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Oral history interview with Hermine Ford, 2010 Feb. 18-19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Hermine Ford on February 18 and 19, 2010. The interview took place at the artist's home and studio in New York, New York, and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

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

Interview

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Hermine Ford at 81 Leonard Street in Manhattan [New York City] on February 18, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

Hermine, I wanted to start with your family and back beyond - your father, your grandparents, whatever you know about your family and especially those people who you knew, met.

HERMINE FORD: Right. My father was born in Poland, a part of Poland that was sometimes in Russia and sometimes in Poland, and he immigrated to New York - he was born in 1900 and he immigrated to New York in 1913 with his mother and his sister.

MS. RICHARDS: And your father's name?

MS. FORD: And my father is the painter Jack Tworkov. They had been preceded -

MS. RICHARDS: And your mother's name? I'm sorry.

MS. FORD: Rachel. Her maiden name was Wolodarfsky.

MS. RICHARDS: W-O-L-O?

MS. FORD: W-O-L-O-D-A-R-F-S-K-Y. There's always been some question about the spelling of that name but that's more or less it. Records were extremely vague in those early years and we don't know exactly what my father's birth date was and things like that, the spelling of my mother's maiden name has varied a little bit over the years and that's an immigrant, that's part of having grown up with parents who are basically immigrants.

Even though my mother was born in New York City, her family had all immigrated, her parents, and so she grew up - I mean, both of them grew up in an immigrant environment in New York City and that very much flavored my own.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know what your grandparents' occupations were?

MS. FORD: I know that my father's father, I started to say earlier, he had come to New York earlier than my grandmother and my father and his full sister. He had a family of almost grown children by a previous marriage. He became a widower and was left with a whole bunch of children and then -

MS. RICHARDS: What was his name?

MS. FORD: And his name was - I think his first name was Herman. But it was Tworkofsky. And that's another thing about my whole entire family and partly because of being immigrants and other reasons that a lot of us have changed our names many times.

My father was Yankel which became - which was Jacob in English. But when they came to Ellis Island [NY], everything was changed and shortened and Americanized, their idea of what Americanized was. So he became Jack legally on his immigration papers.

And anyway, they came and they joined my grandfather, who was a tailor, and he had set up a little tailor shop on - I think on Rivington Street. Anyway, they were in the Lower East Side [New York City]. They had several different locations: Rivington Street, Eldridge Street, and his shop was in the front. It was a store and the family, the entire whole family lived in the back of the store. I don't know, I mean, there were a lot of brothers and sisters. So there were a lot of them -

MS. RICHARDS: Jack had a lot of brothers and sisters?

MS. FORD: Yeah, half-brothers and sisters from his father's first marriage and then his mother and his one full sister, who's the painter Janice Biala, and they - so that's how they started out in America.

When they came to Ellis Island, and I never understood this, I only understood this toward the end of my aunt's life. When they came to Ellis Island, they changed their name to Bernstein and I always thought this was hilarious. I assumed -

MS. RICHARDS: You mean Rachel?

MS. FORD: No, no this is my father's family still, the Tworkofsky's. They came to Ellis Island and they changed - they became Bernstein. My grandmother's name, as I knew her my whole life, was Esther Bernstein and I never questioned it when I was a child. But when I -

MS. RICHARDS: Jack's mother?

MS. FORD: Jack's mother, and I just as a young adult, I just very lazily kind of assumed that it was so somewhat hilarious that - I mean, to me I just assumed that they didn't want to have a Jewish name so they changed it from Tworkofsky to Bernstein. That was their idea of - but I found out - and I thought that was weird.

But I found out from my aunt at the end of her life that the reason why it was changed - and nobody had ever bothered to explain any of this to us - is because to come to America, they were being sponsored by some distant cousin whose name was Bernstein and in order to smooth that so they wouldn't have - so their entry into the United States would be smooth, they all changed their names and my father and his sister Biala their first years in America, their last names were Bernstein.

But when they - they both became artists and interested in art and kind of rebels when they were very, very young, when they were still adolescents and one of the first things they did was to change their names back to Tworkov, from Tworkofsky to Tworkov. So the two of them became Tworkovs.

MS. RICHARDS: Their father in the meantime was still Tworkofsky?

MS. FORD: No, he was Bernstein. They were all Bernstein. Isn't that the weirdest thing and you know -

MS. RICHARDS: I thought since his father had already been here, he wouldn't have to do that, but okay.

MS. FORD: No, because Esther -

MS. RICHARDS: But in order for your kids to have that name, you'd have to have that name.

MS. FORD: Yeah, and you know what, there's a lot of details about this that I don't know because nobody - it was like people - you know, they came to America way before World War II. But they sort of had a survivor's thing. They didn't want to talk about any of this too much, the way war veterans don't. It was such an upheaval that they didn't want to look back too much on any of this.

But my grandmother's name was Bernstein. Nobody - by that time, nobody in my life's name was Bernstein. My father's name wasn't Bernstein. Biala changed her name a million times. I mean, Biala, she just chose that for her name and then they - because that was the name of the village they were born in in Poland. So when she became a painter, she didn't want to have my father's name.

They were both two young painters. So she didn't want to have the same name as him. So she chose the name Biala for herself and of course I've changed my name a few times too or chosen different names to use because I was born Hermine Ford Tworkov.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did Ford come from?

MS. FORD: Ford came from the fact that Biala was married to Ford Madox Ford the last 12 years of his life, extremely happily married. I think it was by far - it was Ford's only happy marriage because he had been unhappily married many times and they had a wonderful 12 years together.

He was I think 33 years older than she was, 30 years older than she was and he died basically a pauper. I mean, poverty is a very big theme in the early part of all of our lives and he died just - in France, just as World War II was breaking out, the summer I was born 1939.

MS. RICHARDS: What was the exact birth date of - your birthday?

MS. FORD: July 13, 1939, so I was going to be named Janice, for Janice Biala, but when Ford died, it all got switched around. I don't remember exactly what. But anyway, I was given Ford's name for my middle name, Hermine Ford Tworkov, and when I - it took me - we'll come to this later but I was a very slow bloomer as a professional artist, although I always made art.

But it took me a long time to accept the fact that I really, really was going to go out in the world as an artist. I was very slow to do that and when I did, I was already married to the painter Bob Moskowitz. But I didn't want to have Tworkov. I mean, I had identity issues. I didn't want to have Tworkov. I didn't want to have Moskowitz and I didn't want to make up a name.

So I had this other name Ford. So that's the name that I chose and, you know, I've discovered over the years, there's people have all kinds of ways of explaining to themselves why I have that name.

Some people assume that it was an early marriage name and then much to my horror, not so long ago somebody actually said to me, oh, I always thought you changed your name because you didn't want to have a Jewish name, which was extremely offensive to me.

But also, it was very funny because it repeated a false idea that I myself had about my early ancestors. I went through life thinking they had done that, even though it was ridiculous to think that Bernstein would not be thought of as a Jewish name. [Laughs.] So names are like - anyway, that's my father's side of the family. They settled on the Lower East Side.

My mother was born - I don't know where her mother came from. My mother came from an extremely, tragically dysfunctional family and her - I know that my grandfather - I think they were married here, but I'm not sure.

He came from Odessa and probably his wife did also, my mother's mother, and they came to New York and there was an - his sisters were here. There was some family and my great-grandfather, I knew when I was small.

But my mother's mother was mentally ill and spent years in insane asylums and I never met her.

MS. RICHARDS: In New York?

MS. FORD: In New York. I never met her. My mother was unbelievably ashamed of this and was terrified that somehow this would rub off on my sister and I. My mother was an extremely intelligent, very sophisticated person. But she had these - her fears were so great that she knew that insanity - actually now of course, it's sort of shifted a little bit more the other way, where there may be some genetic component.

But in her day, the sophisticated idea was that you could not inherit insanity. It was all Freudian and it was all environment. There was no nature component to the nurture part. So she kept her mother's history a secret from us. That was a big secret that was in my family, my sister and I. I mean, this was the kind of thing I might decide I - water under the bridge.

MS. RICHARDS: Did your mother have siblings?

MS. FORD: No, I mean, yes, that was another sad part of the story. She had one sister who also had a terrible battle with mental illness and she had a daughter and she battled mental illness. So I have that whole - and my father and my mother were very, very good to these people and it actually was my father who insisted and helped my mother to help take care of them.

I think that my mother, on her own, would not have been able to really deal with this. But my father took them in many times when they were - I mean, my mother's sister lived with us for a while and I hadn't thought about this in a long time, but that whole situation with my mother's sister and my cousin - my sister and I have one first cousin. I have a very tiny family and a lot of family members never had any children.

So my sister and I had one first cousin and that was this young woman who is now disappeared. I doubt if she's still alive. But it's a terrible story.

So we had - I mean, the net effect of all of this is that although my parents very early on moved into what would seem to be the headiest and in some ways most glamorous, cutting edge, avant-garde, exciting, interesting, sophisticated circles in American art, they weren't alone in this. Many people had the same - but they had this very dark side to their beginnings and their family's situation so that they still needed to have contact with that, they still had to take care of. So that was -

MS. RICHARDS: What were your mother's interests, besides taking care of you and your sister? Did she have any artistic -

MS. FORD: No, if she had been born later, she would have either been a writer or she would have been a really

brilliant literary editor or agent. She was a fantastic reader and to this day - she's been dead many years - people who knew her miss her reading recommendations. I mean, and she discovered writers.

Nobody I know had ever read Jean Reece until my mother picked her up on a bookstall on Fourth Avenue and said, "This is a fabulous" - I mean, but there are many examples of that and through her whole life, young writers came to her with their manuscripts for her criticism, for help she was - and so that was her great -

MS. RICHARDS: Did your grandfather continue to be a tailor?

MS. FORD: He did, but he died before I was born. I never knew him. He was - and also I don't know how old he was when he died. But yes, he continued to be a tailor and then my grandmother, my father's mother, she lived until I was a teenager. So I have a lot of memories of her, although they're fraught. They're not - I mean, first of all, she remained - she never learned English.

My father always said some immigrants never succeed as Americans. They just don't make it. They just don't survive the immigration and on both sides of my family I have many examples of that. They were just uprooted and never recovered from it and my grandmother never learned English. So I never had a conversation with her and even though -

MS. RICHARDS: This is?

MS. FORD: My father's mother.

MS. RICHARDS: What was her name?

MS. FORD: Esther.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh yes, Esther Bernstein.

MS. FORD: Esther Bernstein.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FORD: It's amazing that I didn't question that very much when I was growing up.

MS. RICHARDS: So she just spoke Yiddish?

MS. FORD: She just spoke Yiddish and she - but the times we were taken to visit her, she live in a rooming house in Coney Island [NY], which at that time was a completely Jewish neighborhood, poor Jewish neighborhood. Even though her stepchildren, who had become very prosperous very quickly in New York, my father's half-brothers. They went into business. They were the classic American success story.

MS. RICHARDS: Were their names Tworkov?

MS. FORD: And their names were - well, they were Bernsteins. The ones I knew were Ferbers because the one that my - I know this is confusing. I don't know how you can follow this, Judith. But the older half-siblings of my father were mostly boys and they were all Bernsteins. But I barely knew them.

They came to - as soon as they grew up, they dispersed. And a lot of them went to South Africa and became Jewish diamond merchants and my father had very, very little contact with them. They just -

But the girl, the sister, the half-sister, Celia, she really took care of my father and my aunt a lot. She was - helped my grandmother and she was a very, very warm person and she married a man called Bernard Ferber, who was a really wonderful person and he owned a Singer sewing machine shop and they were very prosperous, especially relative to us. They were extremely - and my grandmother could have gone to live with them.

They begged her to come and they had a very, very nice house out near Sheepshead's Bay [NY], you know, with a garden and two kitchens, a kosher kitchen and a regular kitchen. It was - she would have been extremely well cared for and comfortable there. But no, she stayed in this rooming house and we used to go and visit her. My father would take us. It was tense. It was sad for my father, you know?

It was such a - and my grandmother very rarely came to our house. We lived on East 23rd Street, mostly because my parents didn't keep kosher. She felt she couldn't eat in our house. But she used to show up unannounced.

She just would get on the subway and ride an hour. In those days it was even more than an hour, the train ride from Coney Island, and she would show up with a really - I remember this, a very wrinkled paper shopping bag

that she had used for 20 years.

It was like her skin, the same thing, and in that shopping bag would be a pot and a dish and a spoon and a boiled egg. I remember she would - and so she could have lunch, feed herself lunch because she wouldn't eat in my mother's kitchen. It was just crazy, you know. It was interesting but there was a lot of sadness around all this, this estrangement.

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you live when you were born?

MS. FORD: When I first was born, my parents lived in a loft on West 22nd Street and their neighbors were -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the address?

MS. FORD: I know the building. I think I do have the address somewhere but I don't know it by heart. But we didn't stay there very long. I mean, we stayed there up until the time my sister was born and -

MS. RICHARDS: Your sister's name?

MS. FORD: Helen, Helen Tworkov.

They shared a loft with another couple. Everybody was poor and then in the loft, in another loft in that same building, it was a small loft on West 22nd Street, Elaine de Kooning at that time lived with Milton Resnick and then it was there I think that she first met Bill [Willem]. They all met de Kooning at that time and they also - anyway, I think that the Burckhardts were right around the corner.

But then when my sister - when my mother was expecting my sister, they moved and they moved into an apartment on East 23rd Street, a kind of - it was basically a railroad flat but it was a step up from a tenement.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know, I didn't ask you how your parents met.

MS. FORD: Oh, that's a story Judith. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: And your mother was born here you said?

MS. FORD: Here, she was born - I think she was born in the Bronx [NY]. There was a Jewish neighborhood up in the Bronx which is sort of Italian now or it was a mix in those days and - or maybe they were on the Lower East Side and they moved to the Bronx when she was very young and when I was growing up, whatever relatives she had, and there were some that I liked actually, they were all up there in the Bronx.

My mother was a bright student and for high school she was sent to George Washington School for Girls, which is still there. It's not a girl's school anymore, on Irving Place, and at that time it was a school for bright girls. So she went there.

MS. RICHARDS: Isn't it the Washington Irving School or the George Washington?

MS. FORD: No.

MS. RICHARDS: On Irving Place? George Washington?

MS. FORD: No, you're right, you're right, Washington Irving, and so she was there and she had a very smart-alecky and smart set of girls around her and one of them started dating and later married John Garfield. One was Arshile Gorky's girlfriend and they were all Leftists and my mother went to study Russian.

That was the thing to do in those days, was to study Russian in case you ever decided to go to the Soviet Union and fight for Communism, and my father was in that Russian class and he was 17 years older than she was. [Laughs.]

She was 16 when she met him and he had already been married twice though he never had children. And they remained married for the rest of their lives.

MS. RICHARDS: So then picking up when you were small, you moved to West 22nd - or East 23rd?

MS. FORD: East 23rd. We moved from West 22nd to East 23rd Street and they stayed in that apartment for 27 years.

MS. RICHARDS: So you went to school in that area? Where did you go to school?

MS. FORD: So I first of all - I mean, my mother always worked. My mother had to work and so I went to daycare

center at the Church of All Nations neighborhood house which was on Houston Street and Second Avenue, which was a fabulous - it was a settlement house and it was fabulous and it was a home away from home for all of us and my mother eventually ended up teaching nursery school there. I mean, we had -

MS. RICHARDS: It was a Jewish run - the settlement house was part of the -

MS. FORD: No, that was Educational Alliance.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, right.

MS. FORD: In fact, on the contrary it was totally ecumenical and non-sectarian but it was run by Methodists. It was an extraordinary place, just extraordinary. The staff was incredible. I remember every single one of them. The kids were phenomenal, so dynamic. Every language on the face of the earth was spoken there. Of course, they taught a lot of English classes.

The neighborhood originally when I - of course it was close to where my father's family - my father had grown up, you know. But it was Polish and Ukrainian and Lithuanian and of course there's still remnants of that in Second Avenue and then at a certain point, Puerto Ricans, when Puerto Ricans starting to immigrate to New York, it became - it changed over. But that's the whole history of the Lower East Side, which is not my story to tell, [laughs] but it's a great story.

So I went to nursery school there and then when I started grade school, I went there I think in an after school program and I went there to summer school program, which I loved. I had a wonderful time there.

And then very significantly for me they had several different kinds of summer camps that they used to send kids to and most of them were like - they were well-known - I can't think of the organization -

MS. RICHARDS: Children's Aid Society?

MS. FORD: It wasn't Children's Aid. It was a camp program. Oh, yes, the Herald Tribune Air Camps.

Anyway, I was sent to one of those for a couple of weeks. It was horrible. But then there was a very, very special camp that very selected kids were sent to if they qualified, whatever that meant, and that was a camp that was run by Life magazine.

It was called Life Camp and I started going there for a month every summer and that was a very amazing place and it turned out to be very significant for me because it was unlike any other camp.

It was very, very particular. We were divided into small groups of girls with two counselors and a junior counselor and we lived - we camped in the woods for a month and we didn't have any organized activities. I mean, we were busy but we made up our own stuff to do and it was really about nature. It was -

MS. RICHARDS: What was the connection with Life magazine then?

MS. FORD: Life magazine sponsored this camp. It was a boy's camp and a girl's camp for underprivileged children.

MS. RICHARDS: Where was it?

MS. FORD: It was in Port Jervis, New York, down by the Delaware Water Gap [National Recreational Area] is and in those days it was beautiful, beautiful, wooded and the farms and I mean, I could talk for an hour about the things that I learned and did there. But we used to go on a vagabond for three days.

One time they had these covered wagons. One whole summer we lived in covered wagons that they had gotten from the Spanish Civil War left over, and we went on a three day trip down country roads in covered wagons with horses hitched up, camped every night, cooked food over and open fire. I learned how to gather tinder and firewood. I could chop wood. I once won a little contest, who could gather wood, start a fire, and boil a can of water the fastest.

So I won't go on about that, except that I do feel that my decision to lead my family up to Cape Breton [Nova Scotia, Canada] for the summers and my very, very keen response to living in a natural environment has informed my life and my work and that was my first exposure to it. I mean, we learned to identify birds. I remember standing in the woods, these little girls listening to a hermit thrush sing. I just lived - I couldn't wait all year to go there.

MS. RICHARDS: How many years did you go?

MS. FORD: I went for - let's see. I know that the summer I turned 13 I did not go. So I went from 12 - I'm counting backwards, 12, 11, 10, nine, maybe from nine to 12, for four years. This is really bizarre Judith. The reason why I didn't go my thirteenth year is because - no, I'm sorry. I did go my thirteenth year. That was my last year.

I went in August. August was when I always went. But I went that summer that I turned 13 in July. We all went to Black Mountain College [Asheville, NC] for my father to teach there and that was also like a major experience for me. For the first time, I actually started listening to what grownups were talking about around me and I started to read poetry and it was all very - and then at the end of that month at Black Mountain, I went back to Life Camp and I don't remember not having a great time.

But I think I kind of knew that something had come to an end and then the next year my father was able to bring us to Cape Cod for a month and I was such a goody-goody. I remember writing a letter to Ms. Burdick, who was the director of the Church of All Nations, saying, dear Ms. Burdick, "I'm very fortunate in that we're going to Cape Cod [MA] for a month and I think somebody else should have my place at Life Camp," [laughs] because I could not tell you the children that came from orphanages.

But they were specially picked because they were highly functional despite everything and so it was an astounding experience.

MS. RICHARDS: So through elementary school, which was -

MS. FORD: First grade, I went - for first, second, and third grade I went to a little progressive left-wing private school called the Downtown Community School, which was owned and run by friends of my father's, political friends, because during that period of time my father and my mother both were very active politically on the left.

So I think I must have had some fabulous scholarship or something to go there and it was wonderful. It was terrific and I loved it and I was off to a great start but when it was time for my sister to start first grade, my parents couldn't afford to send both of us to the Downtown.

So we both went to the local public school and that was horrible for me and it started a pattern throughout my whole life where I went sort of back and forth between private school and public school, depending on changing circumstances.

And in every case, my public school experience was really horrible for me. I mean, the schools in that part of Manhattan were so tough and so scary and so deprived. The teachers were almost psychotically cruel.

I graduated from the sixth grade from P.S. 50 on East 19th Street and then for one year I went to the junior high further down on the Lower East Side to a very, very tough junior high school that was patrolled by police, the police department.

You couldn't go into the bathroom by yourself. I don't think I even went to the bathroom once that whole year at school and I used to get beaten up on the way home by tough girls who thought I was weird. It was - so long story short, I went back to the Downtown Community School for eighth grade and then from there I went to Dalton and the reason why I went to Dalton - and I didn't want to go to Dalton. It was terrifying for me to go there.

But by that time, my father was beginning to have his very first success with his work and he had a patron. His first patron, the first wealthy person that began to buy pictures from him was Alexander Bing and that was Bing & Bing and Company, big Upper East Side [New York City] realtors. Every other Fifth Avenue apartment building was Bing & Bing

And his children had all gone to Dalton and he was a trustee and he arranged for me to have the first scholarship ever at Dalton, based on absolutely nothing, based on the fact that he said that my father was great [laughs] because I was completely unprepared to do the schoolwork that I had to do at Dalton.

I mean, I could read. I had math problems. I could read and I could write but I couldn't do anything analytical. I mean, you know, I struggled with math. I struggled with biology, like foreign languages, I had to take Latin for two years. I loved the idea of taking Latin. I was totally into the idea of it but I couldn't organize. But it improved. By the time I left Dalton, I actually ended up getting a very good education.

But I was very miserable there socially. I didn't have a social life through the school. I couldn't. I couldn't afford to, for one thing, and of course the minute I got up there, I became a reverse snob, instantly, hated not only all my classmates but all their prep school boyfriends and their prep school dances and their Park Avenue dancing social clubs and Jewish coming out parties. I just, you know - of course I couldn't do it anyway, but-

MS. RICHARDS: Did you find one ally?

MS. FORD: I did. I had three. I had three friends whose houses we went back and forth into and two out of the three of them were especially dear to me and of course typically, we all got through school that way, and we ended up being successful Dalton students.

By the time we graduated, between the four of us, we were editor of the yearbook, editor of the literary magazine, president of the drama club, and so it sort of turned out all right. But from there, I went to Antioch College [Yellow Springs, OH].

MS. RICHARDS: In high school, what was your interest in art and what were you thinking about in terms of your father being an artist and all the people that you met and did that make you want to not do that because -

MS. FORD: Absolutely, oh yeah, that's very important actually. Yeah, I mean first of all, the summer - I went to Black Mountain the summer before I started Dalton. Did I say that already?

