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Oral history interview with Joan Snyder, 2010 February 25-26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Joan Snyder on 2010 February 25-26. The interview took place in Brooklyn, N.Y. at the artist's home and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Joan Snyder and Judith Olch Richards have reviewed the transcript. Snyder's corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Joan Snyder on February 25, 2010 in Brooklyn for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

Joan, let's start with my asking you about your family, starting back I guess with your grandparents—where they were from and what their professions were and all that, and how well you knew any of them, and then going on to your parents, yourself and your siblings.

JOAN SNYDER: My maternal grandparents—my mother's mother was named Dora Saltzman Cohen.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Cohen, C-O-H-E-N?

JOAN SNYDER: C-O-H-E-N, and her husband was Samuel Cohen. She was from a town called Kovno Gubernia , which I think was on the Russian-German border.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you know how to spell that?

JOAN SNYDER: No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Okay.

JOAN SNYDER: But we can find out. I mean, I can guess but that's just a guess.

My grandfather was from Moscow, and he actually was an educated man and my grandmother was not an educated woman. He was an inventor, among other things. They came to this country—she came when she was 13. I don't really know the whole story.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you know when she was born?

JOAN SNYDER: No, but I could figure it out. She died in 19—oh, my gosh. Well, it's easy for me to find that out, but she died in the—oh, when did she die? She probably died in the late '60s when she was 86 years old, so she had to be born in 1880 sometime. [1964 –JS]

Well, let's just go to my paternal grandparents who I didn't—I knew my paternal grandmother but not well. That was my father's mother. She lived in Perth Amboy, New Jersey when I was growing up, but we barely saw her. Her name was Sarah Snyder and I think her maiden name was Boehm—B-O-E-H-M—something like that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What was Dora's maiden name?

JOAN SNYDER: Saltzman. And Dora came over on a boat with her brother, Abraham Saltzman when they were 12 and 13.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Here to New York?

JOAN SNYDER: Yes. And I don't know how and when she met my grandfather. It's too bad I never asked her.

Getting back to my paternal grandparents, my father's father owned a butcher shop in New Brunswick, New Jersey. His name was Joseph Snyder, and I'm named after him. Yussel was the Hebrew name—or the Yiddish name.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Were they also from Russia?

JOAN SNYDER: No. I think that they—well, I think he was born in Germany, but for some reason I think she was

born in this country, Sarah. My grandfather committed suicide, actually, in the mid-'30s. He actually was a rich man who lost all his money in the Depression. He had been a butcher.

This was something that my father never, never talked about but I found out myself because I became very close friends with an old man in New Brunswick [who –JS] had a junk business and I messed around with him with this junk business. And that's when I had my studio on the Raritan River in New Brunswick during and before graduate school.

Anyway, he told me about my grandfather, and then I asked my father about it but I didn't get much conversation from him. Money was never important to my father. He was a toy salesman.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What was your father's name?

JOAN SNYDER: Leon David Snyder—[he] went around to local candy stores and sold his toys. He went to different towns. And the neighborhood kids used to call him Mr. Leon and they loved all his toys, and I did, too.

And he was a really, really kind, gentle, nice guy—not highly intelligent like my mother. My mother was—we didn't finish with my grandmother yet. Shall we go back to my grandmother?

So I was very, very attached to my grandmother. I used to call her Grandma Cohen. And she was a major figure in my life, really. I loved her. Her husband died when my mother was about 14. My mother and he were on a train together going to New York where he was going to patent an invention that he had made, which was like Ajax. It was a cleanser that wasn't on the market yet.

And they were on the train going to New York [City –JS] to patent this thing and he had a heart attack and died. It was probably the worst thing that ever happened to my mother, I'm sure. It was devastating because her father was the educated, English-speaking one. Her mother [barely spoke –JS] English.

So my mother, who was a very—had two brothers name Bernard Cohen and Simon Cohen—anyway, her name—my mother's name was Edythe—E-D-Y-T-H-E—Adelaide Cohen. And that was very devastating to her. And she was a really tall 13-year-old, so she kind of got away with working to support my—help support my grandmother. I don't know; I think my Uncle Bernie might have been out of the house by then. I'm not sure. [Her brothers –JS] were older.

And Simon was—Uncle Simey was sort of retarded. I don't know what happened to him but he was—I don't know what we would call it today but he definitely had serious learning disabilities and lots of other things. I mean, he was a nice guy; he was sweet, but he was, you know, backwards.

So my mother, who was kind of a genius, worked to support my grandmother and often got picked up by the truancy officers because she was tall and—but they were on to her, you know. I mean, that was her story as a child. She tried to help my grandmother and never went to college, which was horrible, and became a very angry, frustrated woman who was pretty abusive towards me.

I mean, I suffered a lot of verbal abuse from her. She was just negative, negative, negative. Just everything was—it was horrible. And she yelled and screamed a lot.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How did she and your father meet, or when or—

JOAN SNYDER: You know, I don't know. They were a very attractive young couple. I don't know where or how they [met]. It was in New Brunswick somewhere.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How did they meet?

JOAN SNYDER: I don't really know, but I think they were happy when they were a young couple. Think they married [when –JS] they were in their late 20s, though.

But she—you know, her crowd was more an upwardly mobile crowd and so she was always angry that money was never important to my father because of what had happened to his own father. And so she was not a happy camper, to put it mildly.

You know, the Reform temple that my grandfather had practically built, or was one of the founders of, we couldn't afford to go [to] after a while. My brother got bar mitzvahed and I got bat mitzvahed, but then they had to quit because they couldn't afford it.

So that was a source of great anger and frustration and certainly didn't make me very happy in terms of any kind of organized religion. You know, forget about it. But my grandmother was an Orthodox Jew, and one of the things that always resonated with me was going to synagogue with her, because I used to accompany her,

especially on the High Holy days when—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This was your father's mother?

JOAN SNYDER: No, this was my mother's mother, Grandma Cohen, who—no, my father's mother was in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and I can't even remember her ever being at our house. We went and visited her maybe once a year or twice a year. She was kind of strange. I have no idea why or what her—well, her husband had committed suicide. That could be one reason that would make her strange for the rest of her life. I never really thought very much about her.

