIEBER: It's always seemed to me that abstraction is an extreme zoom—

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER:—or an extreme pull-back of something figurative.

MR. ALEXANDER: Hopefully. Hopefully it's a distillation of the same information you get from figuration. But as you know, a great deal can be lost—[laughs]—you know, in going that route because in a way you don't have

anything to rely on. I mean, at least figuration gives you something to hold onto. Or it gives your audience something to hold on to. But when you go to abstraction, then you kind of—you have to rely on the feed, so to speak, of your choices to produce those qualities that you want.

MR. STIEBER: You mentioned Turner earlier. And I was just, this conversation is reminding me of a painting that was just in the big retrospective that was in the National Gallery in Washington and it's called *Rough Sea* [*With Wreckage*, 1840-45]. And it's one of his last paintings and it's almost completely abstract. It's just—

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah.

MR. STIEBER: And you can tell that it's the surface of a rough ocean, but it's just a swirl of color.

MR. ALEXANDER: He doesn't tell you very much. [Laughs.] Right.

MR. STIEBER: So I think that that painting is illustrative of this point.

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, I always liked—I mean, he was a traveling artist, you know. And apparently, he did these wonderful fuck pictures. [They laugh.] There was a—what the hell was that? One of these guys. The earl of something or other. Would invite him up to his country house often and he used to hang out there a lot.

And what they did in these country houses—you know—all that shit. You know, you could imagine. And they had all the drugs and everything. And so Turner did these wonderful, sort of, intimate sex pictures of people fucking and—but all full of this atmosphere and this, sort of—and [John] Ruskin thought they were awful and so he had them all destroyed with a few exceptions. But how we got into Turner and sex, I don't know, but—[they laugh]—but—

MR. STIEBER: We're talking about visual pleasure, so it's—

MR. ALEXANDER: We're talking about visual pleasure.

MR. STIEBER: And the relationship between—or the lack of a true dividing line between abstraction and figuration.

MR. ALEXANDER: Yeah, yeah. Well, one of the—I had a real thrill when I went to London in the late '80s and specifically to go to the Tate [Britain, London] because of the Turner drawing room, where you go in and they have a sink in the corner—or no it's upstairs; it's upstairs from the—you know, it's a Turner—it's where they have all Turner drawings that were given to the Tate.

Anybody can walk in. There's a big sink in the corner. You wash your hands. And then you say, I'd like to see the Burning of the Houses of Parliament. And they go—[laughs]—bring out this big book, you know, plunk on the table. And the book's about like this. Have you ever done this?

MR. STIEBER: I have never done this. No.

MR. ALEXANDER: And—[laughs]—you know. And here is this little watercolor that's in these big pages. And you can see—you can touch it. You can see all of the decisions that he made which you never see in reproduction. You can see, he did this and then he did this and that didn't work, so he did this and then he did this. And that sequence of decisions became electrified by that experience of—it brought you so much closer to the person than would, say, the reproduction because you could see what he did. So how'd we get into that? [Laughs.]

MR. STIEBER: It's interesting you mentioned your pleasure in that when you, in a sense, try to excise that from your cast resin pieces. You said you don't want any fingerprints. And you know, the surface is polished. Turner is all fingerprints.

MR. ALEXANDER: He's all fingerprints. [They laugh.] And that's one of the things that's wonderful about him. And I think it's that—that was what got—why I'm sure I went to what I—to the landscapes and the pastels and all that was because of that wanting to enjoy that material—the touch, the smell, all of it—which you can't do with the resin so much. But going back to the finger stuff, that was a quality that I think is maybe one of the first times that that as an aesthetic surfaced with such predominance.

MR. STIEBER: You mean, art historically.

MR. ALEXANDER: Art historically, yeah. I'm not sure—I mean, I—this is the first time I'm really thinking about it. Is there a precedence? I'm sure there is, but I think for different reasons. And I think this stuff was all still a reaction against AE [Abstract Expressionism]—that is that surface, you know, was still being affected by what preceded it. And you respond against it, you know.

MR. STIEBER: Fascinating. Well, thank you.

MR. ALEXANDER: Well, okay. I mean, is that it? [They laugh.]

MR. STIEBER: I think we have a good five-hour—[they laugh]—interview considering the last bit too, the last portion as well.

MR. ALEXANDER: It was a lot of stuff.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]