MS. RICHARDS: When you were 13?

MS. FORD: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FORD: The summer in Black Mountain completely altered my life because first of all I started actually listening. I started reading William Carlos Williams and T.S. Eliot and I started listening to all the talk about painting and poetry and another thing that was very, very important for me is that Merce Cunningham and John Cage were there that summer and I fell in love with them and I actually studied with Merce all the years I was at Dalton.

Of course, nobody at Dalton had ever heard of them. Well, nobody anywhere had ever heard of them. I also liked jazz. My father's Black Mountain students were about nine years older than me and I was totally naïve.

But there was kind of a frisson going on and they used to sometimes come and wait for me on 89th Street to get out of school and they'd be like - at one time Franz Kline and Fee [Fielding] Dawson, who had been up drinking all night -

MS. RICHARDS: Sorry, and who?

MS. FORD: Fee Dawson, who had been a student, he was - you know the Black Mountain poets - and he was one of the those and he was very close to Franz and they were - when Fee came to New York, they were great drinking buddies and this one time they had been up all night. They looked like hell. They were waiting outside Dalton, waiting for me to come out of school in my blue smock, my blue Dalton smock and somebody saw them there and said what are you doing. They said, "We're waiting for Hermine to walk out." And it was like - [laughs] everybody was upset, including my father. But he wasn't as upset as the school authorities were.

Anyway, so I - meanwhile, they, my high school girl classmates, they went to these dances. They went - shopped at Best & Company. I mean, I was wearing black stockings, long dangly earrings. They were shopping at Best & Company and going to dances where they would hire the Lester Lanin Band and I was like - [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: And you were a Beatnik?

MS. FORD: And I was a Beatnik. So that was that.

MS. RICHARDS: What were - in school, you went to museums, you looked at art beyond just what was in your family orbit.

MS. FORD: Absolutely, absolutely.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you drawn to a particular kind of work?

MS. FORD: Well, first of all, to answer another question that you had asked me recently, I did a lot - I painted a lot at Dalton and I had a wonderful art teacher who was very, very sympathetic and a sophisticated -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the name of that teacher?

MS. FORD: His name is Aaron Kurzon.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell Kurzon?

MS. FORD: A-A-R-O-N, Aaron, K-U-R-Z-O-N, and his assistant, who was a recent Dalton graduate, was Sue [Susan]

Weil - who had married Bob [Robert] Rauschenberg and had a child and then the marriage dissolved very quickly- and while I was a student at Dalton, I started babysitting for Sue and her son Christopher.

And of course she was an immensely sophisticated person and the other - the only other faculty member that I could - that I loved at Dalton was a very, very gifted woman who taught drama and we did spectacular, very avant-garde drama at Dalton.

That kind of pulled me through. So I did a lot of creative writing and a lot of painting and a lot of drama. We did - we used to do e e [Edward Estlin] cummings plays. We could do whatever we wanted if we had a proposal. I was like a big e e cummings fan when I was in high school and plus I was dancing with Merce Cunningham and John Cage was playing the piano for us.

So I had a whole other life and it's interesting because I felt when I was at Dalton so on the outside and years and years and years later I occasionally would bump into somebody who knew me from Dalton and they very nicely would kind of let me know that they knew what my life was really and that they were very intrigued by it.

But they had no way themselves of bridging the gap at that point. In other words, I felt more isolated than I really actually was in some way. There was some unspoken thing. But there was no way of communicating. They were still locked into their thing.

I was still locked into mine and I thought they knew nothing about me and also had no interest or even worse, had some kind of contempt or something, I didn't look right. But it was actually not the way I thought it was, apparently, in some cases anyway.

MS. RICHARDS: So you did paint. You took art classes and you went to museums.

MS. FORD: Oh yeah, I went to museums. I grew up - my father took me to museums starting from when I was very, very young and I knew when I was in high school - I knew from the time I was 13 really that I was in the middle of something really important. I knew it because everybody around me was so excited and I just knew and I was very turned on by it. It was very important for me as well.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you picture yourself being part of that when you grew up, being an artist?

MS. FORD: No, that - no, that's where my own private life story kicks in because, no. In fact, just because of that, what I've just described to you, I had a very difficult time picturing myself as an adult in any kind of a world.

I don't know how I can explain it better. I was so admirous of all the adults around me, I was so - and I was sort of - in a way I was kind of coddled as this kind of precocious - because most of those people, like the Black Mountain students, they came from extremely conventional households.

They had to fight like hell to get themselves to a place like Black Mountain and here I was just like having it all served up to me on a silver platter and it took me a long time to own that completely for myself because it had just been handed to me.

So no, I mean, even the dancing, as much as I loved doing it, I never totally could picture myself being in Merce's kind of company, for instance. I'm not saying I could have been but I never even had the fantasy really that I would be. I was very happy to work in the studio with him, but no, and the same thing with painting. Really I was - it was very easy for me to impress my teachers and I didn't trust that.

Fortunately, I was smart enough to know that I would have to walk through fire a little bit more than that and it took me a very long time to do that.

MS. RICHARDS: Did your Aunt Janice, was she a part of your life at that point?

MS. FORD: Yeah, she was, when she was around. They - after Ford died, she just by the skin of her teeth got herself to America by practically the last boat and she then married a wonderful man who was my uncle growing up. He also has many names.

He was a cartoonist for The New Yorker for many years and his name was Alain, A-L-A-I-N. But he was also a painter and for painting he used his actual real name. I don't know where Alain came from. Maybe it was a middle name too. But Daniel Brustlein is his name as a painter and he was a wonderful painter.

But in those early years, they - the McCarran Act was in effect. It was in the '50s, during the McCarthy Era and because they were both naturalized American citizens, they couldn't stay out of the country for more than two years at a time. So they went back and forth. My whole childhood was marked by the comings and goings of them.

They came to New York for two years and they went back to Paris for two years and they came to New York and my mother was always in charge of finding an apartment for them when they were coming back. My poor mother, [laughs] she was in charge of everything.

Anyway, and yeah, it was pretty grand when they were here. But, I mean, Helen and I were kind of terrified of her when we were little. She was tough.

MS. RICHARDS: Judgmental?

MS. FORD: Yes, yes, she was - I have to say, I mean we ended up adoring her as we grew up and she was the last survivor of the four of them and Helen and I were completely devoted to her. But yeah, she didn't have children of her own. So she kind of appropriated us and she was so hypocritical in her attitude toward - she used to yell at us that we were sitting with our knees too far apart and she would say, "Young girls in Paris never sit like that."

In the meantime, I never saw her in a dress practically her whole life and she was a tomboy. She was tough as nails. She had to be to be a painter in those days. She had to be, you know. chain-smoking and swearing and cursing and sitting anyway she wanted. It was just ridiculous and she would kind of lash out at us and say, "You should never wear that color."

One time she said to me, "You should never wear bangs. Your forehead is your best feature." Now, I mean a teenage girl does not want to hear that. I don't know what a teenage girl wants to hear but it's certainly not that [laughs], your forehead is your best feature. So yeah, we were kind of terrified of her but we were very, very fond of her and she used to bring us wonderful presents from Paris and we had French perfume starting from the time we were 13 and little French sweaters.

MS. RICHARDS: You mentioned that you went to Provincetown [MA] one summer. Did you continue going to Provincetown each summer?

MS. FORD: Yeah, after we started to go, we did. My father had a very early association with Provincetown and actually lived there for several winters and married there when he was young and then -

MS. RICHARDS: Before he was married to your mother.

MS. FORD: Yeah, yeah right, before he was married to my mother. But he had some of his closest friends were there not only in the summertime. I mean, for instance he originally went to Provincetown with his sister to - she went to Provincetown to study with Edwin Dickinson and he kind of followed her there.

They were in their 20s. She must have still been 18 or 19. He was in his 20s and the Dickinson's lived year round in Provincetown for many years before they were able to come to New York in the wintertime.

So he had very close friends there. But after those early years, after his marriage there and so on, he came back to New York and you know, he had started to have children and the war, we never left the city, I mean never made - I mean, that's why the Church of All Nations was so important to me growing up because that was the only way. We rarely left the city in the summertime until that first summer in Wellfeet and how that happened, I know exactly how that happened.

He was offered a teaching job at the University of Indiana in the summer program at Bloomington and because of that income from that teaching job the Dickinson's actually found a tiny little cottage on the harbor for us to rent.

None of this is there anymore - for my mother and my sister and I to spend the summer in and then he was going to join us, which he did after his teaching stint was over and that's the first summer that my sister and I ever went to Cape Cod and it was the first time in many years that either of my parents had been there.

And then for the next few summers, they would rent a little something and we would go and I'm telling you, it was extremely primitive the way we lived the first few summers.

[END CD 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Hermine Ford at 81 Leonard Street in New York City on February 18, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

MS. FORD: Provincetown we were talking about, yeah. So yeah, from the time I was 14, we started to spend - I think we just first went for one month. Let me turn this - it's fine - and in little shacky places or one time we had a sort of a little bungalow, like a little one room bungalow or two rooms with a screened in porch.

I slept on the porch at night and my father worked on the porch during the day. I mean, that's sort of how we - we had many little arrangements like that.

And then finally - and those were my high school years, most of them. Most of my high school years were like that and I had summer jobs in Provincetown right away. I mean, I had jobs right away, as soon as I could. I mean that first babysitting job for Sue Weil and I always had - I always was because my parents had very little money. So I worked in restaurants in Provincetown.

I also got involved in a theater company one summer there that later became the Performance Garage which is now the Worcester Group and that's a big story because my son [Erik Moskowitz] got involved with them, separate from me, just as a coincidence. Anyway, that's a whole other story.

So those were really fantastic years in the summer in Provincetown and then the same man, Alexander Bing, who had arranged for us to have scholarships at Dalton, gave my father his inheritance, what he had designated in his will, which was $10,000 and with that $10,000 my parents bought, cash down, complete, what became their house in Provincetown at 30 Commercial Street and it was a wonderful, wonderful house and my father -

And it was a very, very old house, set back on a beautiful lawn right across from the bay with a little right-of-way down to the beach and he built a beautiful studio for himself in the back of that house and that house was their pride and joy. I mean, that was the culmination of his Americanization, [laughs] to own this plot of land in America.

I mean, I think that Jews couldn't own any land in Europe. His childhood in Poland was more bizarre than it even should have been because his father was a tailor for the tsar's Cossacks. So they lived in the gentile part of town. They lived near the barracks. So they didn't even live in a Jewish neighborhood. So they could play with the neighborhood children in the street but they couldn't go inside each other's homes.

I don't know how they survived it. I mean, well, they didn't entirely psychologically. But when they bought that house in Provincetown, my father was just over the moon and he tended it, you know. He just - he was devoted to every blade of grass. So that was very thrilling and then from then on, of course I went off to college very soon after that.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you decide to go to Antioch?

MS. FORD: This was the last fantastically great thing in my growing up that my father did for me because being at Dalton, my best friend wanted me to go to Radcliffe with her and I kept saying to her, first of all I don't want to go to Radcliffe, I'm not a scholar, and second of all, I could never get in. I could never get in. My scores wouldn't have been high enough. I mean, I had very high scores in some things and very low scores in everything else.

So I wanted to go to the most comfortable thing. I wanted to go to either Bennington [College, Bennington, VT] or Sarah Lawrence [College, Bronxville, NY] and my father said, "I really think that's a big mistake, Hermine. You've already gone to a fancy girl's school." Dalton at that time was just girls.

He said, "You're going to do the same thing again and it's going to be all artsy-fartsy and you should go out to some part of the country you've never been to and have a completely different experience." And he had a very, very dear friend from his old Greenwich Village days who had left her farm and her husband and her children to run away to Greenwich Village when she was young, a fabulous person, and she then went back to her farms.

She was a prosperous farmer in Southern Ohio, and she said, "I think you should send Hermine to Antioch. It's the most wonderful place because that was her cultural haven" and she said, "They have a fabulous Shakespeare under the Stars festival in the summertime," blah, blah, and I was very attracted to Antioch because it had a work-study program. So you were only on campus for three months at a time and then you went off.

You could go anywhere in the country and I was very drawn to that. I thought I might really get through college if I didn't have to study for nine months of the year straight through and that's what I did and I was deliriously happy there and also it was coed and I just had a fabulous - my father was really, really right about that.

After that, and he was very old-fashioned. He considered - when I left for college, he considered I was grown up. He didn't continue to try to give me advice. I mean, he was - I mean, he was extremely attentive and involved with us, but he didn't remain parental like that forever. I mean, that's what I remember. That was the last major parental thing he did, was advice for college and he was terrific.

I mean, it was the best advice he could have ever given me.

MS. RICHARDS: When you went there, you declared a major. What was it or what did you imagine it would be?

MS. FORD: Well, I put that off - okay, one of the reasons why I ended up going to Antioch, unlike Bennington and Sarah Lawrence, I knew perfectly well that they had almost no art department to speak of and I didn't care. I wasn't going to study art. That was the whole idea.

So I got out there. I didn't have to declare. I think I had two years before I had to declare a major and I took a lot of - I took a math class, which was fantastic because I'd had so much trouble with math in high school and I took philosophy and I took anthropology and it was fabulous and I had great jobs all over the country. Really, I had the most wonderful job experiences.

And then the time was coming when I had to pick a major and meanwhile, when I had time off from Antioch, like I remember one time I was in Provincetown for a month or so in the summer. What was I doing? I was painting, so.

MS. RICHARDS: What did those paintings look like?

MS. FORD: Well, I have one still. I made a self-portrait of myself one summer. It's still in this little house that I have up there, which is not the house that my parents lived in.

I remember years later, Jennifer Bartlett came to visit my parents in Provincetown because she had been a student of my dad's at Yale [University, New Haven, CT]. In fact, she rented the upstairs studio from them and that's how I became friends with Jennifer and she saw that painting. I won't ever forget that she said - and it's this big and it was just my face.

MS. RICHARDS: Like 10 inches square.

MS. FORD: Yeah, and she said, "You look very anxious," and I was offended and I thought about it long and hard and I knew she was right. I did look very anxious. But anyway, it's pretty good. It's a pretty good painting and anyway, long story short, I decided, okay, I will major in painting.

But I couldn't do it at Antioch. I mean, I had started to take some painting classes there and I had a very nice painting teacher, a very nice, intelligent man, and I remember setting up these big pieces of paper outdoors. I had built a big easel and these giant pieces of paper. I was making these big abstract expressionist paintings and he was floored and he knew who I was. He knew where I came from.

It was like a little uncomfortable for me because he wanted me to tell him what Franz Kline was really like and I just - and also he thought my work was like genius and I knew it wasn't. I knew that I could - that I had learned this style like the way most children learn to tie their shoes.

MS. RICHARDS: Absorbed it.

MS. FORD: You know, and that I wasn't - so anyway, what I did was I went to Yale for a year as a special student and Antioch was so open to this. I went to them and I said, "I want to major in art." I can't avoid it. I think this is really - I can't - I think - I said, "Somehow I can't avoid it and I think I should do this but I don't want to do it here. I can't really do it here. I think I could go to Yale for a year." This is before my father was the head of the department. I don't know how I thought I could do that.

MS. RICHARDS: What was it about Yale? Certain teachers that attracted you?

MS. FORD: You know what, you know that might have been my father's idea too, come to think of it because I think he had already, had some contact with them or maybe had gone up there as a visitor.

So my father - you know, the same reason that he insisted that I go to Dalton, I didn't want to, I wanted to go to the High School of Music & Art [NY] with my girlfriends.

But he had this - it was like an American dream, like my daughter's going to go to Dalton and then, okay, Antioch fine, but then Yale. [Laughs.] Anyway, so I did. I went to Yale for a year as a special undergraduate student.

I got all my credits that I needed for my Antioch major. They wanted me to stay at Yale. They invited me to stay and get my - what then would have been B.F.A [Bachelor of Fine Arts] and then an M.F.A. [Master of Fine Arts] and, you know, Yale wasn't that interesting when I was there.

MS. RICHARDS: Who did you study with?

MS. FORD: Well, I studied with all of [Josef] Albers' sycophantic little drones who were left over. I mean, Albers

was no longer there but his students were basically teaching his color class, his drawing class, two design classes, studio design class and I hated them.

MS. RICHARDS: Anybody who'd be known, I mean, if you said their names?

MS. FORD: Well, Sy Silman, I don't know, Sy Silman wrote a famous color theory book. In fact, he used a reproduction - he used a work I made in his color class as part of - I forgot about that. [Laughs.] I mean, he used his student's work to illustrate how he taught Albers's color class. He was writing it at the time that I was there.

And then, a sculptor, not that I studied sculpture, but Richard Engle I think was in the sculpture department. Bernard Chaet was teaching painting. I mean, it's funny that Albers had this side of him where he was - I mean, Rauschenberg said famously when he studied with Albers at Black Mountain, I mean, they used to have to put their work up into representation.

Albers would go down the row and comment and I don't know, you might know this story from Rauschenberg. Albers would stop at Bob Rauschenberg's piece every time and he'd say," whoever did this piece, take it away," [laughs] and Bob said he was - it upset him terribly.

He couldn't figure out why he couldn't do what Albers wanted him to do and he says that he finally figured out that he could do what Albers wanted him to do if he would study [Paul] Cézanne and make something look Cézanne-esque so he did that and the next time Albers went down the row and he goes to that one and he says, "Take everything else down and leave this one up." [Laughs.]

So Bernie Chaet, I don't know if you know him as an artist.

MS. RICHARDS: A little.

MS. FORD: Well, I mean, this is not - I'm not making a serious proclamation about him.

He was a very, very nice man and he was very, very nice to me.

But from where I was coming from at that time, I thought it was totally retro, this kind of - kind of somewhat academic representation and I know I was coming from a real place, from my own aesthetic, point of view, because the thing that saved that year for me at Yale was that Alex Katz came up from New York once a week to teach the painting class to the first year students and that was fabulous.

So it wasn't representation per se I had a problem with. I mean, I admired my aunt's work and she was representational and my uncle and my father always drew from life. I mean, that was - that split was never maintained in my family at all.

But there was just a certain kind of representation that I - and the theory part, the color theory part, I thought that was completely ridiculous and Sy Silman used to come through our painting studios and then he would announce in his color class the next day that he couldn't understand why none of us were applying the Albers color theory in our painting.

Anyway, that - so but the thing of it is, Judith, that they offered me to stay. That would have been three more years there and I had six months left at Antioch to get my B.A. [Bachelor in Arts] and I was - didn't want to stay in school. I wanted to get out of school. So I went back to Antioch. I got my B.A. I never went to graduate school. That was it and I have to say, I never regretted that.

In fact, years later and for 25 years I taught graduate students at the Maryland Institute and one of the greatest pleasures I ever had was like the perfect moment when I would announce to some kid, well, I don't have a graduate degree, and they were like amazed [laughs]- because I would yell at them. I said, "You cannot be here just because you think you're getting a teaching job. You don't have to be here to be an artist. So you better figure out what you're going to do while you're here, what you're here for."

MS. RICHARDS: So when you graduated from Antioch, where did you go and what did you do?

MS. FORD: I came back to New York. I had already met Bob.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you meet?

MS. FORD: Some of this is so rich that I'm embarrassed by it when I think back on it.

MS. RICHARDS: Talking about Bob Moskowitz.

MS. FORD: Yeah, I mean the way we met each other was this. In the summertime in Provincetown, I had become

friends with Henry Geldzahler, who was at Harvard getting his degree in art history and he was like a hippie. We were all like hippies together in Provincetown and that fall - let's see. Well, I finished -

MS. RICHARDS: Which year, you graduated in '62?

MS. FORD: Yeah, exactly.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you ever study in the Provincetown painting workshop? Did that exist then?

MS. FORD: No, because my father founded that with Stanley Kunitz, the Provincetown Fine Arts Center, and it was just a winter program. The summer school part is fairly recent and the Winter Residency wasn't a school.

It was a residency to keep something going on in Provincetown in the winter. That was their idea, was to make something happen there in the wintertime for the local community of people there. So it wasn't just this big summer thing. No, but -

MS. RICHARDS: So you're saying that Bob knew Henry?

MS. FORD: When I came back to New York that fall, I had a date with Henry and he said, I have this - "I just moved into this really cool new apartment. You have to come over here." So I went over there.

MS. RICHARDS: Where was that?

MS. FORD: And it was near the Museum of Natural History, just off - the Upper West Side, just west, a block west from the park I think. He had a brownstone. He had the parlor floor and upstairs, Richard and Betsy Smith, Richard Smith, the artist, was living upstairs and Henry had just bought a Bob Moskowitz painting. He was rich, you know. He had money.

MS. RICHARDS: Henry?

MS. FORD: Henry did, yeah, and I loved the painting. It was a brown window shade painting and I thought it was really cool and then the next time I had a date with Henry, we said, "Well, let's meet and we'll go around and see some shows together." So we did and we went up to Leo Castelli Gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: On the Upper East Side.

MS. FORD: On the Upper East Side and which was my father's gallery at the time as well.

MS. RICHARDS: Henry knew your father from Provincetown?

MS. FORD: He did. They were not enamored with each other. My father - Henry had moved way beyond Abstract Expressionism by then. My father felt that and my father was extremely open-minded, I mean, towards young artists, which is why he was such a great teacher and a friend. But Henry couldn't get into that and also, you know, there was a sexual thing too.

I mean, I don't know how to say this because of course my father and all of us were close to many homosexual people. But I think that Henry's brand of sexuality was uncomfortable for my father.

So we went to the Castelli Gallery and there was a group show up there and there was a painting of Bob's there and Henry's saying, "Oh look, there's a new Bob Moskowitz" and we're standing there admiring it.

And this guy walks in and he's dressed from head to foot in the same exact colors as his painting, like khaki, like khaki pants and a khaki t-shirt and his hair was reddish at that time and he was - it's almost like he was camouflaged for his painting. It was so funny.

And you know, he was happy - he and Henry were happy to see each other and we said, well - I mean we just used to hang out in those days. "Let's go see Alex Katz's new work." Okay, so we go up to Alex's studio and he was doing his first cut outs.

MS. RICHARDS: Go up where? Where was that?

MS. FORD: His studio I think was in the West 20s?

MS. RICHARDS: So you went down.

MS. FORD: We went down, yeah, and then so we spent some time there. Alex was showing us his first cut outs, or at least they were the first standing cutouts that I saw of his, and then so anyways, that's how we met each other.

MS. RICHARDS: When you came from Antioch to New York, where was your first apartment?

MS. FORD: It was on Third Avenue between 94th and 95th Street. It was a railroad flat in a tenement building in what was then a really wonderful neighborhood of small working-class, very stable working-class neighborhood, small shop owners.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other artists in that neighborhood?