But where was I going with my—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You said you went to synagogue with—

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, with my grandmother.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: So that is part of my history, which is that I always loved the singing and the chanting and the prayers, the sound of it, the Hebrew and hearing the Kaddish. I don't know why that resonated with me, because, you know, when you translate the Kaddish it doesn't mean anything but just a regular prayer. It doesn't translate into anything that's profound, but the words of the Kaddish are iconic to all of us, I'm sure. So those words have [at times –JS] ended up in my work.

Anyway, so we go with my grandmother to synagogue, and then often she would walk home several miles and I would follow her in the car to make sure she was okay, because she wouldn't drive on Shabbos or holidays.

And then, you know, I just spent a lot of time with her. I took care of her, whatever I had to do. She was in New Brunswick; we were in Highland Park. So that was— that background, unless you have other—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It sounds like she was a supportive, positive force versus your mother, who was negative.

JOAN SNYDER: She was a very positive force, totally uneducated, had no idea what I was doing or why. She died before—I think I had just started painting, so she didn't know much about all of that. Maybe I had been painting a few years.

But, [yes], she was—you know, she just loved me and her house was always warm and cozy and friendly and good food. She was kosher. She let us eat milk with meat. She was really good that way. So that was nice.

And we had holidays at her house. And once she died, the religion thing went away pretty much because my mother didn't continue to have Passover or anything like that. That was only instituted when Maggie [Cammer] came into my life and she really wanted Molly [Snyder-Fink] to have some Jewish background. We started doing Seders and it was great. It was absolutely great. The [younger generation, including Molly, –JS] loved it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you were growing up in New Brunswick?

JOAN SNYDER: I grew up in Highland Park, New Jersey.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You went to public school—

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —and in elementary school, were there any areas that you really loved, that you excelled in? Were you doing artwork? Were your talents recognized?

JOAN SNYDER: Nothing was recognized. That part of my life was eerie and difficult because my mother wasn't—my mother wasn't there emotionally for any of us. I had a brother—an older brother and a younger sister.

[My –JS] mother was good with us when we were infants, but the minute we got to be walking and talking, or something, she—I don't know what. She had a—when I was three-and-a-half she had a baby and pretty much gave her to me. I pretty much raised my sister at a certain point.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What about your father?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, he was out working. You know, he was a traditional father. He wasn't so involved. I mean, my father was very supportive and kind and loving, but he wasn't—nobody knew, in my family, what I was going

through except maybe my younger sister. But I was very anxious as a child. I suffered from tons of anxiety and I never knew what it was.

I think I was self-medicating in kindergarten. I thought if I took a little milk of magnesia to school with me and chewed on it—you know what I mean? It was like I was this little kid doing little medicines that I could find because I thought that would make me feel better.

I think first, second, third and maybe fourth grade were okay. I think I was happy there. By the time fifth grade came around, fifth grade was an awful experience with a teacher that would constantly look at me and tell me I looked sick, because I was very thin. I wasn't—I mean, I was very healthy. I wasn't sick, but for some reason she wanted to tell me I looked sick. And then finally I just passed out in her class, and that became a big—for me a dramatic event.

So I don't know; I mean, it was a childhood that I really wasn't—what I was as a child was I was an observer. I watched everybody. I knew the names of everybody in town. I knew their stories. I knew—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you read a lot?

JOAN SNYDER: I used to read biographies is what I liked when I was a kid, those little yellow books in the library with, you know, Washington Carver and Clara Barton and—I don't know. I read.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I mean, I was thinking, if you were feeling alone you would dive into another world in a book.

JOAN SNYDER: I dove into—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It's kind of a cliché but—

JOAN SNYDER: Yes, but I don't remember getting comfort from reading so much. I don't remember getting comfort—well, I was popular. I had friends, and I think we had a very nice group of kids that I grew up with, you know, through high school.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you ever go to museums?

JOAN SNYDER: No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Were there any images, reproductions—

JOAN SNYDER: I never went to a museum.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —or anything on the walls of your house?

JOAN SNYDER: When I was—it's amazing; when I was young, my father—before I was born my father painted, and there were a few paintings that he had done on our walls. I think I later found out that they were copies of famous paintings, but they were well done. They were nicely done.

Later in life he painted and he was like Grandma Moses. He made beautiful paintings, beautiful paintings, and then he stopped. I think he started getting senile.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you had a terrible fifth grade because of the teacher.

JOAN SNYDER: So I had a terrible fifth grade because of the teacher. Sixth grade was good again, but—you know, I think I had a fairly normal childhood except that my mother was not emotionally involved with me. So what I was doing was watching how everybody else interacted with their parents. I mean, I was very, very interested and curious with all that.

My best friend in grammar school was Jackie—her name was Jackie Kaufelt—K-A-U-F-E-L-T. And I was always crazy about her mother because her mother paid—her mother was kind of more like me than her own daughter. She was a very anxiety-ridden, neurotic woman whose husband was a rich supermarket owner. Well, he wasn't rich then, when we were children. He owned, you know, a grocery store. He then became a supermarket king.

But Florence Kaufelt and I really bonded and I really loved her. She used to read a lot, so she was kind of a role model in some ways.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In terms of art in any way?

JOAN SNYDER: No. There was no art.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When did you—did you ever do art in elementary school or middle school?

JOAN SNYDER: I recently came across two really, really early paintings but I haven't opened them up. But when I was I don't even remember but I did start to paint in my basement. I made a studio out of the coal room in the basement in Highland Park, and I used to make paintings.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was this during high school, or do you think before?

JOAN SNYDER: I think it was before high school and then I stopped.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you get books out of the library of images of paintings? How did you—

JOAN SNYDER: I used to find images on the cover of—like I remember I once copied a snow scene from the cover of a women's magazine, you know, one of those.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Or *Saturday Evening Post* or—

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I wish—I don't think they got the *Saturday Evening Post*. I think it was—I don't know. It was just some magazine that [was lying around –JS].

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you had made a little studio to paint, but who told you what kind of paints to buy, what to paint on? How did you use paint? How did you learn how to do those things?

JOAN SNYDER: I don't have a clue. I just knew that I wanted to make paintings, and I wish I could tell you the year. I actually have the paintings somewhere here because we just took them out of storage, I think, because I would be curious myself. I don't even know. I don't know when it was. I was a kid. [1953 –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you remember what propelled you to do that? I mean, you were probably unique -- in your other circle of friends no one else was doing that. How did it come to your mind that you wanted to do this and set up a studio and buy paints—not drawing, not sculpture? Did you have a drive to make things with your hands?