MS. FORD: There were.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that why you knew about it?

MS. FORD: Yeah, I found that apartment because our family friends, Giorgio Cavallon, and the Bultmans lived around the corner on 95th Street and they found that apartment for me and they knew that -

MS. RICHARDS: Henry Bultman?

MS. FORD: Fritz Bultman.

MS. RICHARDS: That's right.

MS. FORD: Fritz Bultman and his wife Jean lived right next door to the Cavallons. The Cavallons, Giorgio was one of - Giorgio and Linda, his wife Linda, were probably my parents' closest friends for many, many, many years and I loved them. I mean, I didn't love all my parent's friends but I loved them and actually Linda Cavallon as a woman and as an artist was very important to me. She paid a lot of attention to me.

I mean, she went out of her way to have serious conversations with me as a young adult in a way that very few people really did. I was sort of an adjunct to the -

So Linda and Giorgio found that apartment and I moved in there and I went back to a job that I'd had on a co-op period from Antioch, which was to teach blind nursery school children at the Lighthouse.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you set up a studio space in that apartment?

MS. FORD: I had a studio in that apartment and again, I have some of the work I did in that studio and I still - I see. I recognize myself in it, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: What was it like?

MS. FORD: It was kind of, you know, I had recently been studying with Alex [Katz] but it was kind of like a combination of the people that were important to me in my life. It was sort of like - including Alex - a kind of - because of course I had my father.

I had a lot of my father's sensibility for paint and then it's kind of both Biala and Alex, very different from each other, but they both were making representational art that was informed by abstract expressionism in different ways but still - so I was working - I would set up a still life and then I would kind of elaborate.

The thing that is the most relevant to my work now and stayed through the years was that there would be like a cloth on the table and I got very involved in making this stripe pattern kind of undulate across the canvas and that was like the important part or that's where I put most of my energy into that and that's the part that I can still relate to. In the painting I would make the striped cloth very heightened.

By the time I was finished with it, it really was not very realistic actually or naturalistic I should say.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you working in oils? Oil on canvas, stretched canvas?

MS. FORD: Yeah, yeah and also during that period - let's see, how did that work. Anyway, then Bob and I got married.

MS. RICHARDS: When was that?

MS. FORD: I graduated from Antioch in '62. In '64 we got married and he was evicted from his loft on Sixth Avenue in the flower district. So he rented a -

MS. RICHARDS: In the 20s.

MS. FORD: Right, he rented an apartment very similar to the one that we lived in, that I was living in, across the street. So we had two railroad flats.

MS. RICHARDS: In the east 90s?

MS. FORD: Right, on Third Avenue, between 94th and 95th Street, on Third Avenue, across the street from each other and we had these two apartments. My apartment was $49 a month and I think his was $52 and we had these two apartments for $100 a month and during that period of time, our friends, besides Henry - well, of course Bob was showing at Castelli.

But we were never quite - that was a very glamorous scene and Bob was selling - you know, Leo was selling work and Bob was included in a lot of important - he was in the "Art of the Assemblage" show and everything and we would sort of go to parties with Andy Warhol and all this but we were never that kind of sucked into it. I don't know why.

Neither one of us really had a big interest in a big kind of party life.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you consciously live where you were living, because most artists were living downtown somewhere, SoHo, Tribeca.

MS. FORD: Well it was really before SoHo and Tribeca. Well, certainly it was before Tribeca.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, there were pioneering artists there then certainly.

MS. FORD: They were there illegally.

MS. RICHARDS: In the '60s, right.

MS. FORD: They were living there illegally and this is actually very ironic.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, and also in the 20s.

MS. FORD: In the 20s. Where Bob's studio was in the Flower District, there were many artists there. But when we lived on Third Avenue and 94th Street, actually there were artists all around us.

Mel Bochner lived down the street from us and we became very, very good friends because Mel was working as a guard at the Jewish Museum. That was right up the street from us and Bob met him at the museum. They struck up a conversation there and we became very, very good friends with Mel.

Then, Rackstraw Downes lived across the street from us and then the older generation, see, the Cavallons and the Bultmans lived around the corner from us on one side on 95th Street. The Motherwells, who we all kind of -

MS. RICHARDS: What is that gesture? You distanced yourself?

MS. FORD: Yeah, he - my father's group of friends were not in love with the Motherwells, who at that time it was Helen Frankenthaler. So that complicated it also. But anyway, they did meet each other and greet each other at parties and so on. But anyway, so the Motherwells were on that side and there were young artists moving into the neighborhood.

We brought some friends. Some young friends of ours joined us in that neighborhood. My sister lived there for a while. Yeah, and then Bob got evicted from his apartment where his studio was because he was working there and not living there. Meantime, our friends downtown were being -

MS. RICHARDS: He was living in your apartment?

MS. FORD: He was living in my apartment and my son was born by then.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, when was he born?

MS. FORD: He was born in '66 and we were living on -

MS. RICHARDS: And his name?

MS. FORD: Erik, E-R-I-K, Erik Tworkov Moskowitz.

And so Bob was evicted from that apartment because he was working there and not living there. The landlord wanted to upgrade it, which was a joke. His idea of upgrading was I don't know what and meanwhile, our friends downtown were being evicted from lofts because they were living there.

So nobody was in a good situation and the upshot of it in our case was that we became the first family to move into Westbeth, [laughs] I mean- yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So this is in the late '60s?

MS. FORD: Yeah, we moved in. Erik was born in '66 and he was about - yeah, we moved into Westbeth when, maybe '70, something like that. I mean, the day we moved in, maybe two or three other families moved in and we lived in an empty building for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a space that was big enough to include both of your studios?

MS. FORD: No, what happened is Bob's studio was there for - okay, here's what happened.

MS. RICHARDS: And sorry, you were working still at the Lighthouse?

MS. FORD: I was working - okay, I worked at the Lighthouse until Erik was born. I forget exactly how that happened and then shortly after Erik was born, I was offered to become the assistant of my painting teacher at Dalton, just as Sue Weil, had been when I was there, and it was a great job for me because it was a part-time job and Dalton was close to where we lived on 89th Street.

So I could kind of have this little tiny baby at home. Bob would stay home and I was breastfeeding him. I mean, I would leave a bottle there but I could just about continue to breastfeed, going back and forth to Dalton and Bob was like teaching a little bit and driving a taxi and I don't know.

We were scrambling for money all the time because then after a certain point he left Leo's. His work started to change and Leo was so similar to my father actually. Bob's work started to change and it became very transitional for several years.

In the meantime, Leo was so preoccupied with his, you know, Pop stars and so Bob left and didn't have a gallery for a while and then he started driving a taxi and he would teach a little, which he hated.

He much preferred to drive a taxi and then we moved to Westbeth and both of us decided we were going to make - design book jackets for money because we had some friends who were doing that and Bob did that a lot and I started to do it too.

And I really was barely doing my own work. I mean, I had this young child. I think I started to get my first teaching jobs. I was doing book jackets for a couple of years there and then Bob - Bob hated Westbeth. He hated it and I didn't mind it that much because the whole place was full of little kids and babysitters and a laundry room and a playground. So he moved his studio here.

MS. RICHARDS: To 81 Leonard Street.

MS. FORD: To 81 Leonard Street, with a friend. The two of them rented this whole floor.

MS. RICHARDS: Who was that person?

MS. FORD: His friend was Jimmy Starrett, Jim Starrett, a painter friend, very good friend of ours who at that time was Pat Steir's boyfriend. We all were friends and I got Bob's studio at Westbeth.

MS. RICHARDS: So you had an apartment at Westbeth plus a separate space?

MS. FORD: No, the apartment at Westbeth was designed to have a big studio in it and it was. It was beautiful and so when I got that studio, I did start to work again.

I mean, the studio was the spur and also around that same time, I had become close to Jennifer Bartlett and Elizabeth Murray and a bunch of young very ambitious women artists and I realized and learned from being with them that I had to get serious. I couldn't let this time go by.

I mean, Elizabeth had a child and she was a single mother. She was a great example, as she was throughout my whole life, and our boys became friends. She actually lived at Westbeth briefly around then. And so I did start to work seriously, finally.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel that it was particularly difficult to be a woman artist in the art world then?

MS. FORD: Oh, God yes, absolutely, and I had horrible examples of the women artists I knew growing up. They were all monsters. Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell was terrifying.

My own aunt, Janice, was terrifying. I mean, they had to behave like men in a way and I heard many, many wives of artists, who were artists, talked about disparagingly by the men and for instance, I mean, my mother's friend Linda Cavallon was a very gifted painter who was not - who didn't take herself seriously and she worked

all the time. It's not that she didn't work.

But she didn't take herself seriously enough and the men in her life didn't take her seriously enough. I mean, it was a two-way street. It fed into each other and I could see that very, very clearly as I was growing up and then the men used to talk about artists' wives. I still get upset when I think about it.

So yeah, I mean that, in the '70s when I had this group of women artists -

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say that it was an official group that you got together?

MS. FORD: Well, in some ways it was, but not really. Of course it was during the period of time when there were women's groups. Then there were men's groups and it was - you experienced that I'm sure at that time. It was extremely intense and I don't remember going to meetings. But we used to get together a lot. That was one of the things that we did is that we got together a lot. My mother never went out alone without my father, with her friends.

Her closest women friends were the wives of my father's friends. She was lucky enough, Linda - she had some very, very good, close women friends. But they were never alone together or hardly ever, hardly ever, and they didn't live lives where they went out for lunch together or cocktails or - [laughs].

MS. RICHARDS: Tea.

MS. FORD: Tea, yeah, tea at the Plaza together, no.

So that was different. That was different and actually it rocked my mother's world to see my sister and I do this. She had some very rough years, kind of reevaluating herself and her own life in light of what she saw her daughters, thinking about and how they were with their women friends.

MS. RICHARDS: So this is the '70s. How long did you live in Westbeth?

MS. FORD: We lived at Westbeth I would say for - well, we moved - we bought this building with three other families and moved in in 1976. So we lived at Westbeth for five or six years and most of that time, Bob's studio was down here and my studio was there and it worked out quite well actually.

MS. RICHARDS: During those years in Westbeth, did you feel that you were ready to show your work? Did you have any opportunities?

MS. FORD: Let's see, I - let's see - when did -

MS. RICHARDS: I think there was a show that you were in in the '70s. I don't remember the date.

MS. FORD: I had a show at Artists Space [gallery, NY]. I'm terrible at remembering the years. I mean, some people can rattle this stuff off but I can't. But I was here. We were already here. I think that might have been in '76, maybe.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, it rings a bell for me.

MS. FORD: But before that I was in various group shows. I remember and then I would sell some work. People would come to the studio. They'd be interested in - a couple of times I sold , particularly drawings, and to quite good collections, university museum collections and stuff.

But I think the first one person show that I had that was important to me was at Artists Space and then I was in Barbara Rose's show.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about that. That's 1979.

MS. FORD: Right and that was very important for me for a lot of reasons, but particularly because Barbara Toll saw that painting and called me. I think it's the one and only time. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Where did she see the painting?

MS. FORD: At Barbara's show at NYU [Grey Art Gallery, New York University] and she liked the painting. She called me up. She said -

MS. RICHARDS: Sorry, wait, who called you?

MS. FORD: Barbara Toll.

MS. RICHARDS: Barbara Toll.

MS. FORD: Who became my dealer.

MS. RICHARDS: When you said Barbara I was thinking Barbara Rose.

MS. FORD: No, Barbara Rose, no, right, Barbara Toll.

MS. RICHARDS: But I was wondering how Barbara Rose saw your painting.

MS. FORD: Oh, Barbara Rose.

MS. RICHARDS: How did she know your work?

MS. FORD: This is interesting. I can't believe this actually. She was - we knew Barbara and Frank [Stella] together in the early Castelli days and then she was out on her own doing her thing and I think that she came to see my husband Bob.

And I don't know if Bob asked her to come into my studio or if I had a painting in the living room that she saw and she said, "Could I see Hermine's work?" And actually Barbara Rose became a big fan and a supporter of mine, even though she really couldn't do very much for me.

But anyway, so I had - so that's how I got into that show. That's it. She saw the work here. That's where she first saw it. I can't remember under what circumstances but that's where she first saw it.

And then Barbara Toll had been a private dealer and was getting ready to open up a gallery in SoHo [area south of Houston Street] and she called me up and said, "Can I come down here," invited herself down here and then she offered me a show.

I had two or three, two shows with Barbara and that was very wonderful for me. She showed the work very well. I was in group shows and then Barbara kind of petered out and I have never been able to have a dealer since then. I haven't had a dealer all these years and I've had a lot of difficulty showing my work. It's been very, very sporadic.

I mean, I do show occasionally. I have sort of a little fan club. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Let me go to that since we're talking about it, skipping ahead from the chronology a little bit, but going to your relationships with galleries.

I know - so you had a few shows with Barbara, '81, and I think the last one was in '86 and then you had a solo show at Sigma but that was a decade later in '97.

MS. FORD: That's right, exactly, and that gallery folded. I mean, it was here today, gone tomorrow.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you had a solo show at Grant Selwyn a couple of years later.

MS. FORD: Right, and that folded. I mean, I really had very bad luck with - I mean, I have to say that the Grant Selwyn thing didn't fold immediately and it wasn't just that they folded. I mean, it turned out to be - it was disappointing in a way.

I mean, the show wasn't disappointing and I was very thrilled to have that show and of course I was thinking this is - I'm going to have a home for my work now for the rest of my life and of course that was ridiculous because, you know, they - they were really heavily involved in the secondary market. Anthony had come from the auction house world and that's where he went back to.

MS. RICHARDS: Anthony Grant?

MS. FORD: Anthony Grant. So that didn't last very long. I had a show in Baltimore at Goya-Girl [gallery], which was a lot of fun actually that show and then John Newman and I had a show together at the museum, the university museum in Plattsburgh [Plattsburgh State Art Museum, NY]. But as you can see, these are all few and far between.

MS. RICHARDS: A lot of group shows though.

MS. FORD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you - I know it's complicated, but when you were going through this painful process of trying to find a gallery, what approaches did you take to that process? They succeeded sometimes and didn't other

times. But did you sort of give up and think it just didn't matter, or you weren't going to deal with it? What was the whole experience?

MS. FORD: No, I still haven't given up, [laughs] and the only reason why I think that's possibly is because I'm very engaged with my work and I feel so grateful for that because I know that some artists don't have that.

They kind of do - if they don't have a big audience for their work, it's difficult for them to sustain it, which I'm totally sympathetic to. I mean, I don't feel judgmental about that at all. But I have been spared that and maybe it hasn't stood me in good stead.

Maybe if I was more desperate about it, I would have been able to make something else work. It's not that I haven't tried. What happened - whatever did happen happened and in those days, less so now, artists could really help each other out and we did and dealers listened to their artists.

If an artist said, you have to go see my friend, blah, blah, blah, they were grateful for the tip and whether it worked out or not, you could have people come to your studio. It wasn't hard to get people to come to the studio. They were eager to go out and go around.

And I've had some really devoted friends over the years, mostly women but not only women. But of all the group shows that I've been in, especially had to do with Elizabeth Murray and Mary Heilmann has been very supportive.

It's harder now. I think there is now at this point in my life I think there are other kinds of difficulties. I think there's an ageism thing. I think the last thing a dealer wants to do is deal with that. Of course, painting itself has been out of favor in some ways, especially this kind of painting or some painting is in. I think the whole corporate model that took over the art world is something I just wasn't fit for. I'm not. I wish I were. It's not that I - I have a lot of friends involved with it and it's great. I just couldn't.

So it's been hard. It's been difficult. But I've never felt completely isolated, which is very strange in a way. I've always had a community of people around me looking at my work and supporting it and I know something's going to be around the corner.

I don't know what it is, whether it's a group show or it's this or that. I have this strange thing, connection in Bushwick [area in Brooklyn, NY] now with a whole young group of artists. All of a sudden I'm famous in Bushwick, [laughs] which I adore. So you know, it's sort of -

MS. RICHARDS: Thinking about your work being in the show that Barbara Rose curated, "American Painting: The '80s" [Grey Gallery, NYU, 1979], what would you say the subject of your painting was in the late '70s? Also, I heard you say at one point or I read that you were struggling to figure out what you wanted to do and you spent a long time drawing and that the drawings evolved into the paintings.

I think that was in the '70s. Can you talk about that whole period?

MS. FORD: That's right. I did skip over something. When you asked me what I was doing during the years after my son was born.

I forgot to mention one small detail, which is, I did come to a point in my early young adult life where I decided I wasn't going to be an artist after all because I could not find a space for myself and not just with the personalities of the artists around me and my family, but I couldn't find an aesthetic opening. I couldn't figure out what kind of work I could make that would be its own, that would really, really be its own. I was afraid of that challenge.

I couldn't imagine how I was going to and I knew - in a way I was too smart for my own good in sort of an intuitive way - because I knew that I had to do that if I was going to be an artist. I had to. I mean, I don't want to name names but I couldn't be a kind of second generation whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MS. FORD: So I said, okay, I'm just not going to be an artist and I was on the verge of going back to school. I was teaching at the Lighthouse and I said, well, I'm going to get a degree in early childhood education and I'm going to become professional at this job.

Because I was very, very good at it. I loved it. I had no professional standing and I had no special training for this and I thought, well, I should go back to school and do this and that I was seriously considering that and what happened instead is that - I mean, let's say that spring decided I'm not going to be an artist and I was beginning to think of going back to school, where and how and when I would do that.

And that summer, we rented, Bob and Erik and I rented a dune shack in Provincetown out on Peaked Hill. I don't know if you're familiar at all with this.

MS. RICHARDS: Peaked Hill?

MS. FORD: Peaked Hill.

MS. RICHARDS: P-E-A-K?

MS. FORD: E-D, as in peaked. In Provincetown history, these are quite famous. They were squatters' shacks.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I've heard of them.

MS. FORD: That you had to walk out to and carry your supplies on your back and they were perched on the last dune before the ocean and they were very isolated from each other. There was a lot of space. They were quite at a distance.

And my family was friends with a woman whose name was Hazel Hawthorne and she had two -

MS. RICHARDS: Hazel what?

MS. FORD: Hawthorne, wonderful, amazing person actually, and we went out there and so it was me and Bob and little Erik and I think - and as a result of the women's movement and the ferment and my observation of my women friends and how they managed to do what they needed to do, I needed time, a few hours. I said to Bob, I need a few hours every day to myself. So we made a deal.

But I needed to find something to do in those three hours. I needed to have a reason. What was I going to do? Like I didn't just want to sit on the beach by myself. That I wanted to do with them, you know? [Laughs.]

So I said, okay, I'm just going to take a drawing pad and go out onto the dunes and just amuse myself. Well, that was the beginning of my life as an artist because I made a group of drawings in the dunes that month that I'm really still working from, you know, 40 years later.

MS. RICHARDS: Graphite on paper?

MS. FORD: Yeah. I don't know what happened to me. Like a switch went on in my brain. The drawings that I - I mean, I can't say they were unrelated to anything I'd ever done before.

I can explain how they were but in some essential way they were a very big break for me and I was completely surprised and taken with them and that was it. I went back to New York and then I began to work in the studio that I had at Westbeth.

[END CD 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Hermine Ford at 81 Leonard Street on February 18, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

You were talking about a turning point, you might say, these drawings that you did in the dunes in the summer of '77, or earlier?

MS. FORD: It was earlier. It would be earlier. I would say it was - well, '70, '71? I always count forward from when Erik was born but I don't really remember. I mean, I have some of those drawings still, although a lot of them were sold or in other places. So I have the dates. It's easy for me.

MS. RICHARDS: How did those drawings bring you back to painting?

MS. FORD: Well, okay, I was drawing the dunes themselves and so the grass, the beach grass grows in very irregular shapes across the sand. So I developed this stroke, a drawing stroke. I was drawing just with pencil and I was observing very, very carefully and almost immediately I decided to eliminate the horizon line. I didn't - I wasn't interested in representing near, middle, and far space in that kind of representation.

But I was very interested in a very up close, kind of almost flattened out look, and so the thing that fascinated me and has stayed fascinating is that I sat there and I drew very faithfully and you know I had drawn from the model with my father starting from a very young age.

I taught life drawing at Parsons [The New School for Design, NY] and I discovered that I was very strict at teaching life drawings. I hated all those tricks the other teachers were doing, shut your eyes and turn the lights

off and on. I mean I really was very interested in very sharp observation.

So I did this and the subject matter was so eccentric. I mean even though we think we know dune grass growing on the dunes, seascape, blah, blah, blah, Provincetown, Cape Cod. But the pattern, why - and I'm still - see, the science part, because there is a science element in my work, which is related to the natural world.

Why does the grass grow here and not here? So anyway, I made these drawings from a very acute observation and they were totally eccentric looking, and I was fascinated by that. How eccentric the real world, how abstract the real world is. So that - anyway, so that's basically - that's sort of a bottom line interest that has been abiding. It's taken different forms. It looks different. But that aspect has never gone away.

So then I got back to New York and I wanted to keep working. I didn't have subject matter and I wasn't interested in any old subject matter. I wasn't interested, contrary to before, where I would just set up a still life or look out the window. I didn't want it to be an arbitrary subject matter and so I began immediately to make - well, there was a little bit of fooling around in between.

I made some feather drawings, blah, blah, bah, but that isn't so important. What I did eventually - what was important eventually is the drawing stroke that I invented for the dune grass, I started to make works on paper that was just that stroke. So it was instantly completely abstract. I just eliminated the subject matter. But the method of drawing remained the same and that's how I entered into a period when I just worked on paper for a couple of years and it became more and more elaborate.

First it was - I mean just for an example, I would start out with the idea I'm going to cover this whole piece of paper with just this stroke. But then I couldn't sustain that. It was like boring.

So then I would divide it in half and I would draw with graphite up to the middle and then on the other half I wanted to have some kind of foil for that and so I came up with the idea that the shack that we lived in on the dunes was gray weathered boards with this kind of copper green trim and so I imitated that copper green color.

I had these two fields, so-called, of the gray marks and natural and then this artificial paint, green, and I was very - in my mind, that green was a green that was not a natural green but a very artificial green and that also became a very constant thought in my work and so I made a lot of drawings like that and then all of that -

MS. RICHARDS: Those kind of dualities?

MS. FORD: Yes, this kind of duality, kind of this between nature and artifice, nature and artifice and how art is artifice and art is natural and then these fields of marks. It was very difficult to make a field of marks without some kind of shift in color or shapes emerging. It's very difficult to keep that, unless you mechanically make it.