JOAN SNYDER: You know, it's really a good question. I've never thought about it, because when I was a senior in college, that's when I started painting again, and I can distinctly remember that experience, but the earlier experience— I do remember I copied a [Maurice] Utrillo.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Where did you get a Utrillo? From the library maybe?

JOAN SNYDER: Maybe a postcard, a magazine.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: All through high school, were there any art courses offered that you took?

JOAN SNYDER: I was in the band, in the orchestra. I didn't—there was no art that—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So music was—

JOAN SNYDER: We had this awful art teacher named Ms. Herman. It was just a nightmare. You know, it wasn't anything that you could get connected with or—I don't know how or why I was painting in the basement of my house, but it didn't—I do remember one experience, which is that I did a drawing of my family, a really good drawing, and my older brother, three years older than me, saw it and ripped it up—it was probably one of the more traumatic experiences—because he didn't like the way he looked in it. That was not good.

And, you know, maybe I was 13. It was severe. It was horrible. I might even have stopped doing stuff then. God knows—I'm sure I could look in my diaries of when I was a kid, because I have diaries of things I wrote down. I wrote diaries.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Well, in high school, what were your favorite subjects besides band?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I liked algebra and some science. What did I like in high school? I don't know.

I always got by in school. School was not so important to me.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Were there special things you did every summer that were important—family activities or your own personal—

JOAN SNYDER: When I was a child, the great summer things we did was my parents, for about three or four years, went to Point Pleasant, New Jersey, and rented a cottage right on Ocean Avenue, the main street, and I used to love that. And usually it was an extended family with their friends. They would rent a place and we

would all be there.

The memories I have of that is walking my sister in a baby carriage down the boardwalk because I would take care of her. And she was really, really pretty, with blonde curly hair, and everybody would stop me and talk about her. You know, she was a baby. So I loved being at the beach. But then we stopped doing that. I'm sure that they couldn't afford it at a certain point.

And then I have—you know, my mother was not very inventive. They didn't have money but museums were free. It's not like she thought, well, let's take the children to a museum. No, she never did that. She never went to concerts. She never—we had absolutely no literature, art. We had a little bit of music in the house. I remember her playing Tchaikovsky or something like that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: On the phonograph?

JOAN SNYDER: On the phonograph, but it wasn't—it wasn't like permeating our lives or—[maybe –JS] it was once in a while. She worked. She had to work, and I had to come home after school and put the dinner up, take care of my sister. Sometimes she would scream over the phone that I had to dust, [set the table, turn on the oven, etc. –JS].

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Oh, my god.

JOAN SNYDER: It was—you know, it was hard. It was really hard.

My brother was a very shy, brilliant, handsome young man, boy, who never—almost never spoke. He hid in his room all the time. He came out for meals. We had meals together. And, I mean, he had a really hard time. He was a kid who, everybody thought he should play sports and he didn't want to play sports so he probably had a lot of trouble with that.

He put himself through college, became an engineer. That's another story altogether about my brother, but growing up , I remember one summer I started a summer—I started a day camp when I was [maybe in the –JS] seventh grade. So I would gather little children from the neighborhood and take them to Donaldson Park, which was about five blocks down from our house. [1952-1953? –JS]

So that was a big venture because I made a little bit of money. I remember being very anxious during that [time –JS], that was a little bit of responsibility for a kid that age to start a summer camp.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you didn't get to go to sleep-away camp.

JOAN SNYDER: I didn't get to go to camp. I never went to camp. Jackie—all my friends—they were all upwardly mobile. So that was hard because they all went to camp, they did this, they did that. You know, they did things that sort of—it was nouveau riche at the time, is what we called it. And I didn't do that.

So I mulled and dwelled, and there was a woods across the street from our house that I absolutely loved. I spent a lot of time in the woods and just alone, just being in the woods and looking at things and nature.

And that was very important because these were like the suburbs. You know, it's not real suburban but they were old wooden houses with lawns and things. It was kind of—it wasn't bad look-wise. And we lived in a two-family house. We were on the bottom floor. My mother and father [had] bought a house with friends of theirs.

The first house we lived in when I was a really little child, next door something horrible happened. Somebody got murdered in that house. I've always tried to find that out. Anyway, and then we moved to another place on Cedar Avenue to rent and then they bought this house. So we owned half of a house with this family that—I'm not going to go into that because I'm not going to talk publicly about them.

But there was a family across the street from us that I really loved, I was very attached to, the Williams. He was a doctor and she was a nurse and they had five kids, which was just unheard of. I mean, all the Jewish mothers in the neighborhood used to say," oh, my god, she's having another kid," you know, but they were great.

I mean, they lived in this really nice house right across the street, and I was very, very close to Irene, the mother, and just loved all these little kids that she kept having, and watching how independent they were. I mean, she used to let little Paul, when he was two years old with his diapers, take his bicycle all the way around the block, you know, and I just loved watching that. And my mother would just say, "how can she do that?" You know, "how can she"—whatever. They were very judgmental, but I thought it was great.

I was watching everybody. There was a family next to us that was crazy that used to beat their kids, so I used to hear through my bedroom window. They used to physically—these were Jewish people—abuse their child every day, screaming at this little kid, Toby, and it was horrible. And I heard that a lot.

And then the next house down was this other family that I watched carefully because this woman had a son who had died, and then her next son, who was my age, stuttered, so I was very curious about that. This was my life.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you finished high school, were you certain that you'd go to—

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, so there was a major thing that I haven't mentioned, which was that in seventh grade I fell madly in love with David Rackmill, and we were madly in love through high school, and it was a [serious–JS] "Romeo and Juliet" thing.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: R-A-C-K?

JOAN SNYDER: Romeo and Juliet, believe me. It was so intense. And then I was also madly in love with my band leader, Connie Atkinson. He was the nicest man. We loved him. Mr. A we used to call him.

So you know, I did find people in my life to connect with and who cared about me and who I cared about. And also I was popular in high school. And David and I had this big romance, but when we were seniors in high school, his mother, who was my mother's best friend, Vivian Rackmill—who didn't like me very much, I guess—took David out of high school and put him in private school in Philadelphia.