So then I went through different periods when I would pick out the shape that was buried in there that I would just - so then I had this kind of found shape.

MS. RICHARDS: Based on an intuitive response?

MS. FORD: Yeah, well no, I mean if you - I don't know how to -

MS. RICHARDS: Like seeing a shape in the clouds?

MS. FORD: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Or a preconceived shape that you -

MS. FORD: No, that was the idea. I didn't want a preconceived shape. I wanted it to emerge from the gesture of making the drawing and it's true. Like if you cover a sheet of paper with any kind of a mark, because of the randomness, certain clumps, certain marks are closer together and form a kind of clump and it's like a weird shape. So then I would draw a line around a shape.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you associate this with the other artists who had dealt with the unconscious and the surrealists?

MS. FORD: I don't think I was thinking of surrealism. I think I was thinking of nature, like why does a bush take this shape when you look at it. Clouds are a very good example. Also, the way constellations were invented from a cluster of stars. I've later, years later, I have used star maps a lot in my work and I've used land sat photographs.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were then picking out these images that appeared?

MS. FORD: Right and I was very strict with myself.

Well, then, I started - then after working on paper for a couple of years, I really wanted to paint and it took me - I mulled over this for really a long time what I was going to do and so what I decided was like the dumbest, I mean, quote, unquote, "dumb" thing, which is I said, "Okay, I'm going to stretch out the canvas and I'm going to do exactly on the canvas what I've been doing on paper."

So I would draw with a pencil on one half of the canvas and then I would paint - because by the time I finished working on paper I was using gouache to fill in a kind of watery field on the left, or right, whatever it was.

So I made a bunch of paintings where I imitated the drawings that I had made and then that's when I started to make paintings and then eventually I started making these very long horizontal paintings that were divided into sections.

I would make a field of marks and there would be like a weird shape and then in the next section I would paint that shape and they were bizarre. I could never invent a shape like that. I was interested in that fact, that I design a shape like that. I couldn't try to make that shape.

So I thought of it as a found shape, like finding a pebble on the beach and you would just accept it. You don't criticize what the shape of a pebble is.

MS. RICHARDS: Except that you're selecting that particular pebble.

MS. FORD: Except that you're selecting it, absolutely, and also you've made the decision to do that because you're attracted to that.

MS. RICHARDS: I saw some images of paintings that I think were done in the late '70s, maybe early '80s that were very intense color with the marks. How did you arrive at that palette, those intense colors for those paintings, and was it one of those paintings that Barbara Rose included in her show?

MS. FORD: Barbara Rose included - the painting that Barbara had in that first show, I mean then she did a second one years, 10 years later, which was less successful in a lot of different ways.

But anyway, the one in the first one was actually all red and it was really complicated because it had - and I think it's the only painting like this I ever made. It had - it was divided into six sections. It was a rectangular painting instead of one long horizontal. So it had three squares on top and three squares on the bottom.

Each section had a separate kind of mark or texture to it. But then on top of that there was kind of an overall - there were some connections made. So it was both staccato - of course it was all the same color, so that carried through - but then also I kind of connected certain things that were inside each box to each other so that there was an overall, yeah.

The intense color, I think originally, as I said, I wanted the color to be intense in opposition to kind of a more naturalistic gray. I always thought of graphite as being like a foggy misty atmospheric Cape Cod weather kind of color, totally natural. I thought of the gray as being natural and largely I thought of the color as being artificial color. So I really wanted to make it almost jarring in some way.

MS. RICHARDS: And you were using oil then?

MS. FORD: Yeah, oh yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: You never had any hesitation about leaving behind identifiable subject matter and working completely non-representationally?

MS. FORD: Not really. I don't know how to explain that exactly. I mean, I loved doing it when I was doing it. You know, I mean the Yale year where Alex was our teacher and I was painting from still lifes and I was looking at his work and Bob has never been a totally abstract painter.

There's always been recognizable images and in my family, I mean this is really strange, in my family, I came from a traditional - traditional, as the panel was discussing last night, the Tworkov panel, my father was not alone.

De Kooning, most of them continued to draw from life. It was just a pleasure for them to do that. It's a lot like the way pianists practice their scales. But when it came to kind of staking my life on it, I really - somehow I wasn't that interested. I think it was in a way it was sort of too easy for me. It didn't have to have stayed that way but for myself I couldn't figure out how to challenge myself enough doing that.

MS. RICHARDS: So as you were making these large paintings, at what point did your work break apart as it has -

MS. FORD: Yeah, it happened really slowly, really slowly.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean the work over the last 10 years at least has been distinct images.

MS. FORD: Yeah, it started to happen right away actually. By the time I had two shows with Barbara Toll and between the first show and the second show -

MS. RICHARDS: I think that was '81 and '86.

MS. FORD: Right, what happened is I started looking at landsat photographs and at first I was just looking at them for form.

MS. RICHARDS: What does that stand for, landsat? Land satellite?

MS. FORD: Satellite and they were very primitive in those early days. Actually, my husband Bob, when he saw me getting into this, he bought a book for me at Strand [bookstore] that I guess I don't know if NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] put it out or some government department and there were two things about these photographs that tempted me.

One was that there was a kind of annotation for certain photographs that the scientists labeled "false color image" and that fascinated me that they were recording something real in the world but it was being - it was because of the thermal, it was like heat sensitive, the imagery. So it translated the color into this weird color and I was really interested in that.

I had already been interested in maps. I had already been interested in diagrams because I should at some point mention the fact that - I mean I described my early camping experiences as a child and then years later, Bob and Erik and I went up to - and then we had that summer in the dunes and all those years on the beach in Provincetown and then -

MS. RICHARDS: We didn't talk about too many years.

MS. FORD: We didn't talk about Canada.

MS. RICHARDS: No.

MS. FORD: Well, anyway, but anyway, sticking to the work for now, I was looking - the years that we have spent in the country in a fairly remote natural setting, I started looking at star maps and then river systems, which I was, you know, and then flyways, like bird flyways.

I made a whole bunch of paintings in the '80s that at first I was looking - that were - I would have this form that looked like a river but it was actually a bird flyway. In fact I was commenting on the fact that it's the same kind of formation.

When you map what a bird's migratory route is and they come down from the Arctic for instance several different ways, the same species, starting at the top of the world. Sometimes some of them go down the West Coast of the Americas, some of them go down the East Coast. So when scientists map that it kind of looks like a river system. It also looks like a bronchial system. I mean so there is a kind of macro-micro and fractal kind of interest here.

Anyway, the landsat photographs were also very oddly shaped. They were like torqued. They were parallelograms instead of rectangles and I didn't even notice that at first. I was involved at looking at other stuff but then I kept paying more and more attention to that and I started to think like, well, what if I made a painting that was torqued like that? What would that mean? Why would I do that?

So I wanted to find out why they were shaped like that and there were two main reasons. One is that in those days they would mount the camera at a weird angle outside of an airplane. I don't think they do it that way anymore. I mean now they do it from satellites. But these were taken and they would actually go up in an airplane with a camera mounted at a weird angle to clear the wing or to clear the rest of the plane and then they didn't care. The scientists didn't care what the overall shape of this was. So they would just print it up.

And then the other reason why is because they sometimes put these photographs together to make a globe. So they had this kind of Bucky Fuller kind of shape, you know, and once I thought about that, I was completely hooked and so the first, not direct -

MS. RICHARDS: What hooked you about it?

MS. FORD: Well, I just - the corners stopped making sense to me for my work and I don't feel this about other people's work - the corners, the four right corners, and I found that I didn't want to paint into them because I thought of them as a shape, those four corners, those straight edges, and it didn't make any sense to me.

I mean once I was imagining that I was flying through the air or standing on the top of a globe where there's not even left-right. The whole idea of what's left or what's right is missing and then I was also looking at maps of under the sea and I'm a big swimmer.

I love to swim in the ocean and you know how when you're tossing around in the ocean, you kind of lose - you forget where the top is. You kind of - things fall away. These boundaries fall away. So I wanted to kind of set myself free that way in my work.

So I made a lot of work there were parallelograms or trapezoids and they were interesting to me because they wanted to curve because of that, the way scientists actually would make them curve literally. But of course they weren't. They were flat.

I mean, clearly I'm making shaped paintings. But I'm very reluctant to use that phrase because shaped paintings to me means something that was made in the '60s where they came off the wall, where they were three-dimensionally shaped.

I wasn't interested in that. I was interested in the tension between the literal flatness of the surface and the pressure from the overall shape.

MS. RICHARDS: So this whole study gave you a way to get rid of the corners.

MS. FORD: I just - you know, one day I had a painting and I didn't want to paint the ground out to the corners and I added - I had kind of a river shape going through it. So I added a bar, a horizontal bar so this organic shape flowed out into this rectangle. That was a rectangle and I loved that. I said I just eliminated the ground.

So I did those for a long time and I did a lot of different versions of it. I fooled around with it a lot.

MS. RICHARDS: Drawings?

MS. FORD: Drawings, but - I never stopped drawing. I mean, I don't - I'm not always drawing but I always in a year I have a period or two when I'm drawing.

MS. RICHARDS: When you first started doing these shapes, non-rectilinear shapes, what was the surface, the support that you used and how did you -

MS. FORD: It's a stretcher and my stretcher maker, I made him crazy, and they got even more complicated because sometimes I put two together, different thicknesses. Like one would be more off the wall and one would be recessive. But yeah, I had to work very closely with my stretcher maker, but they were stretched canvas.

MS. RICHARDS: Obviously it was an expense to have these made.

MS. FORD: Yes, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: You had to really know what you wanted.

MS. FORD: Oh, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Does that mean that you began by doing a drawing and finalizing the shapes that way?

MS. FORD: Yeah, I never - or very rarely - I mean, maybe occasionally, butd even now I don't make a complete drawing that I just blow up into a painting. But I do make a lot of different kinds of drawings. Sometimes they're just thumbnail drawings. Sometimes they're more elaborate where I get to the point where I'm pretty confident that I have an idea for a shape, you know what I mean?

So when I get the stretcher and I have the thing on the wall in front of me, I'm not starting from scratch.

I have a kind of repertoire, a kind of vocabulary in my head and I make a lot of changes. I don't stick - I make some changes as I go along but I'm pretty confident that I have an idea for this shape or a series of ideas that I can pick and choose from for this shape.

MS. RICHARDS: When you first arrived at that opening to expanding the field of your work and working in multiple pieces - were you doing those in a kind of a series or think, I'm going to try this and this is going to be four paintings because I'm going to try this this way, this way, and this way?

MS. FORD: No, no one led to the other. One led to the next. No, I didn't have a long range plan. I didn't, no I didn't do four at a time.

Well, I mean I would order more than one stretcher at a time usually. So I would have maybe two or three come into the studio at once and I would have, as I said, some idea. But they didn't have a particular sequence or I didn't know exactly how the three were going to relate to each other.

MS. RICHARDS: These works, I guess we're talking about the late '80s.

MS. FORD: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: I haven't seen a lot of those works but they're mostly comprised of one unique form, not as you're doing now in multiples.

MS. FORD: Right, that's right.

MS. RICHARDS: One unique form.

MS. FORD: Right, and they - the subject matter, not that that was identifiable to a viewer necessarily, changed over the years. Sometimes it was kind of like a water thing or like a whirlpool thing. Then I went through this whole river thing and that took different forms actually in the outer painting and then - what was your question? [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I was trying to envision the paintings and I'm picturing a biomorphic kind of form.

MS. FORD: Oh yeah. I mean, they have never not reflected my interest in natural systems. Even these, which have to do with architecture of some kind, we can get to that later.

MS. RICHARDS: Tomorrow, yeah.

MS. FORD: I think that the paintings always were about my - everybody has these - but for me it was like my best moments in life, you know, the most poignant, most sharpest experience, which mostly takes place in a natural place, that has been my experience, where I feel most alive. You know, those moments of where you're like supremely alive and in tune with where you are, mostly for me it takes place when I'm swimming or walking on the beach.

MS. RICHARDS: Aside from these references and inspirations from nature, at that period in the late '80s, were there artists, either of that time or earlier artists, who you were particularly interested in, and whose work might have images of on your studio wall?

MS. FORD: Yeah, and they're very surprising.

MS. RICHARDS: As always.

MS. FORD: Yeah, I mean they - I'm just turning to see what I happen to have up there. There's one thing about the nature thing I should mention too, briefly, that's important, is that I've been an active environmentalist and interested in conservation. I mean, I was following global warming before most people had ever heard of it and so a lot of this interest in nature has to do with the fact that I feel it's under threat.

So it's not just a bucolic and it's not like a 19th century bucolic thing and I always felt that then, it was the 20th century, when you looked out at the natural world, you could not possibly see it the same way that somebody in the 19th century because first of all, when you're looking at the ocean, you know what the floor of the ocean looks like.

You know how the rivers move, currents move through the ocean. Scientists mapped that. It has a particular shape and you know that it's threatened. So I just want to say that. But anyway, what do I have over there? I have Mount Fuji, [laughs] which has this weird -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FORD: - what is that.

And then Tony Smith, who I never paid any attention to when I was young.

MS. RICHARDS: But do you think you were looking at him in the late '80s when he was first -

MS. FORD: I think those images have been up there in that spot for at least 12 years.

MS. RICHARDS: Twenty?

MS. FORD: Twelve.

MS. RICHARDS: No, I mean -

MS. FORD: So that's not exactly - no.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you think about the - well obvious, [William] Baziotes or other painters of the '30s or the '40s, kind of looking at - or [Jean] Arp - or any -

MS. FORD: Arp has come up. That's a - yeah, Arp has come up. Well, first of all, starting from the beginning, the first paintings when I was dividing these horizontal things, I had to recognize - I mean, I kind of dropped out during the early days of minimalism.

I mean, that was during the period when I decided I wasn't going to be an artist. I had a young child. I wasn't going out to look at much art. But when I started to, I thought, oh my god, this has some relationship to Bob Ryman and I started to look at Bob Ryman's work.

MS. RICHARDS: The strokes?

MS. FORD: Yeah and this kind of blankness because a lot of those rectangles had this kind of blankness and the stroking. Then I made - we haven't sort f come right up to this yet but I sort of started to make these sort of little pebble shaped paintings and they sometimes looked like Arp.

Now I had never paid that much attention to Arp but then when it came up in the studio, then I did. I had to. So it's interesting.

Now I'm going to tell you something that I don't often mention because it sounds so self-serving. But I'm going to make a point of this because I think it's important and similar issues came up last night on the panel at the studio school. One of the people whose studios we regularly exchanged studio visits was my dear friend Elizabeth Murray and the first time she saw the first torqued paintings, she was really interested in it.

She said, "You know Hermine, you could really go far with this," and she said, "If you don't do it, I'm going to." I don't tell this story very often. I guess I've now really officially told it because it's so easy to misinterpret what I really want to say when I say that. I think we did both do something in extremely different ways.

I have had reviewers compare my work to Elizabeth's and of course because she's so much more famous than I am, it's always that I've been influenced by her, which I have been.

I don't think I've actually been influenced by her but I've certainly been tremendously inspired by Elizabeth, her work and as importantly, her way of being an artist in the world, which in some ways is one and the same thing and in another way, not the same thing at all.

But I think I've lost my fear. I've obviously lost my fear of repeating that story because I think it's more and more important that artists begin to correct art history and the way art historians talk about work in general, not just this, but the way artists pay attention to each other and the way they learn from each other and the way a generation of artists come up together and feed off each other.

And that is the way it should be. I mean I think we have lived in an age where the idea of originality has been completely misunderstood. I mean I think we were talking about the corporate art world before in the kitchen.

My experience is that most people can't recognize an original work of art if it's right in front of them. They have no way of really looking at something carefully enough. They think they know what they're seeing. They think they've seen it before and they categorize it.

They're either interested in that category or they're not interested in that category and so- we were talking before about artists who have had a hard time and of course what I'm saying partly explains that. But anyway, so what else was I looking at?

Well, at a certain point in my recent life I've started to look at very, very ancient art and that's reflected in this new work.

MS. RICHARDS: In the '80s, and we'll get beyond that shortly, who were your -

MS. FORD: Well, Jennifer Bartlett, I have to mention Jennifer. I don't see very much of her lately but we were very close. At a certain time she was very close - I met Elizabeth through Jennifer. They were very close and I actually

worked on - Jennifer used to hire her friends to dot for her and we all did that together. That was fun and we'd be in her studio and I think that the dotting that I did for Jennifer, on the plates, you know what I mean when I say that?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, who else was working with you?

MS. FORD: Jan Hashey and I, we did Rhapsody [1975-76]. Elizabeth did, too. We all worked on Rhapsody, even though -

MS. RICHARDS: She had such skillful assistants.

MS. FORD: Even though, and I want to say this with frankness, in a recent exhibition catalog of Jennifer's, she told the interviewer that only Elizabeth worked on Rhapsody. [Laughs.] I was totally pissed off.

MS. RICHARDS: And there was you and there was Jan?

MS. FORD: And Jan Hashey.

MS. RICHARDS: Anyone else?

MS. FORD: There was a whole bunch of other people. I can't even remember. Her studio assistants, and I don't know, we used to come in. She was always - she was at a deadline and she had a show scheduled with Paula for that piece and we were totally into it, all of us.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you feel about doing that? You were in some way her peer yet you were her assistant.

MS. FORD: But this is what I'm telling you. Actually this is exactly the point that I'm making, that we - I felt fine about it. I felt it was wonderful to be working on something together instead of locked up alone in your own studio having your own little private nervous breakdown. [Laughs.] We just had a ball. It was wonderful. It was a spirit of generosity towards each other.

It's not to say that we weren't competitive or wildly ambitious. Certainly Jennifer and Elizabeth had a very, very competitive relationship. But they adored each other, to say that it was complicated. I mean, I don't think any one of us wanted to do it forever, certainly not.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other things you did to get out of the studio, jobs?

MS. FORD: Oh yeah, jobs, jobs, that was enough.

MS. RICHARDS: What were those jobs?

MS. FORD: Well, I was teaching some.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh yeah, when did the teaching start? Was that in the '80s too?

MS. FORD: The first - I had so many. The first teaching jobs I had were so horrible. I think the very first teaching job that I had - well first of all, of course I had been teaching children of course.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I'm talking about art school or art departments.

MS. FORD: Right. Somebody - I knew a friend at Westbeth, had a job that he was giving up at the last minute because he'd gotten a better job and it was teaching life drawing to an adult extension class in a high school in Newark, New Jersey, at night, at night.

MS. RICHARDS: You thought you had to take that?

MS. FORD: Yeah, I mean Bob was driving a taxi and he also had a little stretcher making business down here. By the way, Bob made my stretchers originally for a while. He made a lot of people's stretchers. I forgot that. I should give him credit for that. That was good. I had free stretchers for a long time.

MS. RICHARDS: Not completely free, but -

MS. FORD: Not completely free but free from the labor anyway. Yeah, I thought - I think I wanted to have this job. It was horrible. It was after the riots. It was after the Newark riots. It was dangerous.

I don't know how - I don't know how I made myself. I had to walk from the train station in the dark to this high school which was so dreary and I had already a big allergy to public school buildings, the physical public school buildings that I had gone to as a kid which were so depressing, just physically decrepit and hideous.

MS. RICHARDS: After that, what was the -

MS. FORD: And then, that same person actually, I followed him from job to job. Through him I suddenly - oh, so at the last minute they had somebody quit and I was invited, do you want to, would you take my class at Parsons teaching color theory, because I had taken the Yale Albers color theory class.

Oh yes I'd love to do that! But of course I hated it as a student. I think you just have to lie your way through these things when you're young. So I went in there. I pretended I was totally enthusiastic about this and of course I didn't teach it the way I was taught it and it was a hard slog. I mean, it was hard.

But I did get my foot in the door at Parsons and I eventually was invited to teach life drawing and that was a ball. That was the first teaching job that I had some real personal - something personal to offer.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that in the '80s or earlier?

MS. FORD: I forgot another thing about Parsons is that somebody said to me, "if you make up a course and present it to them, you might - they might hire you."

So I made up this course for the night school called "drawing with color pencils" because I was drawing with color pencils a little bit myself and they went for it and so I had that course at night and then during the day I was teaching color theory and eventually life drawing.

And then I started being invited to be a visiting teacher at various places and also sometimes I would fill in for my friends at the School for Visual Arts and then I would be invited. I went down for a semester every week to Tyler [School of Art, Temple University, MD]. I guess that was after I started to show with Barbara Toll and then eventually I was invited to teach at the Maryland Institute [College of Art, Baltimore, MD] and I had various kinds of jobs there.

But the one that I had for the longest period of time that was really fantastic and that was that I went once a month for three days. That was like the world's best teaching job ever and I just recently retired. I just only now have retired myself from it.

[END CD 3.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Hermine Ford on February 19, 2010, at 81 Leonard Street in New York City for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc four.

Hermine, when we left off yesterday, you had just started talking about teaching at the Maryland Institute, beforehand talking about the teaching jobs that came before that. When the Maryland Institute job came up, were you looking for a more permanent teaching situation, and how did that particular opportunity come up?

MS. FORD: You know, it may seem strange but I actually don't really remember what I was thinking about. I wasn't - I'm telling you, I wasn't entirely conscious for a long time about myself as an artist or what I had to offer.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was it that you started there?

MS. FORD: Oh, God, I told you yesterday I -

MS. RICHARDS: You were there for 25 years.

MS. FORD: I was there for many, many, many years in slightly different capacities and I think that I - I think I enjoyed teaching in general. I think I enjoyed that. I think I found it - basically I found it gratifying in some way, at all levels.

Nobody I knew at that time had a full-time university job. I mean, none of us really wanted that. None of us here in the city wanted a tenured university job but I think that we were always looking for ways to bring a little bit of money in.

I told you, I started a little bit at Parsons and then I was substituting pretty regularly for friends who were teaching at SVA [School of Visual Arts, NY] and Bob was teaching at SVA for a period of time and actually - and so I don't remember going out and looking for teaching jobs but I think we would sort of pass them along to each other as people moved around.

What happened at Maryland, that came to me also initially through Bob, my husband Bob, because - and he hates to teach and he hated being a student. He's allergic to schools, period. But he was kind of like, "all right, maybe I could do this," and people would ask him and he would try. So he - and he also, he was driving a taxi.

He was building stretchers.

So somehow he got wind of a job that opened up that it was going to be I think one day a week in Baltimore or maybe two days a week. I don't think so. I think it was one day a week and this was before they had any graduate schools there. This was in the undergraduate school.

And he went down there for an interview and I think there were two people applying for this job, on at least the day he was there there were two people interviewing for that job.