So that was the tragedy of my life [at the time –JS], which was, David was gone. She took him away. And Jackie's mother put her in Rutgers Prep, which was a private high school. So my best friend and my boyfriend were gone, so I had the band. [And –JS], believe me, there was no art anywhere. [Laughs.] This was really my life.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What instrument did you play in the band?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I started by playing the drums and then I started getting sores on—[a –JS] water on the knee kind of thing, and my mother said, "Either quit the band or learn a new instrument." So I learned the clarinet. I played the clarinet from then on, and I loved it. I like the drums and I love the clarinet, too.

And I used to go on Saturday morning and help Mr. A make 50 baloney sandwiches for the band when we would go out to the football games. So that was my life. David would come in once in a while from Philadelphia, and then sometimes he would climb in the window and sneak in my bedroom. We weren't having sex but we were—it was intense physically. I was not having sex per se, but it was—we were madly in love with each other.

Then, lo and behold, when I think I was a freshman in college or sophomore or [there about –JS], David got married.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Very young.

JOAN SNYDER: Very young. It was devastating—absolutely devastating. We may have been broken up by then, I don't know, but he and I had been planning to get married forever, and then he got married. So that was the end of that, although it was really hard for years.

And then I went to Douglass [Residential] College [at Rutgers University, NJ]. I commuted.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you were graduating high school, there wasn't any question—you knew you would go to college, but how did you decide where to go to college? Was it all a question of money or—

JOAN SNYDER: Well, because I never went to camp and I never went anywhere and I never went away, I had phobias about going away, and my parents couldn't afford—there wasn't even a question about—I don't think I even applied to other schools. Douglass was in New Brunswick. It was $250 tuition a semester. They could do it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You could commute and live at home and go to college?

JOAN SNYDER: I commuted and lived at home, which, too bad but I did, so it wasn't so interesting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And you stayed there for how long?

JOAN SNYDER: Four years.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Majoring in what?

JOAN SNYDER: I started out by majoring in sociology—no, in math; I'm sorry. I started out by majoring in math, and then I changed my major to sociology. I really wanted to be an anthropology major but I think they didn't have an anthropology major. I took a course. I loved anthropology. I already loved looking at all these iconic things and totems and ruins and there was something there for me, but they didn't have that major or I couldn't get in. I think they did not have that major.

So I was a sociology major, and it might have been after meeting the sociology teacher who then I got very involved with, in not a great way, with [her –JS] family, because Joan looking for a family, and finding another family.

And it's a very long story. Her name was Emily Alman and—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: A-L-L?

JOAN SNYDER: A-L-M-A-N, and David Alman. They headed the committee to save the Rosenbergs [Julius and Ethel]. That's who they were. He got blacklisted. [David –JS] was a wonderful novelist who got blacklisted. They lived on a farm in Englishtown, New Jersey, which is where a lot of people who were involved in all that ended up in places like Englishtown, New Jersey. I knew Englishtown because my father used to go to the flea markets with his toys.

So I used to go to the flea markets with my father, and I loved it. I absolutely love the flea markets. To this day, if I need to relax and be 100-percent happy, I'll go to a flea market.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you were going then with your father, were you—did you have your own collection of anything?

JOAN SNYDER: No. I would help him sell toys and wind-up the toys and demonstrate the toys, and then I would run around the flea market sometimes and look at things.

So that was in Englishtown, New Jersey, so we [spend a lot of time –JS] in Englishtown and so I knew Englishtown a little bit. My father went to different flea markets on different nights, different days—I mean, Saturday, Sunday, Friday—but the Englishtown one was the one that I usually went [to –JS] with him. And my mother used to go too sometimes. I have a little drawing that I made of us at the Englishtown [Market –JS] with my father. It's really nice.

Where was I going with—oh, the Almans. So they had a certain mystique for me because they were political and they had points of view and they had passions and—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: That was something neither of your parents had?

JOAN SNYDER: No. Well, my father was a Republican; my mother was a Democrat. I don't think I realized all of that quite until I got a little older, but—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: They weren't radicals in any way?

JOAN SNYDER: He liked Ike and she was more progressive. They weren't radicals in any way, no. I mean, she was too busy worrying about—they were too busy worrying about money, and they had three kids. So no. They could have been political but they weren't.

So the Almans were fascinating to me. Emily Alman was—she died a few years ago. David is still alive. I don't know— I was very naïve. I was in college but I kind of fell in love with her. She did everything but take me to bed. It was beyond a friendship, you know. It was a lot of physical contact, but I guess she stopped herself.

But I can safely say that she was a mentally disturbed human being, and certainly exploitative of me in so many ways. I would never do to a young woman what she did to me. And she had two daughters. And apparently she did it to other young women, but I knew nothing about her history or anything like that. All I know is I got very involved with their family.

That went on for years. And that—you know, it was hurtful to my mother because at a certain point I moved out and moved in with them and blah, blah, blah. We talked about them all the time.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you were still—

JOAN SNYDER: And I started—I guess the thing with the Almans, the hook with the Almans, was I had started painting and they loved my work.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Where were you painting at that point? In your bedroom?

JOAN SNYDER: No. I got out of Douglass in '62.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Well, back up for a second. You changed your major at the end of—or you didn't change your major but you took an art class as a senior?

JOAN SNYDER: I didn't change my major; I took an art class as a senior in college, and because—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: That was a painting class?

JOAN SNYDER: A painting class.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This was a random elective?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I fought very hard for it because they wanted me to take 101 this, 101 that, basics, and I said, "I don't want basics; I just want to paint." I don't know why I knew I wanted to paint. I'd not painted in many, many, many years, but I said I just think I want to paint.

So I signed up for a painting class on Rutgers campus. I had a teacher named Billy Pritchard—P-R-I-T-C-H-A-R-D, Billy. And, if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here today, painting, at all. This is how important a teacher can be. And I was making paintings of my grandmother. I have all these early paintings. I have pictures of them.

I was making paintings of the Berlin Wall. I was reading an Ernest Hemingway book, [about Mexico and –JS] the revolution. I made a painting of that. Was I making—when was I making these paintings, before or after Billy Pritchard? And now I don't—this was after Billy.

So in Billy's class we were doing still lifes, very conventional—set up the still life, make a painting. And then at one point I think he said, "You know, do whatever you want". So I made a painting of my brother and sister-in-law, a portrait of them. And he came up to me one day and he said to me, how do you like Jawlensky? I said I'd never heard of Jawlensky.

So he raced me up to the slide room and he showed me German and Russian Expressionism, and he showed me Jawlensky, and from that day on, you know, my life had changed, because I looked at these paintings—and he showed me a [Alexej Georgewitsch von] Jawlensky painting of a man with a pipe in his mouth—my brother had a pipe in his mouth in my painting—and all the colors were very similar.

It's not [as if –JS] my painting was a great painting or anything, but it was a good, interesting, young person's painting. I mean, it was laying down paint, in a slightly impressionistic, cubistic way, whatever, because I couldn't draw or anything but I was just doing this painting of my brother and sister-in-law, mostly out of how I felt about them.

And he showed me all these paintings, and from then on, I started looking at the Russian and Germans because I'm Russian and German. That's my background. It completely resonated with me and it does to this day resonate with me.

So that was [my senior year –JS] in college, and then—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did he suggest you go to museums at that point, or did you?

JOAN SNYDER: I don't remember. I don't think I did.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So the images are from these slides?

JOAN SNYDER: The images that I saw were from slides, because I didn't have an art history course until I was in graduate school. I think that the reason I became the painter that I am was because I didn't have a background. I knew nothing.

I wasn't coming from any historical point of view except this expressionistic thing, which—you know, I looked at [Maurice de] Vlaminck, and then when I was living on the farm I was making Vlaminck-like snow scenes and things like that because I loved Vlaminck.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So after you graduated then in '62, I think—

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —did you directly go to graduate school?

JOAN SNYDER: No. What happened was—I don't know what—there was a boat dock in New Brunswick, and I went down there, and there was this gorgeous room right on the river. And I asked the boat dock owner if I could rent that. [It was–JS] a little separate building. It was about the size of this room here, maybe 18 by 20 or 30—not that big. But he rented it to me and—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you have money saved up from working?

JOAN SNYDER: I always worked. I always, always had part-time jobs because my parents couldn't give me money. So I always worked in stores. I worked at the Rutgers peach farms when I was kid in the summers. I used to thin peach trees or work as a waitress at [Rutgers –JS] conventions. I worked in drugstores in New Brunswick. I remember loving the little Hummel figures, and all that crap that they sold. I liked all that stuff. So I just worked—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So when you graduated you had money to rent this place.

JOAN SNYDER: I rented this place—yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It was a working space, not a living—

JOAN SNYDER: It was a working space. It was not a living space. I lived at home. Those were the days of the anti-poverty programs. I [worked –JS] for Upward Bound, I got involved working with anti-poverty programs. That's how I was making my money then. They paid pretty well. I was teaching kids art.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Where? In what kind of school?

JOAN SNYDER: It wasn't a school. These were after-school and summer programs for [teenagers who qualified to be in the programs. Poor kids in the area. [A government sponsored program –JS].

Sol Gordon was very involved, and Judith Gordon, who I loved. Judith was a psychologist. Sol was a psychologist. Sol was very involved in sex education for teenagers. He became an important voice for all that. Larry Hopps was another [man –JS] who I worked for during that time, and he was also a significant figure with those kind of programs.

And then I rented that studio, and my mother was so freaked out that I was going to be an artist and not a social worker because—" I sent you to college to be a social worker, to be a sociology major, a social worker; you have to get a job as a social worker." No, I want to be a painter.

Her biggest fear was that I was going to be a painter and I was going to go to Greenwich Village—this is her silly fear fantasy—I was going to meet a black man and get married or sleep with or do something with—do something that I shouldn't be doing as a young Jewish woman. Had she only lived to see my daughter marry a black man. [Laughs.] She would be turning over—I don't know what she would do. She became easier as she got older, but who knows?

Anyway, that was her big fear and that was her upset, and I didn't care. I had to paint. Because when I started painting, I knew that this was something that one day I was going to be very good at. And this was long before I even made one good painting. It took me eight years to make my first really good—what I thought was my first really good painting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: During that period of time you were using oils?

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, yes, oils from the very beginning.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: Acrylics in graduate school. But I knew that this was a way for me to speak, and I knew that I had never really spoken my heart or my—you know, what I was thinking or feeling or—I just knew it was going to be a way for me to speak, or it was already a way for me to speak—I made paintings of people that were close family friends, that were relatives. I made a painting of my grandmother's funeral in—I think it must have been '64.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You said you couldn't draw, or you hadn't taken life drawing. Did you feel a lack, a sense, that you wanted to do this painting of the funeral but you really didn't know how to render those figures right, or you didn't know perspective or—

JOAN SNYDER: No, I never worried about that. I just didn't. It wasn't part of my—nobody was saying to me, why can't you draw. People liked my paintings. I liked my paintings.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Well, you weren't saying it to yourself.

JOAN SNYDER: No, I wasn't saying it to myself. In graduate school I did take some life drawing, which was fun. I enjoyed it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you rented this space, and how long did you work there before you actually decided —and how did you decide -- you needed to go to graduate school?

JOAN SNYDER: So I rented this space and painted—that was in '63—my guess is that Emily might have been the person to suggest graduate school. I'm not remembering exactly but she was [at Rutgers] part of that community. And Rutgers' graduate painting program was on the Douglass campus at the time.

So then I got it in my head, well, maybe I will go to graduate school for painting. And what I did was I painted and painted and painted in this space, and I worked, and I met this—what was his name—Moe, the junk guy. That's when I met Moe. Moe and I used to hang out. I loved Moe. He sold junk.

[END CD1.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards, interviewing Joan Snyder on February 25, 2010 in Brooklyn, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

Talking about approaching the idea of graduate school.

JOAN SNYDER: So I was—this had to be 1963—painting. Emily and David were very involved with my paintings. They would come to the studio and look, and I think they bought a painting. This was my really early work.

Then, after the idea of graduate school was introduced, I piled all my paintings in my car and drove them up the hill to the art department. [Laughs.] It was a very unconventional way to apply to graduate school. And I went in and I asked for the chairman of the department and I told him that my paintings were in the car and could I show them to him? So he said yes.

So I brought my paintings in and showed them to him, and he—what was his reaction? I'll tell you what ended up happening was that they—because I had just that one undergraduate art course, they ended up letting me come for a year non-matriculated. So I spent three years in graduate school. I went for a year in '64 as a non-matriculated student and just took lots of courses.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Both studio and art history?