One was Bob and another was a man whose name is Babe Shapiro and they - must of - they must have been impressed with both of them because I guess it was two days a week. They gave - they split the job between them is what happened in the end.

They kind of couldn't decide and they said, well we want both of you. So they started teaching together at the Maryland Institute and Bob just hated it. He just hated it and what he did was he just - he figured out day one the two or three serious students. They had a blast. They remained lifelong friends. Everybody got As. He never took attendance.

Long story short, he eventually was fired [laughs] and Babe stayed and Bob has - well, he never had regular teaching jobs instead he's visited schools occasionally, including the Maryland Institute, but that was the end of his teaching career basically.

But Babe stayed and I don't know how many years later they decided to add on a graduate program - several, a bunch of graduate programs and they hired Babe to - and again, it was so strange. They had Grace Hartigan was also there and they had Babe and Babe and Grace could not agree on a graduate painting program or a graduate program, studio program.

So the school, again, split. They created two graduate programs. One was for Grace, only painting. This still exists at the Maryland Institute to this day. And then the other one they gave to Babe and that, in sync with Babe's personality and his idea about teaching, which was really great when he was still in the swing of it, was he had no stylistic concerns at all. He wanted the students to be free to do whatever.

And so what is now called mixed media is basically what we have. And of course we have painters. But we also have kids who are making - of course we went through many years of kids learning how to make videos and wanting to and trying to teach themselves how to do it and now finally we have young videographers we have actually produced some interesting work. But that was a long time coming with a lot of fumbling around.

We have sculptors and performance artists. We have - and we have students that go from one thing to the other, experiment. So it was a very lively program and Bob occasionally would go down to that to visit. I think he kind of went - at some period he might have gone regularly but he didn't go very much. I think Babe invited him to come down a couple of times.

And then somehow Babe invited me to come down as a visiting artist. He said, "You come down, why don't you come down," and I went down there. There were people that came down regularly and then there were visitors.

So a big parade of people came through, some who came through more than once, some who came and went, and I came down on a one-time visit and I guess it was quite successful.

And so Babe hired me to be a regular - it was called an artist-in-residence, I think the next year and so I went down once a month for three days and that more or less remained my scheduled for the next 25 years.

The only difference was that several times I was acting director of that program, once when Babe was on sabbatical and then many years after that he had a very serious accident and was sick for quite a while and I took over again.

And then he retired and they hired Frances Barth. I mean I could have frankly, I think I could have had that job but I really didn't want it at that point. So they hired Frances Barth and that was a great success and a great pleasure to work with her and neither of us had any idea it would work out as well. I mean I thought once Babe has gone, I'm out of here.

The new director's going to want their own staff. I kept thinking the Maryland Institute is not going to be interested in this program anymore. They're going to roll it into their new media thing because so many kids were doing it anyway.

But they didn't. They hired a painter to run the program, a very broad-minded painter, and so the last few years there were really terrific.

But I - basically what happened is that the rest of my life got very, very crowded because over that period of time, the older generation in my family, the three painters had died and left estates behind that had to be taken care of and even I have this -

MS. RICHARDS: That's your aunt, your uncle, and your father?

MS. FORD: My father, and that - I have a fantastic assistant, who you've met, who is Jason Andrew.

MS. RICHARDS: Jason Andrew?

MS. FORD: Andrew, Jason Andrew, and he does the vast bulk of this for me.

But still, I have to kind of make the bigger decisions with my sister, who doesn't live in the city anymore, but she comes in and out and she doesn't live far away.

But so and she's a great support and I rely on her very, very much for certain kinds of big things. But on a day to day basis, it's here. The offices are on the other side of that door. So it makes all of this very busy and I just thought, you know what, something has to go.

That Baltimore job was the only thing that was really expendable and I had been thinking about it for quite a while - two or three years and I finally just did it.

MS. RICHARDS: When was your last year?

MS. FORD: This is the first year now that I haven't been teaching.

MS. RICHARDS: So May-June 2009?

MS. FORD: Two thousand nine and it was a huge wrench. I don't want to exaggerate but it wasn't a huge wrench. Once I made the decision, though, I was euphoric about it. I kind of - when I went through this conflict about it because - and the conflict was that I loved my students and I didn't love the night before or the morning that I had to get up and go to Baltimore for three days. I didn't love how exhausted I was when I came home at the end of three days.

MS. RICHARDS: You were teaching most of the whole day?

MS. FORD: The whole day, yeah. No, those three days were wildly intense because I met - I didn't teach classes. I visited each student in their studio for half an hour and if you've ever had any contact with young serious graduate students, they are greedy for you beyond your wildest imagination.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, they're only seeing you once a month, right?

MS. FORD: They're seeing me once a month. I mean, they're seeing other people as well. I'm not the only person. But still, it was - and each student is doing something wildly different.

So you have to like turn around on a dime and enter a whole other world. But, you know, especially as I got older, and the age of my students more or less stayed the same, I think that I would know much less about the 21st century than I would have if I hadn't had contact with young people.

MS. RICHARDS: I've heard that before.

MS. FORD: I mean, and so anyway, so it was very valuable to me personally and it was very gratifying to me of course in all the obvious ways of watching them develop and grow and gain in confidence.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say was your - I mean, you weren't teaching classes, approach, if you can define it in some way, to nurturing and teaching these graduate students?

MS. FORD: Well, I would say that my main goal for myself was to enter as much as I possibly could into their heads and hearts and minds so that I could understand what they wanted to do, what they thought they were doing, so that I could help them reach their own goals and I was in the perfect program for that of course all these years, because they were all doing very, very different things.

I mean, if I had only been able to address myself to painting or only abstract painting or only oil painting, which was what was going on downstairs in Grace's - I mean, I wouldn't - nobody would have learned any - I mean, none of us would have learned anything, either me or my students, most of them.

So and I liked that and I watched them try to do - you know, when the first kids came in and started to make

videos and I would tell them, I was very, very frank with them. I would say to them, "I don't know anything about this. I'll tell you straight up I don't have a big feeling for it. But I know it's here. I know it's possible to do something interesting with this. So I'm just going to look at this the way I would look at anything and tell you what my experience is looking at it," and it worked out fine.

When they needed technological help, which of course I couldn't give them, there were plenty of other resources for them in the school, especially when Frances came and she was very attuned to that and she could bring them or direct them. So I actually learned a lot of technology from them.

But it turned out that I had something to offer them from my point of view, my experience, my visual experience that they couldn't get from anybody else, even from the people that were closer to them in their own mediums, even the distance that I was, was valuable to them, mostly, not always, but most of the time. It was very nice.

MS. RICHARDS: Besides what you've already said, is there any other way that you think the teaching, this teaching experience, affected your work?

MS. FORD: I can't say that it did, I have to say. I know that at other times and in other places - I know for instance for my father, he was at Yale at a very particular time in his own career, his own development I should say, not his career, but in his own development as an artist and he formed a community with his students that was very mutually fertilizing.

But I have to say, I didn't really have that experience.

MS. RICHARDS: It could be in part because of your schedule.

MS. FORD: Yeah, also -

MS. RICHARDS: And the geography of the campus.

MS. FORD: Not really. I just think it was a different time. I think that the fact that - I mean there were two things that were very unrelated to my own personal work that was going on generally speaking over the years with millions of interesting exceptions.

But there was a long period of time in the '80s when my students were like kind of imitating neo-expressionism and I not only wasn't totally sympathetic to that, but I had nothing to learn from them on that score.

And then after that painting sort of went so out of fashion in general, it was the last thing that most young artists were interested in doing, except for the rare - I mean, we always had a few painters every year and out of those few there was occasionally a good one.

I have to say that in general, the most interesting students are not painters right now. They just aren't. They don't know what to do with themselves.

So directly to my own work, I can't say.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of influences, I was thinking about you traveling to Baltimore every month, but at what point did you start going to Nova Scotia in the summer?

MS. FORD: We started to go - Bob and I went to visit my sister who was there. We had friends. We had very close friends who had bought land in Nova Scotia in the early '70s just because it was cheap. They just drove up the East Coast until they found something.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, and through Maine.

MS. FORD: Right, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, Maine, New Brunswick [Canada], mainland Nova Scotia, and they just kept going until they hit Cape Breton and they -

MS. RICHARDS: Artist friends?

MS. FORD: Yeah, artist friends. They wanted us to buy the piece of land that they found with them and we didn't have any money and one of them had a little money and he said, "Well, I'll lend you the money. You can pay me back." I said, no, I've always been allergic to debt.

I didn't want to have any. So we deferred. So they started to spend their summers there and then in the meantime my sister married a draft dodger during the war in Vietnam.

It's not politically correct to say that anymore. I think you're supposed to say a draft evader. [Laughs.]

Somebody recently corrected me on that. So they immigrated to Montreal and then because these were mutual friends of my sister and I that were spending their summers in Cape Breton.

They started going to Cape Breton to see them because they couldn't - I mean, my brother-in-law couldn't come back into the States. So they started to spend - so they bought a big piece of land up there and they were camping on it in the summertime and Bob and I went up there one summer to visit them and while we were there we bought a piece of land next to them.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you been thinking about establishing a place to go every summer?

MS. FORD: Well, I had gotten used to spending as much of the summers as I could in Provincetown.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was an option. You could have gone to Provincetown.

MS. FORD: I could have. Well -

MS. RICHARDS: With the family, you and -

MS. FORD: Yeah, I could have. We could have. I mean, well Bob really couldn't leave the city. You know, just every summer it was different. We invented it as we went along and neither one of us could have gone there for the whole summer to my parents' house because there wouldn't have been a place for us to work there.

But I certainly and all of us, Bob too, I did more than Bob did, went back and forth with our small child to visit and spend a few weeks at a time throughout the summers. So I had a history and I knew I had a great - my whole entire life since I was very small, I hated New York in the summertime.

I just hated it. That's why that camp that I mentioned yesterday was so important to me and I just - I actually literally got depressed from the heat, even as a child, and I have really horrible memories of kind of lying in bed at night in a heat wave in New York just in a pool of sweat and there was no relief.

Nobody had air conditioners. I mean, my aunt, when she lived with us in our apartment, used to sleep on the fire escape the way everybody, half the city, was out sleeping on their fire escapes. It was horrible. So I actually in some ways - I mean I could almost say that I organized my entire whole life around the goal of being able to leave the city in the summer. [Laughs.]

So we bought this piece of land which we then could not afford to go back to for a few years.

MS. RICHARDS: Now you had friends who had places in Maine and in other places not as far away.

MS. FORD: Right, well we didn't have close friends in Maine actually.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MS. FORD: I don't know who you were thinking of. I mean, certainly there were many, many artists in Maine, absolutely. But that - no, I mean the Cape would have been the other option and but not that we could have bought anything on the Cape.

MS. RICHARDS: Much more expensive.

MS. FORD: I mean we could have rented somebody's garage or something or lived in my parents' house and rented a garage to work and blah, blah, blah. We couldn't have had our own place on the cape. Yeah, because it was too expensive. So we bought this piece of land and I mean I fell in love with Cape Breton. We both did the minute we got there.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you know June Leaf and Robert Frank?

MS. FORD: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Are they near where you are?

MS. FORD: They're not far. They're not far. They're not - oh, I don't know. They're 30 minutes drive away but I do see them occasionally. My sister in those early days saw them a lot. But I know I'm holding names back from you exactly who was there but maybe we'll get to that later.

MS. RICHARDS: So you bought this piece of land and you started camping?

MS. FORD: Well, first of all we bought it and then we couldn't get back there for a few years because we just couldn't afford to. We couldn't afford to leave the city at all. We couldn't afford to rent a car. We didn't own a

car. We just couldn't afford any part of it, I mean, once we bought the land, and we bought 40 acres.

MS. RICHARDS: Forty?

MS. FORD: We bought 40 acres for $7,000 on a hillside over the ocean that looked 40 miles up the coast.

MS. RICHARDS: Wow.

MS. FORD: And ran down to the edge of the land which was a cliff overlooking the water, but there was no beach there. But we were nearby to beautiful beaches all around and it was a very - it had a long evolution. It was nice.

Anyway, and then several years later we were able to rent a car and I don't know if you've ever heard of this from other artists. There was a man in those days called Sydney Lewis [Best Products Co, Inc.].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh yes.

MS. FORD: Bob made a trade with him and we got our first icebox and stove for this loft. But we couldn't afford to - we didn't have a kitchen or anything. So the stove stood in the middle of the loft for many years until we could afford to build a kitchen.

MS. RICHARDS: When you lived here you didn't have a kitchen?

MS. FORD: When we moved in here, there was nothing. My father took a mortgage out on the house in Provincetown to give us the - I think we had to put $20,000 down to buy this floor. Each of us had to put - we bought this whole building for $160,000 in 1977.

MS. RICHARDS: And there's -

MS. FORD: There's four, it's 5,000 square foot building. There are four lofts and there's the ground floor and there's two full basements that are fully rented out.

MS. RICHARDS: As storage?

MS. FORD: No, there are businesses in there and originally there were artists- now there are other businesses, graphic design studios.

MS. RICHARDS: So you got - you didn't have any kitchen at all.

MS. FORD: No, we moved in raw. We moved in raw. We had our Cape Breton camping stove.

MS. RICHARDS: Bob was working here awhile before. Just the studio had running water.

MS. FORD: Yes, and there was heat except during business hours. So when he and Jimmy Starrett moved in, they each put one of these stoves -

MS. RICHARDS: Wood burning stoves.

MS. FORD: When they moved in, they built this first "T". They built a wall down the middle. Jimmy's studio was here and it went all the way to the back. It was open all the way to the back and Bob's studio was there and they rented - they sub-rented the front out to a cardboard carton place down on the ground floor for storage and they rented this space for $400 a month.

They rented that out for $200 a month and they each had a studio for $100 a month and the one thing they did was they put a stove in each studio and the wood they used and that we did the first years we lived here were the abandoned pallets that the shipping people left all over the streets of Tribeca and Bob would just walk around the neighborhood with a hand truck.

MS. RICHARDS: Like a woodsman.

MS. FORD: We were pioneers in this neighborhood really and it's really very, very funny because at the same time, we were kind of like living in the woods up there in Canada in the summertime where we were also collecting wood and building fires. But it took us a long time to actually get a kitchen in here.

I'm pointing there because we originally lived back there. We've moved around this loft because we had a tenant there for a long time to help pay the rent and then we were able to get rid of him and move all the living into the front and that was really fabulous because it meant that we didn't have to go through the studios to get to the living space back there.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. So you traded with Sydney Lewis?

MS. FORD: So Sydney Lewis, we got some appliances for this loft and we also got tents and sleeping bags. If you've ever seen that catalog -

MS. RICHARDS: I didn't. I've always heard of artists getting appliances and TVs. But I didn't know it went to camping equipment.

MS. FORD: We got a TV. I got a pair of little gold earrings. He had everything in that catalog, everything. It was like - I don't know what would be comparable.

MS. RICHARDS: Sears [department store] catalog.

MS. FORD: Like Sears, yeah, it was. And we got a big Kohler cooling box and lanterns, propane lanterns - and so we go up there the first summer and I didn't realize until after this but Bob was completely terrified. He had no idea of how this was going to work. But I had gone to Life Camp. [Laughs.] So I knew how to collect kindling and blah, blah.

MS. RICHARDS: To make a fire.

MS. FORD: And make a fire, boil a pot of water in the number 10 tin can. Anyway, we had fabulous times. We'd stay in the city the first part of the summer. I'd go to Provincetown a little bit with Erik and then in August we would go up there and we had really wonderful times up there and it was wonderful for Erik, to this day.

MS. RICHARDS: Life Camp for him.

MS. FORD: It was Life Camp for him and just like me, he took to it like crazy and to this day he is a wilderness guy. He can read a compass. He can lose himself in - he loves to backpack and all of that.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you went up there though, did you continue working in any way?

MS. FORD: No - well we did. For that month it was basically a family vacation. But Bob and I always would draw. We would always have drawing materials with us and then what happened is my sister and her husband got divorced and she was left by herself on the top of a mountain without a car and her friends said, oh, no, no, no, we can't let you do that.

So Bob and I gave her - said to her, you build a cabin on the lower part of our land. Our land was bisected by a little dirt road that went along the side of the mountain. So there was a kind of community house building for Helen and they made a little cabin for her and she lived there for a couple of summers and then she bought a wonderful tiny old house down at the end of that road and we started to spend our summertime in her cabin.

It was tiny. There was no running water. We would carry our water in just like we had up above. But in that little cabin, the difference between a tent and a cabin, we both drew. We would draw side by side and Bob would make pictures of the Empire State Building and the Flatiron Building and I would - [they laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: I guess he missed the city.

MS. FORD: No, because that's just what he was doing. It didn't matter to him where he was. But I would be drawing I don't know what, rivers, and we never thought - I mean, very, very occasionally we would speculate about what if we built a building that could be a real studio, could we spend more of the summer there.

We never - and then how would that work, our little cabin was trashed every winter by hunters and kids from town and I thought how are we -

MS. RICHARDS: Really? It was close enough to town to get -

MS. FORD: Yeah, it was, yeah, and also there was a very popular beach nearby, popular meaning, I mean the townspeople would come out on Sunday afternoon and swim there, maybe 10 of them. But the young men who were restless in Cape Breton, the young people have a really hard time sometimes growing up there and they would come and drink and carry on in our little cabin.

MS. RICHARDS: Break into it?

MS. FORD: Yeah, well we used to - sometimes we used to leave it open with a sign on the door saying, you're welcome to use this cabin. Just take good care of it.

MS. RICHARDS: Did that work out?

MS. FORD: Sometimes it did and sometimes it didn't. One time we came out and the windows had been blown out. Somebody had made a fire on the floor. So I wasn't thinking - I was thinking this is not a really great location for us to have a place deep in the woods that's going to be - which is ironic. There's an irony to that.

Fast-forward a thousand years later. So anyway, but then - so we just kept postponing making a decision. We said those few weeks we were there in the summer were so magical and we didn't seem to miss our big studios that much. We could sort of take this time off, spend a lot of time with Erik.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FORD: But one late winter we got a phone call from our friend Rudy Wurlitzer who was up the road.

MS. RICHARDS: Rudy?

MS. FORD: I'll just tell you, the two people who went up there and bought that first piece of land together and invited Bob and I to join them and we refused were Phil Glass and Rudy Wurlitzer.

MS. RICHARDS: Wurlitzer, W-U-R?

MS. FORD: W-U-R-L-I-T-Z-E-R, and they lived off a slightly larger road. In those days it was still unpaved. It was more of a main artery up the coast and we got a phone call from Rudy saying, Sandra Snitzenger, who I knew -

MS. RICHARDS: Sorry, who?

MS. FORD: This woman, her name was Sandra Snitzenger, but I don't think - I don't know. She just had a farm up the road from them and she was moving to Vancouver Island and selling her farm and Rudy said, "You wouldn't be interested, would you?" - because he was looking. He was trying to choose his neighbors.

If somebody else is going to move in there, he'd rather know who it is. So we don't have a golf course next door or whatever, I don't know. So I knew Sandra's place. I'd never been inside her house and I didn't know the land very well but I knew she had a big barn. I'd been in that barnyard. I'd been down that driveway and I said to him, yes.

This bell went off. I said I think I would be interested in that. Anyway, long story short, Bob and I flew up there. I think it was April. I know there was still snow on the ground and anyway, we bought this farm and that's where we've been ever since

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have trouble selling the other piece?

MS. FORD: Well, we kept it for a while. I didn't know what to do with it. I thought maybe Erik would have it.

We didn't - see, we didn't - I forget. It was the '80s. Bob was making some money and the farm, it is 150 acres with a little house, a little tiny gem of a farmhouse - gem, I mean it is totally humble but adorable and a big barn with a mix of fields and woods going down to a very, very beautiful sandy beach, the longest sandy beach on Cape Breton Island, where there's hardly anybody else there.

This is paradise for us, just total heaven and I remember Bob's dealer at that time was - his gallery was Joe Helman and he called Joe Helman up to ask him if he thought this was possible and Joe said, "Are you crazy? Don't hesitate for a second."

He could tell from Bob's voice how excited we were. Anyway, so we - once we bought that farm we were able to spend very, very long summers there because we had - my father was ill, getting older and ill and we had a telephone and we had electricity and we had water.

MS. RICHARDS: Those modern conveniences.

MS. FORD: And so we could really move in and settle in for a long period of time and we've done that ever since and I think that both of us do more work in the four months that we're up there than we do all winter long in New York. It's just a heavenly place to work.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there other things, might be reading, might be other arts or whatever, that you give time to and that are meaningful in terms of your work?

MS. FORD: Absolutely. There's a big, big thing that we haven't talked about and that's the time that we've been spending in Rome in recent years. But yeah, I read a lot. I love to read and there's stuff - I think this is true for everybody, I mean, even whether you're an artist or not.

You never know what is going to be particularly helpful or informative to you, whatever you're reading. You might be reading Ladies Home Journal. You might be reading Literature or you might be reading The New York Times. You just never know. I mean but once you are looking for information or certain kinds of information, it seems to be everywhere and I've always liked to read anthropological stuff and science for lay people.

I mean, I think that from this Life Camp experience and from my life in Nova Scotia, I've always been interested in people living very close to nature and I had this whole kind of pygmy thing when I was a kid. I was very interested in pygmies and that's actually come back to me recently.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes, I wanted to get to that.

MS. FORD: Right, that is a very weird story because I don't think it's unique. I think the brain, the human brain functions like this. But I hadn't thought about pigmies for 50 years until a few years ago and it came back to me in a very weird way and at the perfect moment in terms of my work.

MS. RICHARDS: When - I'm sorry, go ahead.

MS. FORD: Anyway, and then I've also - I think I mentioned yesterday, I was a very erratic student. I was very, very good in some things. I was mildly dyslexic as a child and it's influenced my memory.

I could never be a brilliant student because I don't have the memory for it. I didn't test well. Anything that required memory, I was never good at in school and a lot of successful students have to have - that's a key thing.

So I couldn't do science. I couldn't do math. But when I got older and it wasn't about - I didn't have to memorize anything. I didn't have to do it for a test or for some other reason. I found that I loved to read certain kinds of science stuff and I had to take some earth science in college. I hated it. It turned out that I have a big interest in earth science [laughs] because I'm interested in the process by which liquids flow, both in what we call living and nonliving things. We make that distinction.

But we say a river is not alive in the same way animals are. But you can make an argument somehow. Anyway, or how rocks are formed because I'm using a lot of kind of marble images and marble was liquid at one time and that's why it has these weird shapes, sort of like frozen in this moving pattern of stuff.

So you know, and then I like - I'm sort of a - I'm not really a birdwatcher in a way but I like to watch birds. I'll say that.

So I'm interested in their habits and there are certain birds that have habits that are very interesting to me with the things they build. So there's that and reading.

I don't find - I've gone through a period where I've kind of lost my interest in novels for some reason. I don't know whether it happens to you when you get older. I'm much more interested in reading nonfiction now, although lately it seems to be coming back a little bit, which is nice. That was one of my greatest pleasures for years was to just inhale novels at a great rate.

But anyway, so there's that and then Rome is really, really important and the way it happened is that Bob was invited to be a resident at the academy in Rome, the American Academy in Rome.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember year that was?

MS. FORD: It was - we went there at the very end of December to start in January in 2002 and 9/11 happened that September before we went. We weren't here. We were still in Canada. Everybody has dramatic stories about that day and the aftermath of it. But I won't go into that.

We postponed our coming back to New York because it was so difficult to cross the border. I mean, normally, if it hadn't been September 11, we would have been already getting ready to come back.

I would be starting Baltimore in several weeks. But we put it off. We still waited hours and hours to get across the border because they were so careful and then our whole neighborhood was cordoned off. You know what it was like.

So it was just such a strange coincidence that we were slated to leave the country for four months very soon after. We had gone to Rome briefly, the way people do, traveling through Europe or whatever or like three or four days at a time. But we arrived in Rome for four months at the American Academy. I don't know if you know too much about it.

MS. RICHARDS: A little.

MS. FORD: You know, you're just so extremely well-taken care of there and it's so marvelous looking and it was like a miracle that we landed there. At that time I had been making paintings on pebble shaped canvases.

I still have remnants of that, that little round kind of pebble shape there. I wasn't making paintings that were pictures of pebbles but I was using that shape, like the drawing that's in the living room.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FORD: So I had a few - I used to travel with a few. I went to Europe regularly when my aunt was still alive in Paris and so I would take these pebbles with me and I would keep drawing them in a sketchbook. So I had these little pebbles from Cape Breton with me to kind of make the transition to beginning to work in a different studio.

So we get to Rome and I started looking at the city in the context of 9/11 and it just struck me that I am going to spend four months in a city made of stone that has collapsed on itself a hundred times and recycled itself over and over again with the materials that were left in place.

And so I just - I'm very slow. I'm not a person that - I used to make fun of my students. I'd go into a student's studio and I'd say - I'd be looking at some bizarre image like a murder. This was during the neo-expressionism boomlet. What is that? Where is this material coming from?

"Oh, I had a fight with my girlfriend yesterday or I had a dream last night." Boom, the next day it's in a painting. Well, I just don't - I said usually you don't know what the significance of these things are until after a long period of time.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. FORD: At least for me anyway. So I made a series of drawings while we were there in Rome and it didn't really -immediately reflect this vast new subject matter that I think of as not a change in subject matter but an incorporation into subject matter that I was already working with.

MS. RICHARDS: Let's talk about that a little. Last we left off talking about your work was possibly about 10 years before this. It was the late '80s. I don't think we talked about your work in the '90s. So let's fill that in so we can make the transition to the experience in Rome.

MS. FORD: Okay, well I think I sort of described - started from the very beginning and then kind of expanded. But it always had this duality between natural, what is natural and what is manmade.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FORD: And so mapmaking and -

MS. RICHARDS: And also the multimedia, that mixture of materials that you came to use.

MS. FORD: Well, that was only in the drawing. Actually, that happened later.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh okay.

MS. FORD: Yeah, that's these drawings, these kind of drawings. I have a lot of different - I think that's what you mean. But in the paintings -

MS. RICHARDS: They were entirely oil.

MS. FORD: Yeah, yeah, there are some very minor exceptions to that, but yeah, mostly they are. But anyway, diagrams, maps - and looking out at the real world - I mean I had these pebbles in my studio. I had a big collection of pebbles. I have a big collection of pebbles in every house I've ever lived in. [Laughs.]

But anyway, mapmaking and land sat photographs and then also star maps and diagrams of birds migrating were interesting to me because they mimicked the real world. So that kind of fit into the idea of what's real and what is artifice and how human beings organize and in some cases schematize what the real world looks like.

So I had been thinking about this and - okay, I was making these paintings and one summer I was having a hard time getting started on this big stretcher that I had brought up from New York, and I said, "You know, I think I need a very routine, very ordinary, kind of little warming up exercise to do in the studio."

I said, every day I'm going to make a drawing of one of these pebbles. Of course it was heaven. It was like I used to draw from the model. It was like that. It was like everything else disappeared, all big choices, all big options, all big decisions, completely disappeared and I could sit like that and what happened is - the same with the dune

drawings.

I mean, even though I was looking - or because I was looking so carefully at the pebble, they weren't very naturalistic looking really. I don't know how to explain - and I mean I love that. I don't know how exactly that happens, what the brain and the hand does to that.

But also I think it's because I wasn't really interested in making it only realistic - I wasn't really interested in reproducing them. But I was interested in sort of picking apart and then putting together.

Anyway, then I stared to make larger drawings where I would have kind of a more or less realistic drawing of a pebble and then I would schematize it in some way or I would alter them through color and I just had them around, sprinkled around the page, not in real space. They were just kind of floating around the page and I've made hundreds of drawings like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Pencil or charcoal?

MS. FORD: Well, then I stared adding - no, prior to that I had been making black charcoal drawings. Wait a second, wait a second Judith. You're right. You're right. I'm sorry.

I was doing two things simultaneously. I was making - I was sprinkling these pebbles around on one page and then, because I always made these big formal black charcoal drawings, I started to make that pebble shape in charcoal, and of course I've always made black charcoal drawings.

All the work that I described to you yesterday, alongside the paintings I was making charcoal drawings.

So I have a long history of making black charcoal paintings and that I got directly from my father. I mean you asked me what my influences were and some of my most favorite work of his are his very dense charcoal drawings and I don't know. I must have gotten something else from him, although it was really funny.

I've always loved [Georges] Seurat's drawings and now people are talking about Tworkov, the panel the other night because of the book [Extreme of the Middle: Writings of Jack Tworkov. Edited by Mira Schor. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009] and those lectures, it keeps coming up how much Tworkov loved Seurat and it's really funny because I don't remember. I mean, I know that but I don't remember him talking about them at all. It wasn't something he talked about a lot. I never discussed it with him.

But anyway, that is something that we share and so yeah, then I started making these pebble-shaped, just drawings, just drawings, and people were coming into my studio looking at these drawings and saying, "Well Hermine, do you think you would ever make - what are you going to do with these drawings? Are you going to make paintings?" And I was cutting them out.

MS. RICHARDS: So they're charcoal drawings on shaped paper, not on -

MS. FORD: Well, first they were just on rectangular pieces of paper. Then I started cutting them out because I told you, I had already started eliminating the ground earlier.

MS. RICHARDS: I've seen those, yeah.

MS. FORD: And with other images, so I said, I don't want to put this into a rectangle and make a still life out of it, you know? I'm just going to cut it out and float it on the wall.

[END CD 4.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Hermine Ford on February 19, 2010, at 81 Leonard Street in New York for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

MS. FORD: Oh yes, people were saying to me, "Well, Hermine, are you going to make paintings shaped like this?" And I said, of course not, I could never make a painting like this. [Laughs.] Oh, I don't think so, no, no I don't think so.

They just seemed beyond. I just - and of course I've done this many times in my life - said absolutely not, I could never do that, I would never do that, not for some intellectual reason but just because of something I've already said which is I don't act on ideas that quickly.

I think that ideas are cheap, like everybody has great ideas.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it a kind of a self-censorship, testing is this good enough, is this right?

MS. FORD: Well, it's - I think it's that I have to be sure of where it's coming from. I don't - it can't just be an idea. It has to fit and be part of this longer range kind of deeper thing that I've been tracking.

MS. RICHARDS: Not only are you asking yourself to test to make sure they're authentic, but you and Bob ask each other about each other's work?

MS. FORD: No. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: No?

MS. FORD: That's a whole other subject. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Okay, we'll return to that.

MS. FORD: Yeah, we'll get to that maybe.

MS. RICHARDS: It's a very internal monologue.

MS. FORD: It is. It's really a very, very internal monologue. I have to say too that I very, very rarely talked about my own work when I was with my students. But I did talk about this process to them because I was very, very sensitive to it in their work, that their ideas often didn't come from a deep enough place, that they were reacting too quickly to surface stuff all around them, you know.

I mean, to some extent that's good and important and especially when you're young, you really - and everybody should have that freedom. But to make a long range commitment to me is something else and so that's what I was not feeling right away when I was making the drawings that - but, again, just like when I first started working as an adult after the dune drawings, I thought, well, okay, this is great. This is a solution. I'm not going to be a painter. I'm just going to be a drawer.

But I couldn't sustain that after a while. I really wanted to make the commitment to painting. Anyway, so then I started making pebble-shaped paintings - first they were tiny.

MS. RICHARDS: So when someone said would you want to, you said absolutely no, and then you started do it.

MS. FORD: And then I started to do it and I made - I did the same thing that I did with the dune drawings. I made little tiny paintings the same size as the drawings. I mean, that was the transition. That was the way I could transit and then I made them larger. That's the work that I showed at Anthony Grant, those kind of roundish -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FORD: And see the thing is, those stone shapes, because they were beach pebbles, were rounded from the way that pebbles are from the water.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, that show was in 1999.

MS. FORD: Right and what really changed dramatically in Rome was not only the mosaics and all that but that they were broken and chipped and much raggedier and they didn't have these kind of smooth edges, so that accounts for what these - why these paintings look the way they do because it was the smashing and the brokenness, which spoke to me.

I mean, I had seen this in Rome before but I think really because of 9/11 it spoke to me in a different way, in a more significant way and I was really thinking about how civilizations end, how they begin again, what is carried over from an earlier time, what is progress, because when you look at very ancient art, it's incredibly sophisticated.

In fact, it makes you feel like an idiot and here we think we represent the epitome of the evolution of the human race and I'm thinking, well, maybe not. Maybe we're in a period of total decrepitude. [Laughs.]

I don't know. I don't think that. But I don't think the other either. I mean I just don't know. I just think it's interesting to speculate about.

So maybe it is getting older and stepping away from the immediacy of life that young people have, and should have, and my friend Elizabeth always said, "Hermine" - because we would be arguing, we - that's one of my serious discussions about art in my formative years took place with mostly my women friends and she would say, "Hermine, you always have the universalist view."

"You always have the long view," and I think that's true. I don't know why. I don't know where that came from

exactly but I think it's really true.

MS. RICHARDS: After that period of time when you were close, talking to Elizabeth, which I guess was the early '80s, late '70s.

MS. FORD: Well, we stayed close until she died. It was ongoing for many years.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back just a second to your circle of friends and artist friends in particular in the '90s, who was important to you at that point or who were you seeing most?

MS. FORD: Yeah, well, of course Bob and I had and have many friends in common and then we have friends that are sort of not - that we have not so much in common with each other. So it's very varied. But Elizabeth - some friends were unique in that Bob and Elizabeth and I and often other people too would spend a lot of time together and then each of us spent time -

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: Bob, her husband, or your Bob?

MS. FORD: My Bob.

MS. RICHARDS: Your Bob.

MS. FORD: I mean, because we knew Elizabeth for many years before Bob Holman. But anyway, who we love also, but also Bob and I saw Elizabeth together but then we each would have lunch with her alone. I mean we had separate relationships with her as well as together. That was really great.

But in the '90s, well early on of course there was Jennifer, but that didn't end up too well and then we had a very, very close friendship - Bob did in particular and I did also - with Michael Hurson.

I don't know if you ever knew his work or knew him and that was challenging for me because - in a good way - because we were not essentially - I mean, I admired Michael's work and Bob totally admired Michael's work and that was mutual and Michael was a terrific support to Bob. I mean they were very helpful to each, there for moral support for many, many years, through thick and thin.

But Michael and I didn't have the completely simpatico attitude or aesthetic and it was good because it was challenging for me. I mean I didn't automatically have the same allies that Bob did. But he was a very big presence in our lives and I think I learned a lot from Michael.

I don't know how. I don't think it's in my work. But I think it's in myself and my life. I mean, I guess what I'm saying is sometimes differences are as important in defining yourself as sameness, similarities.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MS. FORD: Who else was - but John Newman came a little bit after that first group of artists and he and Bob were originally friends. They met each other when they were both making prints. I think it was Minneapolis and then John and I had become very good friends. That started in the '90s, late '90s. Andy Spence is a very close friend. I love them both [Signe Newman] but as an artist Andy and Bob and I are close and have been for many, many years. I'm sure I'm forgetting important people.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there people of your father's generation who you continued to be close to?

MS. FORD: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And your aunt I guess or she didn't live here.

MS. FORD: Well, my aunt lived away. She lived in Paris. My aunt was amazing because she turned out to be a big fan of my work and believe me, there was nothing automatic or familial about it. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about that yesterday.

MS. FORD: And this was really a great gift for me. I mean that meant a great deal to me. Of course my father was extremely supportive and he was really interested in my work and that of course was wonderful. But he died in 1982. My aunt survived him for quite a few years and I don't know why it was very special to me.

I mean, my father - I don't know how to describe it. I don't think he was totally impartial. But on the other hand I don't think he would have encouraged me if he wasn't interested in what I was doing.

He would come to the studio and say, "You know Hermine, you're really ready to show your work. You're really ready." I mean, he was very, very encouraging. But Biala, it wasn't quite her - I didn't think she would automatically like the work I was doing. It wasn't really - it was really at a distance to what she herself was involved with. So that was really great.

And then the other people, as a young artist I mentioned Linda Cavallon the other day. I loved Giorgio Cavallon's work. I still love his work. But I mean he paid no attention to me as an artist. I adored him. He was a wonderful person but he didn't pay any attention to his wife as an artist either. I mean, that's just the way those guys were.

Who else? My father was very close to a man called Calvert Coggeshall, who was quite a good painter.

MS. RICHARDS: What was his last name?

MS. FORD: Coggeshall, C-O-G-G-E-S-H-A-L-L. He's one of those painters that, you know, somebody - every once in a while somebody discovers his work, like Amy Wolf, I put her in touch with his son and she did a show of Calvert and she usually has a Coggeshall painting in her booth when she goes to the ADAA [Art Dealers Association of America]fair or whatever that is up there in the [Park Avenue] Armory.

But he was very attentive to both me and Bob as young artists. He always wanted to come to the studio. He always invited us to his studio. It's interesting how some people are capable of that, embracing the young generation, embracing young adults that they've known since they were children. Not all people are capable of that; once a child, always a child.

MS. RICHARDS: Right, yeah. Did you know other artists who had well-known artist parents with whom you could share any particular issues that one might have in that situation? You were following in your father's or your mother's footsteps, and regardless of how recognized they have been, you still are doing the same thing they are doing and there are issues.

MS. FORD: Well, there is - we don't particularly seek each other out. I mean, I guess the short answer is not really. I mean, the Motherwell daughters were really not my age. We would have - we could have known each other in Provincetown after the Motherwells - they came fairly late in life to Provincetown. But I didn't really know them then.

But what's her name, what is her name, I did have a correspondence with one of them, wrote to me and I guess she is writing a book or writing her dissertation. I think - was, I mean, this was a number of years ago, studying to be a psychiatrist and she was writing her dissertation on the children of artists and she - I think she came down here to talk to me and that was kind of interesting, yeah.

That's one of the very rare occasions that I've had. I mean, for instance I see Kiki Smith from time to time. We never discuss the art of our fathers. I mean, Kiki - her family life was much more fraught than mine was. So that's kind of a forbidden territory.

We never even acknowledge that, although she - I was surprised. She did recently tell me that she was reading the Tworkov book and enjoying it, this new book that Mira [Schor] just did of his papers. I was surprised.

Anyway, and my sister Helen went to a dinner a couple of years ago and found herself sitting next to Guston's daughter Ingie. They were friends when they were smaller. They were closer in age and they spent time as kids together and Helen said that her conversation with Ingie was very interesting and especially in that - I think this is - I actually haven't thought about this so carefully until right this minute, that Ingie I don't think I'm making this up, I think Ingie told Helen that she remembered liking my father a lot, that he seemed very kind to her, which I don't think her father was.

MS. RICHARDS: Didn't she write a book about growing up as his daughter?

MS. FORD: Right, I never read it. But by the way, your question and I'm giving you these funny answers, I haven't really sought this out, like for instance I never even read Ingy's book. Now you think I would rush out to buy it, read it. But there's some reason why I don't want to get into all of that.

MS. RICHARDS: There are, of course, quite a few artists' whose parents were artists.

MS. FORD: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And I saw that wonderful video that you were a part of from 1982. I can't remember the title of it but they interviewed about eight artists in it. Not all of them are terribly well known but each of them is really interesting and I'd say half of them had mothers and/or fathers who were artists. Do you remember that?

MS. FORD: Yeah, well -

MS. RICHARDS: They're all women.

MS. FORD: Was Lynda Benglis?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, Lynda was in it.

MS. FORD: Yes, and that's a very funny story, that film.

MS. RICHARDS: There are all women in that video.

MS. FORD: Right.

MS. RICHARDS: And it's a very valuable document.

MS. FORD: That's interesting. I haven't seen it in a long, long time.

MS. RICHARDS: It's at the New York Public Library.

MS. FORD: Really? It's out of Texas -

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, it was funded.

MS. FORD: I think there's a foundation, the Gihon Foundation.

MS. RICHARDS: That's right.

MS. FORD: The Gihon Foundation -

MS. RICHARDS: And a number of the artists were from Texas, so I realized that was -

MS. FORD: Right, right, yeah, the woman who started that foundation is the woman [Bette Nesmith Graham] who invented White-Out on her kitchen stove.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FORD: Made a trillion dollars and decided to, among other things probably - and one of her sons was a Monkee from that rock and roll group The Monkees.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, she was a single mother. I read about it on the Website.

MS. FORD: Yeah, and she was going to have a collection. She was a feminist. She was a single mother. She invented this stuff at her kitchen stove.

She went out into the world and made a fortune and became an executive and she was going to have a collection of only women artists and she started to collect. I think she bought a Mary Cassatt and she bought work from each of the eight of us that were in that video and then she died.

So it was a very truncated project. Somebody I know was out there at the Gihon Foundation and saw my painting there. But that was a long time ago, too. I have no idea what happened.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of that time, are you aware that most of the paintings that were in the Barbara Rose show at the Grey [Art Gallery, NYU] were purchased by one collector?

MS. FORD: Yeah, do you know anything about it?

MS. RICHARDS: I've seen them.

MS. FORD: Where?

MS. RICHARDS: They are in Cincinnati [OH].

MS. FORD: Well, when were - you have to - you know, that was a very big mystery at the time.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I don't think they were the original purchasers.

MS. FORD: Okay, but the collection stayed together?

MS. RICHARDS: Mostly, I think.

MS. FORD: It was a bit of a scandal or potentially a scandal, except that nobody really unraveled the whole thing. At the time it was kind of a mystery who bought this, who really funded that show.

Then it all - and then it was never available again. You could never contact anybody and then people - there were rumors that it was a big tax scam and you know, Barbara herself always manages to find herself in the middle of a big scandal of one kind or another.

But I could never find that - I think I had the name of it. We were told it was all going to Switzerland.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, we'll get into it later.

MS. FORD: But anyway, I'm very delighted to find out something about it.

MS. RICHARDS: Let's go back to Rome because I want to talk about that work. We can go back to those non-work topics.

So when you got there in early 2002 it seems like it was an incredible moment. From what I know of your work since then, it's all come from that initial experience. I think you go back every year or mostly?

MS. FORD: Right, yeah, we have been back every single year since then. I don't know for how long we'll keep that up. But right, so -

MS. RICHARDS: And so it blended with the previous work that you described.

MS. FORD: Well, the idea was to incorporate this new - okay, I mean, because I had already been working with these round stones, I thought, well - and I had been drawing from nature for years - I mostly made drawings that first year I was at Rome and those drawings where I started to use many different drawing mediums on one page.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MS. FORD: So they became much more elaborate than the first little pencil or ink drawings that I mad of the stones and that year in Rome I made the stone - I mean, I had the Cape Breton pebbles with me.

So I would make a couple of sort of realistic pebble images and then I would just very freely add other stuff, like the top of the umbrella trees in Rome seemed similar in shape to me to the pebbles, these kinds of rounded - and so I would sort of add a little drawing of an umbrella pine, that Roman umbrella pine.

And then I was going out all the time to look at stuff and I would say, well, the first thing I was fascinated by, and this has to do with 9/11, you know how every church in Rome and other kinds of buildings too, but you can count on it in churches in the porches, in the entry porches and also inside, there are Roman - pieces from Roman stuff stuck in the wall and they're just stuck in there.

Like the builders, they didn't want to throw it out. They'd have beautiful drawings on them sometimes and they also have Roman numerals and they have - I know, I mean we live near the Santa Maria, the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere, in Rome. But I mean I'm just using that - every place you go, you see these. Of course I had never noticed them before in my earlier trips to Rome.

But in the stucco walls, the builders in the 12th or 13th century, or even earlier in some cases, would just pick these shards, these Roman things that were broken lying around and knowing intuitively that they were not disposable, they shouldn't just be, they would stick them in the wall to keep a record of what had been in that spot earlier.

And I have countless photographs of these odd shapes and they're like these - they have like these, just stuck in the wall and they have anchors - sometimes there's an engraving of an anchor or a sundial motif or animals, little animals and such.

Anyway, so then the mosaics themselves, the reason - besides the fact that they're very, very, very beautiful - but I was really interested in them for other reasons in that first of all they were made - they were made from two ways.

One way they were made is that there were tile makers who made the little tiles in Roman days. But most of the early Christian mosaics are made from broken stuff that was left behind on these sites. They just would break it up and from a distance they look incredibly regulated, like this tight geometry.

When you look at them up close, they are full of - they make me laugh out loud because they're - well, besides the fact that they've been repaired many times, so there's that irregularity, which I like that too, but also

originally you can see how something's supposed to match up at the end of a line and it doesn't. [Laughs.]

So they kind of like - I can just totally identify with this or there'd just be a whole section where it's red, white, red, white, red, white and all of a sudden there's like three reds and you're thinking, oh, they must have just run out of red tiles that day or something. [Laughs.]

So I like this kind of irregularity within the overall regular thing and that seems so much like nature to me, so exactly like the way bees build a hive, which is hexagonal but they're not all the same.

Why, I do not know. Bird nests, different things in them from one place to another, whatever's around, stick it in. So there's like - I have a vegetable garden that I grow in the summertime and you put these seeds in and the same kind - so you have decided that you're going to grow a certain kind of squash and it comes up.