JOAN SNYDER: Studio and art history. And then I got my degree in '66, but it was absolutely the best experience of my life up to that point because we had a wonderful, wonderful group of students.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you continue living at home?

JOAN SNYDER: No. I got an apartment in New Brunswick when I was in—I think I was living with the Almans in Englishtown, New Jersey, in '63 because I was taking care of their daughter because they were making a movie. So that was '63, so I would commute back and forth to school.

In '65 or '64, I got an apartment in New Brunswick, a little garret apartment, and then I lived on my own ever since that. And then I got another apartment in New Brunswick and—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you maintain that studio by the water as well?

JOAN SNYDER: No, the studio by the water was gone when I got into graduate school. I gave that up in probably '63.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You had a painting space in school?

JOAN SNYDER: [. . . –JS] I had space in school. I didn't paint at home. We had studios.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Are there any particularly important teachers, faculty members that you want to recall?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, the most important faculty member was Mark Berger, who actually was an art history teacher, but he was a—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: B-E-R-G?

JOAN SNYDER: It's M-A-R-K-E-L—Markel Berger, or Mark—B-E-R-G-E-R—who actually was a painter himself, but he was an art history teacher there, and he really connected with my work and was very, very helpful to me with my work. My painting teacher was way too sophisticated for me. You know, I was kind of a primitive on some level.

[I had –JS] a painting teacher named Ulfred Wilke.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Ulfred?

JOAN SNYDER: Ulfred—U-L-F-R-E-D, —W-I-L-K-E. I'm sure if you Googled him you would [find him –JS]. But he

couldn't talk to me about my paintings. He would come in and say, "oh, that's good; make six more of those; make 10 more"—I mean, that's basically all he could say to me. We didn't relate. But Mark was really—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: At that point you were studying art history. Did you start responding to certain artists or certain periods in art history that influenced what you were doing?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I do think that—yes, I learned about Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock. Those were—Paul Klee, Kandinsky—those were the people that influenced me when I was a young painter, I think in graduate school.

There was a lot going on around Minimal art, Color Field Painting and Pop Art, none of which interested me. In fact, color-field painting was what I was working against. I always knew that [Mark] Rothko was a good painter. I think he was a very good painter, and Motherwell, but I also knew that their paintings weren't enough for me. I mean, I would go to a museum and look at one of their paintings and then [too quickly –JS] turn away and that would be it. There would be nothing else there for me.

So I—and then Minimalism, of course. Robert Morris was my sculpture teacher at one point, which was very amusing, because everybody was making boxes and I was making a plaster angel.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What did he—

JOAN SNYDER: —that had fringe and plastic flowers and it was on a plywood board with wheels and—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How did you—

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, he just hated it. Keith Sonnier was making boxes. I don't know what Jackie [Winsor] was doing [at that point –JS].

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How do you think you gave yourself permission to do such a—the kind of work that was so forbidden at that point?

JOAN SNYDER: It was forbidden.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I mean, it's very courageous.

JOAN SNYDER: I know why; because it was so important to me that no one was going to stand in my way. It was like, this was what I love, this was my passion, this was what I wanted to do. I knew I had to take different steps in different stages, and I also knew that I had my own voice, even at that point.

So you know, Robert Morris wasn't going to get in my way. I thought it was—you know, he became much more—his work became much more expressionistic after that, but at the time it was so minimal. To me it was silly, these gray boxes—make a gray box. I don't know, maybe I wasn't sophisticated enough to get it but it just wasn't my world.

And I was going from one step to another. You know, in graduate school, the year that I was non-matriculated, I remember giving myself assignments: Now you're going to make a painting with one figure. Now you're going to put two figures in a painting. I would give myself assignments and then I would do it: Now you're going to forget about all the figure stuff and just think about color. Now you're going to worry about the drawing.

This is what I did. This wasn't coming from any teacher. I was just educating myself, and most of my colleagues or fellow students had been to art school [as undergraduates –JS]. They [had –JS] been making art most of their lives. So I wasn't where they were, but you know, I was doing my own thing.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: At what point do you think you saw yourself as an artist? Was it before graduate school? Was it when you got that studio?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I always called myself a student of the arts. It took me a long time to call myself an artist. But I knew when I got that studio, that's really what I wanted to do. I really—you know, it was it; it was the only thing. It was a deep passion that I wanted to pursue.

And I wanted to invent my own language, and it took me years to get to those stroke paintings because it took a lot of time to kind of get down to that point where I was abstracting—you know, making this abstract language for myself.

Because I'm having a print retrospective. We've gone over all my notebooks and all my drawers and all—

[Cross Talk.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: We'll talk about that probably tomorrow.

JOAN SNYDER: We've gone over everything, and I found—not that I didn't lose them, but I've been reading all my old diaries because the curator wanted to—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When did you start keeping diaries related to your art-making?

JOAN SNYDER: Early on—very early.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Are those text diaries, not sketchbooks?

JOAN SNYDER: They're both. They're combinations, and sometimes it's all writing, sometimes it's more drawing, but in the early—especially earlier years, it was a lot of writing because I was trying to figure out a lot of things, so I wrote a lot.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is there anything else—important influences or artist friends -- that you want to talk about from graduate school that were around before you graduated?

JOAN SNYDER: No, it just was a wonderful group of artists who were—each one of us was working very hard. In many ways it was very different from each other, but we were all very close. And we used to gather on weekends and have breakfasts and parties. And it was a really great experience—graduate school.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you remain friends with some of those—

JOAN SNYDER: Not close friends. Once in a blue moon I see Jackie Winsor, but really only every three years maybe I'll see her, but not—no, I haven't remained friends with them.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So after you graduated you decided to move to New York [City].

JOAN SNYDER: After we graduated we got a—four of us got a building together in New York.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You weren't all fellow students—or were you—there?

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You were.

JOAN SNYDER: We were. In fact, Keith [Sonnier] was my boyfriend until Jackie [Winsor] stole him away. They got married.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So the people that you got the building with are Jackie, Keith—

JOAN SNYDER: Jackie, Keith and Mark Berger. The four of us bought this building on—oh, my God. We rented it; we didn't buy it. I wish we had bought it. We rented a building on Canal and Mulberry Street—105 Mulberry.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Why did you decide on that building, that place?