But then, no two squashes are exactly the same. It's like the tile work and actually, I mean this is sort of going off the deep end a little bit.

I mean, I do feel very strongly that one of the things that's wrong with all of us today in general is that human beings think of themselves as being outside of nature and I like to think of the human animal as being a part of nature and that when people are building things, they're building things the way bees do and birds do.

And there's the same kind of weird happenstance and there's a structure that you arrive at because it's necessary for the way you need to live or what you have to do but then there's all kinds of unexplainable differences.

So that's the Rome work and then of course making geometry is like, if somebody - if my life depended on it 20 years ago, I would never - are you kidding - I have no interest in this. I never was interested in all that pattern and decoration painting that we know of.

That doesn't interest me, never particularly interested me and I think - I'm interested in that, that I came to this from a completely different route. I mean, I don't think it's a better route. I just think it's different from my own - different in terms of my own experience of it.

MS. RICHARDS: Thinking about pattern, you can imagine it as manmade, but it's also all over nature. So it seems like you would have been intrigued by patterns in nature.

MS. FORD: Well, this is the thing, but I am intrigued by patterns in nature but I was never interested in it in contemporary art. I don't know why. I mean, I guess I could think about that but I think not at this moment. I don't know why it wasn't.

I just wasn't. Anyway, but because of being in Rome, I really did start to read about and think about why these patterns are all over the world and of course the obvious answer is - I mean, it wasn't obvious at first, but once you think of it it's so obvious - is that they're in nature and the triangle in different cultures at different times stands for wolves' teeth, for mountains, for waves, and this is the reason why we see it in South America, we see it in the East.

I went - I think - I don't know, maybe I did mention this. I went just last week - there's all this new research being made now where they've unearthed cultures in the Danube Valley that are older.

I mean, they knew there were cave people living in this time, but very sophisticated cultures of villages, towns, pottery, blah, blah, predating Mesopotamia and Egypt and New York University Institute for the Study of Ancient Culture has a little - a very beautiful townhouse uptown in the 80s near the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY] , just east of Fifth Avenue, and they have a tiny exhibition of these artifacts and first of all, they're exquisitely beautiful and also they are related to stuff that you've seen all over the world. So I'm sort of fascinated by that.

MS. RICHARDS: So in Rome you had the ancient references and the shard-like forms. I'm thinking about how all these things are in your work and this kind of dreamlike reality, the layering of time and space has come into it.

MS. FORD: Yes, yes, that's right. Right, I think that comes from the fact that I'm not really making a picture of something, that it is more about experience accumulated over a long period of time, if you know what I mean.

This is why I wait so long between the time I start to have an idea and the time that I actually do it because, as I said, I'm sort of checking. It's sort of a radar system like where is this coming from, you know. Is this the real deal or is this some passing fancy?

MS. RICHARDS: It also seems that - I think you've mentioned this - that while you can imagine you're looking down, you can also imagine looking up.

MS. FORD: Oh yeah, oh absolutely. That - the thing about the landsat photographs and going way back to then the bird migratory patterns and so on and I went through a period where I was very, very - I liked to read about Arctic exploration a lot and there was a book I really loved written by Barry Lopez called - see, this is where my memory fails me - I want to say Arctic Dreams [: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape. New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1986].

That might be right, where that - where, as I said before, the whole idea of up and down - it's like being in outer space, both designations completely fall away. They lose their meaning, like up down, east, west, so.

MS. RICHARDS: What about the colors that you were using beginning in those first works and continuing? Do they also, as you said with the paintings in the early '80s, carry along that kind of duality between nature and culture and the organic and the inorganic?

MS. FORD: Yeah, yeah, no I think it has remained very similar to that and like - you know, the way I start these paintings is I put this kind of liquidy color down as a ground because I don't want to work on a pristine white canvas and I don't really want to color it and I don't really want it to be uniform.

I want to kind of break up the surface right away and I tend - and not always, but they tend to be - I'm sort of thinking of nature more when I put that color down, like it's either an earth color or a water color or a color of waterish or sky and then the so-called artificial part, not always, but it tends to be much more abrasive, like that bright turquoise or orange.

The thing about the mosaics is that each individual - well of course, once I had an amazing conversation with Chuck Close about this because I mean I've known him for a long time but the first one time I ever had a real conversation alone with him was in Rome.

He came to the Academy. He has a long relationship with the academy. But he came while we were there. We had dinner together and I said - we were talking about Rome and blah, blah, blah and I said, it's only - I said, but of course, you must love mosaics yourself.

So we had this wonderful conversation about pointillism and Seurat and the painters touch in all kinds of work related to this mosaic and the thing about the mosaics are that the individual tiles are often very bizarrely colored and sometimes they're metallic, like they put gold tiles in there, and it's just like the Seurat painting.

At a distance it seems very naturalistic, sort of. I should say it really isn't. It asks a question that I've always been interest in. Is this natural, what is this? It's like a weird combination. There's something that doesn't quite settle in and fit sometimes the color is so bizarre, especially in the oldest mosaics.

There's a - I think the very, very oldest mosaic chapel, encrusted chapel, in Rome I think is maybe Ninth century and it's so dazzling in color. I mean, you could not believe. It's certainly anything but contemplative in there but that's a whole other story. Catholicism is a whole weird thing, so much that's unconscious there.

MS. RICHARDS: You were talking about how you begin and I wanted to ask you a few questions about methods. Maybe you can answer these questions related to past work or to the work that you began in Rome.

Do you do preparatory drawings? Are the drawings, whole, both as sketches and preparations to possible paintings, as well as drawings and works on paper on their own?

MS. FORD: Well, I do both. I mean, I draw. I have drawings going on that are not - they may have elements that I'm going to use in paintings but they're not drawings for paintings in that - I mean, I have - here's another thing.

Who knows if and when I might change my mind about this. I have no interest as up until now in making a painting that's square like that with those elements floating in it, again, because I don't - I'm not interested - well anyway, I've already said all that.

So I have lots of drawings that I make that are sort of like that that I have no plans to make a painting of. But within that, there are things I can use. So that's one thing. But I'm not necessarily committed to that. I'm not making them in order to use for a painting. I'm just making them.

But sometimes I find myself going back to them for a painting to look at a certain pattern or a certain -

MS. RICHARDS: So would you say that ideas for paintings develop from drawings?

MS. FORD: Yeah, I think all together they do and then I do make - well first of all, I make - I do make drawings for paintings. But that's a little sloppy.

When I make the paintings, I make - first I make thumbnail sketches for the shapes, for the shape, the totality of the shape and when I'm doing that, I sometimes actually fill the shapes in because I - as I said yesterday, I want to make sure that I have ideas for this. So it's not just blank shapes and I actually make sure I have a vocabulary for this shape.

So I'll do that and I have a bunch of small washes on rectangular pieces of paper. I have cut them out. I did go through a period of time where these shapes were cut out. But I haven't done that lately. I don't know why. I just haven't. I've just been making them on rectangular pieces of paper, getting ready to make larger.

MS. RICHARDS: So at times you've done something like a template.

MS. FORD: Well, then, I do have to make a template for these to make the stretchers and then when I do that, I make them to size and I make them on large sheets of butcher paper, you know, they used to call it butcher paper but it's just cheap white bond paper that I buy on a roll and tape that up on the wall or tack it up on the wall and I make life-size drawings for these and I cut them out and those are the - that's the pattern that I use to make the stretchers.

They're not really stretchers anymore, but I call them stretchers.

MS. RICHARDS: At what point did you evolve from making these actual shaped stretchers to the technique you use now, which I think is canvas on shaped plywood, which sounds like a very logical answer to that question?

MS. FORD: Well, now it's even - it's evolved from that.

MS. RICHARDS: Although the plywood has a certain thickness, I suppose you could add supports and edges.

MS. FORD: Yeah, well - yeah, well actually I'm using a different technology for that now. but anyway, basically I mean that's definitely how I starting and it's linen on board is how I start it and it's still linen and the reason for that is - for the linen - is because the way I do these is I gesso the linen onto a big 8 by 10 sheet of board. I'm not using plywood anymore and -

MS. RICHARDS: Some kind of a synthetic board?

MS. FORD: Well, what it is - we'll get to that in a second.

And then I use gesso. I use gesso to laminate the linen to the board. It's like in one - it's actually amazing. I had no idea that it was going to be this simple [inaudible] you haven't even seen these. I did these. I did these.

MS. RICHARDS: Thanks.

MS. FORD: So the linen is porous enough for the gesso to go right through. I mean, I gesso the board, I put the linen on top, I squeeze it down with my hands, and the gesso starts to come through the linen. So it starts to make this bond and while it's all still wet, I gesso it again on top so it sinks in and it glues it flat very easily to the board.

And then when that's dry, I have the pattern that I draw out on the board and then I cut it with a jigsaw. But it's a little bit more elaborate than that now because when I wanted to make them this size, the plywood was too heavy. So now I'm making them on a laminate that is really very chintzy in that it's Styrofoam with beaver board on both sides.

I get it at a lumber yard. I mean, it's inexpensive and by itself, well the edge was a problem for me because first of all, I didn't want the Styrofoam to announce itself there. But also worse, it was extremely vulnerable. There was no strength there.

You could smash the edge in a second and I tried a lot of different way of dealing with that edge on my own and I gave up and now I send them back to my old stretcher maker at that point and he puts - he reinforces the edge with bass wood.

He jams bass wood all around the edge and he sends it back to me and I do the final trimming because I'm really drawing with the jigsaw. I didn't even know that. He's such a genius this guy. I said, "Well, after you put the bass wood back in, you'll have the pattern there and you'll trim it."

He said, okay. Then he called me up and he said, "You know, Hermine, I think you might want to do that yourself, that last trim." And I said, "You're really right because I make a thousand tiny little decisions when I'm going around there with the jigsaw." So now they're really perfect for me.

MS. RICHARDS: At what point does the imagery evolve so you can determine that this is going to be a painting

and not a drawing, this is going to be 6 feet tall and not 20 inches?

MS. FORD: That's a really good question. Let me see. I don't have an easy answer for that.

Well, by the time I get to this, it is a painting, do you know what I mean? I mean, it's not like - so I guess the question is out of all these drawings that I make, how do I decide what kind of a painting I'm going to make.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it that something needs to be bigger?

MS. FORD: No, I already know I want it to be big. I might not know exactly what size, but I already know that I want it to have some aspect of being life-sized in relationship to architecture or a real place, like a piece of a floor.

MS. RICHARDS: Life-sized, the relationship of you to the piece of floor, so it's what you would reach if you sprawled across it?

MS. FORD: It's sort of like that. There is that. There is that, that it's kind of like - I didn't mean that when I said life-sized but I think that's right. I think that is an element of it.

MS. RICHARDS: What you would see if you looked -

MS. FORD: But what I mean is there would be actually that the pattern is life-size in some regard. Although sometimes I go out of my way to make them way larger than they are in real life, at least that I've ever seen.

But I'm just looking at this thing here. I mean, with one exception, which is not a Roman pattern anyway, it's a pygmy pattern, but those are all more or less life-size. The bottom pattern is in a floor in the town of Ostia. It's an archaeological site.

MS. RICHARDS: It's incredible.

MS. FORD: Yeah, I know, it's incredible. It's incredible. I mean, I'm not saying the painting's incredible but that pattern is incredible and it's the same pattern as the blue rectangles up there.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh yes.

MS. FORD: But Ostia, it was the seaport, the ancient seaport of Rome. You can take the metro out to it and they've done - every year there's more to look at because they're continuing to uncover it. It is so much fun to walk through. It's just heaven and last time - we go every year. Usually we take a day out there and that was in a floor in a house plan, a dwelling floor, that I had never seen before.

I took a picture of it and there it is and these places - you very rarely, although it does happen miraculously, where there's a completely perfect rectangular thing that's pretty perfect. But usually they're broken up and marred and stained. They've been abused for centuries.

MS. RICHARDS: I can see here that you're working on more than one piece at once, although maybe that isn't really the case.

MS. FORD: No.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you -

[Cross talk.]

MS. FORD: No, I very rarely work on two paintings at the same time. Occasionally, this happens - it doesn't happen so much now because - but when I used to work with much thicker paint and there would become a point where I'd have to let it dry for a while before I could continue working on it and if there was a big enough pause there I would begin to work on another painting while I was waiting for something to dry.

But usually I don't. I don't switch very easily from one thing to another in a painting. I sometimes take time off from a painting and draw, although lately, I didn't even notice, I don't really do that. I'm just sort of so lost in this one painting and I'm so eager to find out how it's going to turn out because I really don't know. I really have no idea.

Like the other day, I couldn't wait - and by the way, this painting of course is not finished and it's not nearly finished, even though it looks like it's covered up. But anyway, I couldn't wait to fill those two sides in so I could see what that crack was going to look like. I've just been staying up until like midnight every night. So no, I couldn't be doing something else.

MS. RICHARDS: As a corollary to that, do you try to have past work in the studio when you're doing new work or do you avoid that, put it away?

MS. FORD: I do both. I'm constantly taking it out. Sometimes I want to look at something that I've done before, either because I want to do it again or because I don't want to do it again.

It could be either one or the other or a color, like what was that - what exactly was that blue. Like I think I'm going to use that same blue but then I can't remember exactly what it was. So I have to look at it.

So but then sometimes I have to put them away. I don't want them around. I don't want to be looking at them too much

MS. RICHARDS: As you're working, you have this template and you think you know what you're after, but how many changes happen along the way? How different does it become? What happens when things don't work out, not that it's a failure, but you need to change?

I imagine since you have very specific shapes you're dealing with, you don't have much possibility of what you can change.

MS. FORD: The outside shape never changes and it's really funny that that inflexibility, that particular one, I love because there's something so fun and kind of bizarre about fitting one thing inside this given shape that's given. I mean, and I'm not going to take a jigsaw to it and start altering it after I've paid a fortune to the stretcher maker for sealing the side.

MS. RICHARDS: But you could, if at the end you said, you know, that really should be two inches smaller.

MS. FORD: I've one time trimmed off the edge of something because it was so in the way, so wrong. But the fact is that by changing the painting of it, I can change the way the shape is operating. That's kind of a mystery and magic of making a painting and painters have always done that inside a rectangle. You can - the space, one small thing can blow the whole thing into another direction.

So that I do and that - it's hard. When I was working less schematically in the early days, I would make radical changes in my work and in fact that sort of became part of it because say I had a blue field which I suddenly decided to be pink. I mean, I'm making this up. I would paint it pink and decide.

That was a decision, like how much I wanted to really block the blue out entirely or let some of it come through and I often had a kind of peaking through or bleeding through of earlier layers of paint.

So but with these paintings, it's harder to do that but I have made radical changes. I mean, I have. This painting is very problematical in the state that it's in. I just couldn't take it down. It's too wet for your visits. But I'm getting ready to make some very big changes in the color.

[END CD 5.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Hermine Ford on February 19, 2010, 81 Leonard Street in New York for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc six.

MS. FORD: There was a Hermine Freed, you know that?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes, that's -

MS. FORD: Yeah, but anyway, okay.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, what about titling the work? Do you have the titles in mind in advance?

MS. FORD: No.

MS. RICHARDS: Lots of work seem to alternate between being untitled and having very specific titles that have to do with the color or have to do with all sorts of things.

MS. FORD: Right, I've gone through long periods where I do title - and then when I didn't title anything. Early on I never wanted to title anything and then that changed. I don't really know exactly why. But I all of a sudden had ideas for titles. So then I titled a lot of work.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean the reason they were untitled is you didn't have ideas for titles?

MS. FORD: I didn't have - yeah, I didn't. You know, it wasn't -

MS. RICHARDS: It wasn't a philosophical point that they shouldn't be titled?

MS. FORD: No, no, no I mean, partly - well I could be more specific. I didn't have - I like it when a title comes to me kind of organically. Again, I mean, I trust that, you know. I trust that when that happens.

But early on I was very reluctant to title things because I didn't want them to be too specific, like what titles I came up with. Like if I titled something that was obviously - the obvious title, which is like something specific that I was thinking about, like I don't know, just making this up, I mean, like a bird, like a flyway.

I actually did name a painting Flyway [2007] once. But I thought that was enigmatic enough. I didn't think people would automatically think of birds.

MS. RICHARDS: Because you didn't want people to attach a kind of a literal meaning?

MS. FORD: Right, exactly, and then I went through a period where I had titles that I didn't think did that but sort of evoked the painting in some way for me or amused or put a twist on it in some way that amused me. These paintings now I've had, again, a much harder time titling, the Rome paintings.

I don't want to identify them as being from Rome. I don't want to give them Italian names. That comes into my mind, like I could name them after specific churches in Rome. I don't want to do that. I don't want it to be that. I don't like it when people's work reflects their exotic travels, [laughs] you know what I mean? I just don't want that kind of autobiography to be in the titles.

I've been tempted a few times. I have a painting. It's not up, a painting that I made last summer that the perfect title came into my mind while I was making it and the title of it is This Was a Garden [2009], and I love that title and it's perfect for the painting. But that doesn't always happen and if it doesn't happen naturally like that, I just don't bother with it.

It's a drag because it's very difficult to identify them then.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever thought of using a numbering system?

MS. FORD: Well, Jason numbers them. He kind of - but that's not helpful to me. He has a memory like that. He numbers them if he's photographing them or kind of keeping track of them.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MS. FORD: But so he remembers these numbers. I could never remember the numbers like that. one time I - I have made lately - every once in a while I've been making those teeny-weeny paintings like that, the little tiny rectangles and I've shown a few of them here and there in the last couple of years and I titled that - that was - I think that was too tricky actually.

I titled those Arc.hive [2008]. So it was actually - it was archive but it was in a Greek way where it was divided into two syllables, one, two, three, four, five, arc, hive, and it drove everybody crazy because there was a dot between the two syllables. I sent them up to a gallery once for a group show.

We ended up - I'm so mad with the woman up there. She was mad at me because she thought it was ridiculous and I was mad at her because she thought it was ridiculous. It was so important to me for that dot to be in the middle between - not on the right but up - [laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: In your studio practice, is there a kind of a constant atmosphere that you maintain? You have a consistent light, I guess. You're using artificial and natural. What about sound? Do you always listen to music or never or if you listen to music, what kind, or is it talk radio?

MS. FORD: Yeah, I listen to a lot of talk radio, although less lately. In the summer - sometimes I can't have any sound at all and it goes back and forth. Sometimes I'll turn the radio on and then I'll just turn it off. There's a certain - the situation changes.

Like sometimes I have a big decision to make and then I turn the radio off. But sometimes I have hours of kind of repetitive work, which I love. That's just the purest pleasure for me and then I like to listen to music or turn the radio on.

I can't have people around me. I can't have anybody in the studio with me when I'm working. But in the summer - and so I listen - I listen to all kinds of music. I listen to popular music. I listen to classical music.

I listen to NPR [National Public Radio], which is a combination of talk radio and all kinds of music and I just forget that it's on and sometimes I listen to it and sometimes I don't. I'm kind of a news junkie. I'm like a political

junkie, although I'm trying to wean myself away from it now because it's so horrible.

So but I do have a history of listening to the news a lot. In the summer, in Cape Breton, I don't have lights in my studio. I have electricity in my studio but I don't have an overhead lighting system and I'm very dependent on the daylight.

MS. RICHARDS: On purpose you don't?

MS. FORD: What is the answer to that? I guess it must be on purpose.

MS. RICHARDS: You want to work with nature, so you only work when it's light?

MS. FORD: Yeah. I guess it's on purpose. I mean, sometimes I wish I did, like when the weather's very dark and I'm in there, I think this is ridiculous; I can't see anything.

MS. RICHARDS: And you're so far north that -

MS. FORD: Yeah, well in the summer it's very light late into the evening up there. So that's not the problem.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FORD: I have a big - you know, one side of the studio is like glass, I mean, windows and it faces out over the water to a little island that looks like a pebble.

MS. RICHARDS: How can you concentrate? It's funny because here you have no windows.

MS. FORD: No, it's all in my head here [laughs].

But in that studio I listen to Canadian Broadcasting Company and that's a great radio station and I have a ball listening to that and they have everything.

They have fabulous music. They have great interviews of all kinds, serious writers. They have very serious literary programs and local news, which I can never - and weather, which is very important up there.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to the work you were doing in this recent decade, someone commented in a show, I think it was 2003, that he was seeing visual jokes in a kind of a charming sort of way. Have you ever thought of the imagery in a kind of a joking sense, in kind of a I guess juxtaposition of -

MS. FORD: Who was that? Was that the guy writing in the Baltimore-

MS. RICHARDS: I'm not sure. In the sense that things that don't really connect when you put them together, it can be funny.

MS. FORD: I would say so, depending on how you interpret what the word "funny" means. But yeah, I think the word "witty" would be more my word. That's something that one really shouldn't say about oneself.

You don't go around saying, oh I'm so witty. [Laughs.] But I have had critics use that word. I guess that's what I'm saying and I certainly know what they're talking about when they say that. I mean, I'm certainly aware that the juxtapositions that I'm making have a humor to them, absolutely, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And also in terms of interpretation, someone referred to them as having a kind of Rorschach effect, like looking at the clouds we talked about where you can see things, not see things, and see different things.

You're seeing one particular thing or many things. Does what you see in the work change over time and do you have a particular reading that you hope viewers will get out of the work? Or do you feel a sense that the viewer is completely free to bring whatever interpretations they want?

MS. FORD: Actually both. There's a certain kind of connection I would like an attentive viewer to be able to make.

But I mean, the answer is yes to all those questions that you've just asked, that I have experience seeing things over a period of time that I didn't see originally in my own work, that they continue to unfold even for me, and also I really love it when people tell me things that they're seeing in the work that I've never seen before and I may or may not see it and that's fine.

I like that. I like the fact that they're - I mean, to me that means that they're rich enough in association and I like that, that people can bring their own connections to the work.

MS. RICHARDS: You have a collaborator, a writer, Kathleen Fraser. I really don't know what the beginning date of it was.

MS. FORD: Right, that's a happy story.

MS. RICHARDS: Can you talk about that?

MS. FORD: Yeah, we're going to - yeah. Kathleen Fraser is a poet. She's a very, very old friend. Her first husband and my husband Bob were in grade school together in Brooklyn.

But they didn't remain friends until - I mean, they lost contact with each other and then they met each other on Eighth Street when all of us were very young and they were two poets. We were two painters and the four of us became friends and we had our children together and blah, blah, blah.

Anyway, Kathleen many years ago moved back west and divorced and remarried and for the last 20 years or so she and her husband spend half the year in Rome and the other half of the year in San Francisco.

So we always have stayed friends and we've always loved each other's work. But we never saw each other very much. I mean, occasionally she would come to New York and she would stay here for a few days. But I would not see her for a year.

MS. RICHARDS: Does she associate with artists in San Francisco or not?

MS. FORD: Well, writers in San Francisco, she's very -

MS. RICHARDS: I'm thinking I've heard her name in association with an artist.

MS. FORD: Well, she has worked with other artists. So I can't - yeah, she's very well-known in a certain part of the poet's world. She's edited a magazine for a long time that was important called HOW[ever]. It was kind of a feminist poet - feminist - I mean, it wasn't strictly limited to that but it had that and she ran the San Francisco Poetry Center which was analogous to St. Mark's [Church] for many years. She's very much a part of the poets' world in San Francisco.

So but anyway, since Bob and I started to spend time in Rome, we have spent way more time together then we had for many, many years and she has been watching my drawings and my work for a long time and she invited me. She said, "Would you like to do a book with me?" And I said, "I'd love to, I would just adore to."

So that's how it started and -

MS. RICHARDS: How long ago was that when you started working on it?

MS. FORD: I would say that was about five years ago, yeah, and I think it's - I don't know too much about collaborations but I think it's a bit unusual in that the way we started was that she started to write poems in relationship to my drawings and then I would make another drawing in relationship to a poem, to that same poem.

So it was kind of leapfrogging and the drawings that I made in response to Kathleen's work were not entirely different.

They weren't very different from drawings I was making anyway, although there were things that I would stick into these drawings that wouldn't be there except that I was responding to words or images in some of her text and she's a very abstract - I have to say she's a very abstract poet. So we have I think 16 drawings and 16 pages of text and we show - we have exhibited them.

MS. RICHARDS: There's a title.

MS. FORD: ii ss [2007, to be published 2011 by Granary Press].

MS. RICHARDS: And how do you spell that?

MS. FORD: You spell it I-I-S-S.

MS. RICHARDS: And that's?

MS. FORD: ii ss.

MS. RICHARDS: Reflecting the two of you?

MS. FORD: Well, yes, maybe actually, that's very good. I mean, it's typical of Kathleen's work that she would be fooling around with letters.

MS. RICHARDS: And they're all lowercase.

MS. FORD: Right and she's very involved in designing the page with her text. I mean, she always has been, not just in relationship with working with an artist.

So she's very involved with different kinds of typographies and putting the words or the letters on the page in unexpected ways. Her work is difficult to read. It's wonderful to listen to it, to listen to her reading it. But it's often very difficult to read, especially if you're not in the habit of reading poetry. Readying poetry is something - it's like practicing the piano. When you're out of practice, you kind of lose the hang of it.

But anyway, we've exhibited parts of this project, once in Rome and once here in Brooklyn at a wonderful bookstore called Melville House and now Granary Press is going to publish them in the fall.

And so this month, starting next week, in Rome, we are going to make a final sequence. The sequence has been somewhat interchangeable depending on where we've exhibited this, the space that we've had and so now we kind of have to put it in its final arrangement so that we can give it to -

MS. RICHARDS: Are you going to have any text that you're writing for the book that talks about your collaboration?

MS. FORD: Yeah, I don't think - I mean, Kathleen has written one for - that we used for the two exhibitions that we had. But when Steve Clay was here, the last time he was here, I don't know if you know him.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it Clay, C-L-A-Y?

MS. FORD: Yeah, he is Granary Press basically and I don't know if you know anything about them. That is a very specialized art - writers and artists - publishing company. They publish very, very, very exquisite books and in very small editions. Sometimes they're a little - they're a little less fancy. I want mine to be not so fancy so that - I just don't think it needs to.

But sometimes they're very, very fancy and they're very expensive and he basically sells them. He has a list of people that buy from him and they're specialized libraries and university libraries and stuff. So it's not really something that's going to show up at the Strand bookstore.

MS. RICHARDS: Or Barnes and Noble.

MS. FORD: Or Barnes and Noble, but I'm very thrilled anyway. I mean, it's just wonderful. When he was here, the last time he was here, Kathleen wasn't here. It was just he and I and I had mentioned something about this, about not being too fancy, and he didn't seem enthusiastic.

I think he just wants it to be on its own. I'm not sure. I don't know what he's going to do. He has the final decision actually and in this case I kind of trust him. I mean, I wouldn't always trust the person who's in charge of this.

MS. RICHARDS: I want to get back to the pygmy collection that you did. You interwove the Roman imagery, the ancient imagery, with the pygmy, with shapes and forms that come from those interests. Could you talk about that series of works? Maybe it's not finished yet, but -

MS. FORD: Yes. It is what it is. I mean, there are certain parts of these paintings that have pygmy motifs in them even though - which are so either universal looking or so contemporary looking that the casual viewer would have no way of knowing that's what they were.

But it happened because - I told you I had a favorite book when I was a child and I realize now that one of the reasons I loved this story about this pygmy boy's adventures in the Ituri Forest is because, I didn't realize it at the time, but I have some part of me that's interested in how people live like this, naked in the forest and building fires and gathering wood and food.

MS. RICHARDS: Survival.

MS. FORD: Survival, right.

And strangely enough, coincidentally, I mean, this is sort of typical of New York in those days anyway, my parents had friends, a couple, and their daughter actually went to school with my sister.

We were sort of family friends and the wife was a painter and she had a sister [Anne Eisner] who had married an anthropologist and had gone to Africa to live with the pygmies for quite, many years and I'm blocking on the name of this man.

He's quite famous, not Colin Turnbull, who is the most famous pygmy scholar, but the next one after and there's a rivalry between them. Patrick Putnam.

But anyway, during - at some point this woman's husband died from a tropical disease in the forest and she came back to New York and her sister and her husband took her in. She was bereaved and she had left her life. She didn't have a life to come back to automatically and they took her in until she got on her feet.

And I always was hearing, Hermine, someday you'll have to meet her. She lived with pygmies. She lived with pygmies in the Ituri Forest.

MS. RICHARDS: Which forest is it?

MS. FORD: Ituri, I-T-U-R-I, and I should be smarter. Yeah, this is my memory failing me. It's Botswana and -

MS. RICHARDS: I think it's Zaire.

MS. FORD: And Zaire, I mean, there's different kinds of pygmies. There's not just one kind of pygmy in Africa, but these pygmies, I think the Ituri Forest doesn't - it crosses some national boundaries.

I mean, it goes from one country to another a little bit. Anyway, she did move into her own apartment. It was all very charming on McDougal Street. They all lived on McDougal Street in some charming little old-fashioned apartment and she invited me for tea and I went by myself.

I must have been, I don't know what, 11 or something, 12, and I went to her apartment and it was full of pygmy artifacts and she gave me tea and she was so nice to me. She didn't have children of her own. She was just so nice to me and she said, "I'm so glad you've come to see me. I hear that you're very interested in pygmies." [Laughs.]

It's just ridiculous really, this little girl, and I had a lovely time with her and she gave me a pygmy stool, which I still have. I have it upstairs in my bedroom. It's sort of a wooden thing, which I've seen many of them since then in museums and stuff.

Anyway, that phase of my life went out of my consciousness a long, long time ago. About three or four, three years ago, we were - I was packing - we were getting ready to go up to Cape Breton for the summer and I got a phone call from a friend of mine, a woman whose name is Clytie Alexander. Have you ever run across her?

MS. RICHARDS: Clytie?

MS. FORD: Clytie, C-L-Y-T-I-E, and she's a painter but she's had an interesting past. She's done a number of different kinds of interesting things in her life. She called me up and she said, "Hermine, you have to come over to my studio as soon as possible."

"I've got something here that I think you'll be very, very, very interested in." And I said, "Well, Clytie, I can't possibly do that. I'm swamped. I'm way behind. We're leaving next week for Canada," blah, blah, blah.

She said, "No, Hermine, listen to me, this is really important. You have to come over here immediately." I said, "Well, can you give me some idea what this is?"

She said - well, now this woman Clytie, for a brief period in her life had been kind of a dealer in antique fabrics, kind of like a sideline of hers, an interest and a sideline.

And she said, I have - she said, "A very good friend of mine who had a fabulous collection of hand painted pygmy bark skirts has died and her husband has given me her pygmy collection to sell, to find a museum hopefully to sell this entire collection without breaking it up and there's something about these pygmy skirts that I think you'll find extremely interesting."

So I said, "Well, Clytie, let me think about it. I'll call you back if I can find something, an hour or what." I was completely not interested I thought. I said, "If I can't do it now I'll do it in the fall." "No, no I probably won't have them here by the time you come back."

MS. RICHARDS: Where was she physically?

MS. FORD: She was just up here. Her studio was in the west 30s in Manhattan. I'm going around my business

and, gong, pygmies, and this childhood book started to come back to me and there's a very detailed description of how these loincloths, these bark loincloths were cut.

The bark was cut from the tree and the bark was spread out and it was soaked in water and flattened and beaten until it sort of became this fiber fabric thing and then the women painted these designs, these geometric designs but extremely informally.

I have a book of them here. Anyway, I thought, oh, I think I should - I better go up and see these and then I became obsessed with this. I found the book. I had the book in my son's bookshelf with his childhood books, Saranga the Pygmy Boy [sic] [Saranga the Pygmy. Attilio Gatti. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons. 1939].

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MS. FORD: Saranga, S-A-R-A-N-G-A.

MS. RICHARDS: S-A-R-A

MS. FORD: N-G-A.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

MS. FORD: And not only that, this continues to unfold. I don't even think we have the time to tell the whole story. It just -

MS. RICHARDS: So you went to her apartment that afternoon or soon?

MS. FORD: I went out - well, I called her up and I said - I made a date with her for like three days later. I said, okay, I'm coming.

During that three day period, I'm going around the corner to - I don't know what, the dry cleaners or something - I ran into my friend John Newman and he said, "What's up with you, what are you doing?"

I said, "I'm going crazy, I'm so behind, I'm trying to get ready to go to Cape Breton. Now I'm going up to see pygmy skirts." He said, "Pygmy skirts?" Because he's been to Africa a lot and we're talking and he said, "Have you ever listened to pygmy music?" And I said, no.

He said, "I have some. I'm going to drop it off in your mailbox." So between that day and the day I go up there, I'm listening to pygmy music. I'm reading my pygmy book. I go up to Clytie's studio and she has this box.

It was one of the most wonderful experiences. I mean, it would be a wonderful experience for you. It would be a wonderful experience for anybody because these things were in incredibly perfect condition and they were so beautiful. I'll show you when we're finished with this.

And also there were arrows in there. Oh my god. She ended up - she sold it to the Fogg [Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA]. But so it was an unbelievable privilege and she had - because she was researching this to make her presentation to the Fogg, she had a book in her studio devoted to pygmy designs, which I came home and ordered from Amazon and I never leave my house without it, so.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it a new book or something that the British Museum did or something? [Phone rings.] Oh, sorry.

MS. FORD: That's okay.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, so this book, is it a new publication?

MS. FORD: It's not too old.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

MS. FORD: Anyway, of course I was interested in the fact that of this crazy geometry from this other more remote part of the world and then also because, you know, Italian culture has a lot of African stuff imported.

The Romans traded in Africa and they brought pygmies to decorate the courts of the emperors with and Southern Italian food influenced by North African food. I mean, it's very - they use spices. There was a lot of trade back and forth and I think there are a racial mix. I think the reason why southern Italians are dark and have this curly hair and everything, I think there was a lot of racial mix.

So again, I mean, I wanted to use the pygmy stuff because I had such a long personal history with it and but I couldn't justify - like now I'm going to start putting [laughs] pygmies, Aztecs, whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, yeah, there's patterns and all kinds of -

[Cross talk.]

MS. FORD: Exactly, I mean, again, I had to have some really deep personal connection to it. Otherwise, it would just seem arbitrary to me. So I kind of have allowed myself. It is an indulgence, actually, I feel to put this pygmy stuff in the paintings.

But it's so autobiographical and then the story just gets crazier and crazier because the daughter - remember I mentioned that the daughter of these people had been - not the anthropologist, but her sister whose family we were originally friends - she shows up in Cape Breton one summer to visit my sister out of the blue.

They hadn't seen each other for 1,000 years. She's head of the French department at Harvard now and she is involved in resurrecting the work that her aunt did as a scientist and an anthropologist and a scholar in Africa, which has been totally unrecognized because the two men, Colin Turnbull and this guy, completely dominated the field.

So she is involved with the - Harvard has a - I don't know what it's called. Actually, I want to give them my mother's papers too. They have an archive of - maybe you know something about this or the archives might - of women's papers and women's things.

MS. RICHARDS: I've heard of that but I don't know much about it.

MS. FORD: So she has given her aunt's papers - this woman I had tea with that day and she wrote a book about her aunt's time in the Ituri Forest with the pygmies and her aunt was a painter too.

The two sisters were painters and this woman illustrated or made paintings of the pygmies and of her life and so I have that book as well.

I don't know. This pygmy thing just blossomed into - it's subsided now a little bit. I mean, I use the same patterns from them that I've been using all along but the acuteness has subsided now. But anyway, so that's -

MS. RICHARDS: I wouldn't have known that they were pygmy patterns if I hadn't read about it.

MS. FORD: No, right, well that's fine with me. In fact it's better for me. I don't really want it to announce itself as this is Byzantine, this is pygmies. I just want there to be some kind of a, you know - well it's sort of like a mental landscape. It's sort of like the layers that are inside my mind and I want them to be kind of -

MS. RICHARDS: Regarding the possibility of a critical response to your work, when you have shows, are you involved in writing the press release and do you speak to the critics? How do you respond when you think they've gotten it wrong?

MS. FORD: Oh, you know, I never - I don't think it's a good idea for artists to talk back to critics. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: But you can set the record straight if there was something that maybe was said.

MS. FORD: Yeah, I have - to tell you the truth, I have several times made a mistake in talking too much about my work when people like that are in the studio.

I mean, I think I made a mistake a long time ago by telling one or two people that those shapes came from stones because it really led people to very sloppy conclusions about beach pebble and somehow it diminished the idea for me and so I've regretted saying too much.

I wouldn't really go out of my way to announce the pygmy stuff. I mean, I like doing it here in this context and I like talking about it with my friends. I mean, my friends couldn't get me to shut up about it. Bob had an earful. [Laughs.]

But I wouldn't announce it. On the other hand, and what's most fun is when - or what's most gratifying is when somebody gets it. That's really great and that has happened occasionally for me.

MS. RICHARDS: Have there been times though when there've been misinterpretations, misreadings that are out there and you'd like to take this opportunity to correct those kinds of misreadings?

MS. FORD: God, what a golden opportunity. I don't feel prepared. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Well, then perhaps there isn't anything really glaring.

MS. FORD: There's nothing that's really outstanding that I've been waiting for a long time to like set the record straight. I mean, I would like - and I think, again, this is not just about myself.

I think because I've been through this very intense year of Tworkov stuff and I've thought so much and I've heard so many people write and talk about that history, that it has given me an opportunity to think in general about the way people write about art making and artists and I think it's usually so off, so ignorant in a way.

My friend Mira Schor, you know, art historians and art critics are always talking about the canon and who makes it and we all know this and yet - and even the people who do it, criticize that being done and yet they seem to not be able to help themselves or something. I don't know. I don't know. I don't know why. I wish that there wasn't such a big industry around the art world.

I mean, I love the Archives [of American Art] because they're just interested in documenting the artist's voice, the artist's letters. But then this vast industry that supports itself from the work that artists do and have so much power.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you how you think the art world has changed. It's a huge question, since you've been -

MS. FORD: Oh, my God, this is a good time to ask me that because I've been so involved with looking back.

Well, first of all the hugest difference is how huge it is. I mean, when I was a child in New York, the art world was tiny and also there was no money involved at all. So you could just imagine that those two things, that's it right there in a nutshell is how different it is.

So it's not that there weren't rivalries and factions, Of course there were, but the only thing that was at stake were ideas, not money and reputation. So it's not in my nature, my personality, to be very bitter. I don't feel any bitterness. But I don't identify very much with vast parts of the art world.

MS. RICHARDS: You don't feel like you're part of the art world?

MS. FORD: First, there's many art worlds now. There's no one thing. There's so many things, so many groups, so many activities, so much everything and some of it I'm interested in and a lot or parts of it I'm not interested in and it's not - it's really because I don't find myself interested. It's not because I'm against it.

So I still think it's wonderful that artists still form communities and I still feel I have a community of artist friends. But it's shrinking. That does anyway as you get older but it's also because the market makes it harder, this giant - it's like a giant mouth that eats everything up immediately, like instantaneously.

MS. RICHARDS: In other words, it's hard to keep the conversations and the focus on ideas.

MS. FORD: Yeah, very, people really don't want to do that and when they do, it's all this kind of theoretical gobbledygook.

MS. RICHARDS: When you have time to go to museums and galleries now in New York, what kinds of shows most often draw you or certain museums?

MS. FORD: Yeah, I go out. I go to Chelsea and now I go to the Lower East Side. I go to Brooklyn a lot. I'm going to Brooklyn all the time. I mean, besides the fact that my son lives there, because I go out to see them but also I go all the time. I'm going out there tonight actually to an opening that I have to go to out there.

So I go out. I don't see a lot of stuff. There's a lot of stuff. My son, when he talks about the galleries and the young artists that he's involved with, they're completely unknown to me. I don't know what he's talking about.

Sometimes I go to things that he's interested in, which is great. I have done that. I've gone to see shows that he has said, I think you'd be interested in that. So I go to a gallery I've never been to.

But you know I find I don't like to be in Chelsea all that much. So when I go there, I go to the same old galleries that I've been going to all my life. Sometimes if I'm adventurous I'll stop into places that I don't know, that just my eye is caught by something and I'll just go in and take a look.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you looking mainly at painters?

MS. FORD: I'm not just looking at painters particularly. I mean, I'll go and look at - I have some sculptor friends or I look at certain kinds of - Joan Jonas is a very good friend of mine. I went up to the Modern to see her video

installation, which I love. I mean, I have been around video stuff for a long time. I'm not - I love - so I try not to miss too much.

MS. RICHARDS: Staying in Rome for four months [one month] each year, have you met artists in Rome who you've become -

MS. FORD: Not so much. You know, we don't speak Italian. We're both terrible with languages. We do go out and see - Rome is not a good city for contemporary art. There's a few things and we do. We do.

We go to the obvious places, which are often showing Americans. The museums I mean last year there was a huge and wonderful Cy Twombly show, which he has a big connection in Rome. So that was kind of fun.

MS. RICHARDS: But as you said, American.

MS. FORD: Yeah, and we have gone out of our way. One thing that is always tempting is like sometimes, like last year we went to see a big huge museum exposition of young artists from Russia.

So that was something you'd never see in New York, on that scale, and the work was awful. It was just - it was like grade "Z" American, blah, blah. I mean, at least to me it was. But yet it was interesting to do that. I'm not sorry we went but it was just sort of discouraging.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FORD: And in New York, I go to see all the big museum shows, if I can. But I miss things. I mean, we all miss things all the time. But what did I see this year?

I went to see - I made myself go see the Georgia O'Keeffe show because - but Bob has always been a fan and I have not. But it was interesting. I'm glad I saw it. I liked some things better than I thought I would and I still hated the same things I've always hated. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Right now in your studio, what would you say are your biggest challenges?

MS. FORD: Well, that's such a great question.

Well, one of the challenges that I've always had and sometimes it's more difficult than at other times - it's becoming very difficult with this painting, which I thought I was going to breeze through, but I see I am not - and that is with these differences that I've been working with is how to maintain - how to keep that from totally falling apart in a painting and I want the parts to be on the verge of flying away from each other or appearing to be haphazardly put together or barely put together. So that's a challenge.

And then I guess related to that is there's always more ideas, I mean when you're working, and it's a challenge to decide how far to go, you know. I mean, I have made - I've just realized very recently that these paintings are totally related.

I mean, it's amazing that it took me so long to figure this out, to the first horizontal paintings that I made right after the drawings that were divided. They were divided into equal rectangles but they were separate paintings, dissident colors within each one.

Then at some point I would take two and paint across the edge while the others, the edges remained very rigid and I'm really sort of doing the same thing with these in a way.

I mean, they're not lined up in a row and they're not rectangles. They're not regularly shaped. But I'm putting this different kind of stuff together and it could - they could become really separate.

I have - when I made all these little round things - I had several times an opportunity to show them as a cluster on the wall, as one piece, in addition to showing them separately and breaking - like I asked myself in that painting, I mean, why is the break there.

I mean, why not - why shouldn't they all be separated from each other. What is the significance of having three different things be on one piece and one being on a separate piece? So these are the challenges. That's something I kind of have to -

MS. RICHARDS: That's kind of an intuitive decision, isn't it?

MS. FORD: Yeah, well, I mean it starts out by being intuitive but at some point, you know, you want to get conscious. You can never get fully conscious but you want to at least try.

MS. RICHARDS: Thinking about the future, is there some dream project that you have in your mind?

MS. FORD: I'd like to have a show of these big paintings somewhere in New York City, my home town, and this is being proved so difficult to do, so difficult to do.

MS. RICHARDS: This is an ongoing series, right?

MS. FORD: Well, yeah, I mean, I have a lot of work like this now. I don't really think of it as a series but I guess it is.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean it's not finished, you're continuing in the same direction.

MS. FORD: Oh, yes, absolutely. I feel I have a lot more work to make, more or less like this.

MS. RICHARDS: The last few questions, do you know what the title of this painting will be?

MS. FORD: I don't. No, I have only - I should tell you, I have a book of titles. I have a book filled with titles that I don't have paintings for yet and -

MS. RICHARDS: How did that book come into being?

MS. FORD: Because, you now, I read things or things pop into my mind and a phrase - I mean, a phrase will come into my mind and I think that's a great title for a painting and I write it down and sometimes I've used them.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that one version of a number of sketchbooks that you keep?

MS. FORD: Oh yeah, I have a lot of sketchbooks. I've started to do a very old-fashioned thing: I often make drawings in museums and in Rome I make drawings all over the place.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MS. FORD: I just actually -

MS. RICHARDS: So you have not only a book of titles but many books of ideas.

MS. FORD: Yeah, I have a lot of notebooks. But yeah, this is titles. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Well, we have a lot to look forward to.

MS. FORD: No, they're not all of them any good for me anymore. I read some of them and I know that moment is passed and I'll never do that. But some of them are viable still.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there anything else you'd like to add before we end? Okay, thank you very much.

MS. FORD: Thank you so much.

[END CD 6.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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