JOAN SNYDER: I don't know; it was available. We must have looked around. It was a totally abandoned, empty—it had been a lampshade factory or something. We had to do everything. We had to put [in –JS] plumbing, electricity. That's how I wrecked my knees. I was on my hands and knees with the floor for years. It was just such a mess, but big, beautiful spaces. A beautiful building.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you have a floor to yourself or was it—

JOAN SNYDER: I did. I had 3,000 square feet, and I didn't use all of it for quite a long time.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So it was a place to live and work.

JOAN SNYDER: A place to live and work, right [on the border of –JS] Chinatown and Little Italy.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was it technically illegal to live there?

JOAN SNYDER: Yes, it was technically illegal to live there. We didn't have an AIR [Artist in Residence]. One amusing thing, just a detail, is that Philip Glass was our plumber, because that's what he did in those days, you know?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you got there, what was your work like? That was in 1967.

JOAN SNYDER: That was in probably '68. I stayed for a year in New Brunswick after I graduated, working. And [was –JS] when I was working on the anti-poverty programs [Upward Bound –JS] in '67.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What did you use as a studio during that year?

JOAN SNYDER: I painted in my apartment on George Street. I had a big—not huge, but it was—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you moved from the garret to a larger apartment.

JOAN SNYDER: Right, to a larger apartment on George Street, and I painted in the apartment during that year. And I remember in graduate school I was using acrylics almost exclusively. When I went back to painting on my own that year I started using oil paint again.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Up until then it's just the medium of paint. You're not adding things to the surface yet.

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, no, I'm always adding things to the surface, [almost –JS] from the very beginning. In graduate school I definitely was adding things to the surface, yes, a lot—a lot of wallpaper and fringe and [plastic flowers and –JS] sparkles and stuff like that.

I came across a set of drawings of mine from the late '60s that I think [are –JS] just amazing. They look like Jessica Stockholder's sculpture ideas. They're really sculpture ideas. I don't know what was going on, but there are dozens of them that I've just found.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Were there artists in history who made collages or introduced other kinds of materials into their paintings that you had seen, and was there any touchstone for that kind of practice for you?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, you know, I had seen the Cubists, and they were certainly doing collage. [Georges] Braque was doing collage. I'm sure [Pablo] Picasso was. And then there was what's-his-name, the little boxes guy.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: [Kurt] Schwitters?

JOAN SNYDER: Schwitters, is that—who was the [artist –JS] that lived in—oh, in Brooklyn.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Oh, in Brooklyn.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Cornell.

JOAN SNYDER: Joseph Cornell. I don't know if I saw Cornell then but I certainly saw Schwitters. I think—I'm sure I saw art books and things. I don't know what gave me the idea to put things in, but I was collaging from pretty early on.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was there a sense of consciously wanting to bring the real world into the painted world, to combine things that way?

JOAN SNYDER: No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It was all unconscious, those choices?

JOAN SNYDER: Not even to this day do I think about that, no. And, look. [Laughs.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: [. . . –JS] Do you remember the impulse behind that? And those impulses might have then determined the kinds of materials that you introduced to the surface.

JOAN SNYDER: God knows.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Okay.

JOAN SNYDER: I don't know. If I would go back and look at the work, maybe I could remember more, but—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Perhaps you went to a flea market and you found a box of something and that caused you to use that on the painting.

JOAN SNYDER: Well, that happened. I have memories of that later on, on Canal Street and, finding a box of cloth flowers and going home and having to stop everything and make this big nude painting with all these flowers all over her [*Bedeckt Mich Mit Blumen,* 1985]. And I was, at the time, listening to Hugo Wolf songs. There was one called *Bedeckt mich mit Blumen*: *Bedeck me with Flowers, I'm Dying of Love.*

Well, I was always dying of love of one sort or another in my life. I mean, that's another part of my biography, that there was always something going on that was some major drama or other in terms of love. So I made that painting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In 1968 then you—

JOAN SNYDER: We moved to—we rented the building in '68.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: '68. You also then took a trip that summer to Europe.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was that important? Do you want to describe that or talk about it?

JOAN SNYDER: It was my first trip to Europe. My sister was living there in Belgium.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What was your sister doing there?

JOAN SNYDER: She was married to a man at the time who couldn't get into medical school in the United States and he got into medical school in Belgium, so I went to visit them. It was wonderful in many ways but of course I became very unhinged. I never knew when or why these major anxiety attacks would hit me, but something happened there and I really think it was like a mini nervous breakdown.

It wasn't—I wasn't hospitalized or anything but I would sit in the park every day and just stare into space, and draw and write and think about things. And when I came back from that trip, my work did take a change. It was interesting because I was trying, in my paintings, to describe my inner—what was going on inside of me. I felt broken apart and I wanted to break apart strokes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you went to Europe, was it also to see art or just to see your sister?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, it was to see my sister. She and I went to Paris together. I'm sure we went to the Louvre. And I remember going to the Rodin Museum. But I just was going to Europe.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It was your first trip to Europe, though. You might have had a goal to see this or—certainly the Louvre, of course.

JOAN SNYDER: To this day I'm not a big museum-goer. It's terrible. I miss a lot of things. For years now my knees have been so bad that that's my excuse, I guess. Now my knees are great and I can go to museums. I'll probably go to more.

But I've never been a big museum-goer, and I don't run around the New York art world unless a friend is having a show or unless there's something that I think is important for me to see. I am not out there. I don't hang out. My life is really at home. I'm very family oriented, and I was a single mother for a long time.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —You rented the studio on Mulberry Street, then you went to Europe.

JOAN SNYDER: Then I went to Europe.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Then you came back.

JOAN SNYDER: Then I came back. And what I wanted to do when I came back was I remembered the old farm scenes that I did of the Alman farm, and I remember loving those paintings. And what I wanted to do was I wanted to make paintings that had the same feeling as those farm paintings but without the content because I didn't want to make farm paintings.

And on top of that I was feeling the way I was feeling, this kind of broken apart feeling, and I somehow wanted to translate that into a visual language in my paintings.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you speak about this, it makes me think of [Vincent] van Gogh—I mean, the strokes and the fields—had that been an influence or had you been—

JOAN SNYDER: I think that I got more involved with van Gogh as I got older got more sophisticated. I certainly had seen van Gogh and I do remember saying something to myself like—I was taken with [Paul] Cézanne, and I remember thinking I want to go beyond Cezanne, whatever the hell that meant, because I knew that he was looking at things, in a certain way, but I wanted to—I wanted to really examine them lined up in a different way than he was doing with his landscapes.

I think I fell deeper and deeper in love with van Gogh as I got older. Was I looking at van Gogh then? I think I was looking back at my old landscapes and—because if you look at the work during that time, it's not van Gogh; it's very simple but it's me trying to take things apart and lay them down.

I was back to acrylic, I think, and struggling— it's always landscape space but struggling— I remember in the loft on Mulberry Street we had—in the one room that I was using, we had tongue-in-groove walls. And I remember one day sitting in my studio and looking at this [white –JS] tongue-in-groove wall and there were these little, delicate [drips –JS] all over—little delicate drips all over it.

And I had already started to play with the idea of layering things, and music and children's art influenced me. Music became a very big influence in my work, much more than art, really, and to this day music is—I learn more from listening to music than I often do from looking at anybody's art.

But I remember looking at that wall and thinking, "ah-ha!" I mean, this is crystal clear. That's what I want my paintings to look like—that white grid going down and those little drips on the wall.

And I proceeded to make a painting where I was busy dragging paint very gently across the canvas, because this is something I thought it was part of my process, part of my language thing that I was developing. And then I remember making very delicate drips on that painting, just like on the wall, and that was my first drip painting where I would drip something down.

The only thing I can say about somebody like Jackson Pollock, who was busy dripping away, was that for me, painters like Jackson Pollock gave us the freedom. It wasn't as if at the time I was really looking at his work. Like the van Gogh experience, I looked at his work very carefully many years later and was amazed by it. But at that time I think I looked more carefully at Hans Hofmann because [he –JS] was more in my world, my genre.

But at that time, those little delicate drips were really coming from that wall I had been looking at, and it was very— it was speaking to what I was trying to do, but I just hadn't gotten there.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: At that point, were you doing what you called your flock paintings?

JOAN SNYDER: Yes. I was doing the flock paintings in '68 and '69 a little bit, but '68 mostly. And those paintings were full of material.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Mostly natural materials, right?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, they were filled with crushed rayon, which was what the flocking was.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: They were filled with lentil seeds, thread, that kind of thing.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Would you say that through the selection of those materials (you were adding to it as well as the imagery) that you're really dealing with feminist issues at that point?

JOAN SNYDER: At that time, that's what those were all about. I started the Women's Artist Series in—well, we can look back and find out, but I started it. After I got out of graduate school was when the light bulb went off and I said I had no female teachers; I never see art by women. There were a few artists that we saw but really [so few –JS].

When I was in graduate school, you would ask me—one artist that I liked very, very much, by the way—she was a sculptor and she used a lot of collage elements—was—what's her name? She would make a face, you know, and then it would be wooden and she would make a drawing of a face and put it on a wooden sculpture.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Marisol [Escobar]?

JOAN SNYDER: Yes, Marisol. Marisol was really important to me. I loved Marisol. I thought Niki de Saint Phalle was pretty funny. I liked her but I don't think [she –JS] was as important as Marisol was.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you ever meet Marisol?

JOAN SNYDER: No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you said you doing—

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, so—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —the series of women—

JOAN SNYDER: [It became –JS] the Mary H. Dana Women Artist Series at the Douglass College library.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes, speak about it.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. So one day I'm walking across campus with Emily Alman—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you're still—

JOAN SNYDER: This was probably after graduate school.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You still kept in touch with them even though there was this problematic—

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, no, this is a long—this went on—even after I got married there was a connection there.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Anyway, walking across campus.

JOAN SNYDER: Walking across campus with her, I said something like I was saying what I'm saying to you, which is that in graduate school and undergraduate, we never [got –JS] to see women artists. We never—and there's so much going on in New York—because I already was living in New York. There's so many exciting things going on in New York with women artists.

So Emily said to me, "Why don't you speak to Daisy Brightenback?" I remember this so clearly; the campus we were walking across, the whole thing. "Why don't you speak to Daisy Brightenback?" She was the head librarian. "Maybe she'll let you do something at the library."

So I went and spoke to Daisy Brightenback, who loved the idea instantly. Why don't you do—why don't you have shows here? It's not like there were great walls or anything. You know, it was a library.

But I curated the [shows for the –JS] next two years. [I decided –JS] how I was going to proceed. I was going to show women at the Douglass College library, which was a women's school that had no females teaching in the art department ever. It's a women's school that had never hired a woman artist. *Small Symphony for Women* [1974] [addresses those issues –JS].

I was going to curate these shows [with three objectives in mind. –JS] I was going to [show –JS] women whose work I liked, women whose work I thought other people would like, not necessarily myself, and women who needed exposure, who I felt [needed –JS] to have a show no matter what.

So for two years I did that—at least two or three years I curated those shows. [We showed –JS] people like Louise Bourgeois, Ida Applebroog, Jackie Winsor. It's a very eminent list. I wish I had [the first catalog –JS] in front of me. You know, and some people that maybe you haven't heard of. I think Nancy Spero had a show.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So these are obviously artists living in the area but not necessarily in New Jersey.

JOAN SNYDER: No, not in New Jersey at all. These were artists who were living in New York mostly. There was one woman named Audrey Hemenway who I invited to do a piece in the reading room, and it was like a big water pond with all kinds of— it was unbelievable. She set up this [pond –JS] in the whole reading room on the floor. I mean, it was just—no one had ever done anything like that. It was amazing.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What was the response on the campus—the students and the faculty?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, so what happened was then I decided to initiate [an evening for –JS] each show where the artist would come and we'd talk to the students about the work. I don't know how I was doing this schlepping back and forth from New York, but this is what I was doing.

The first few evenings—maybe the first year; I don't even remember—but we had very few people come. You know, by the second or third year it was just packed. It became very successful. To this day this [program –JS] is running in different ways. They actually built gallery space in the library,

It's wonderful what they did, and they have shows. Students get to see women's art. I don't know if [women's –JS] shows still need to be going on but that's another conversation altogether.

So we did the Women's Artist Series. [In 1968, –JS] I was making flock paintings. I was making them because I felt like women's experiences were so different [from men's –JS] and our bodies were so different.

The flock paintings were about women's bodies and anatomy and the delicacy and the flesh.

And then the dialogue began about, is there such a thing as a female sensibility? And I of course was big on the bandwagon of that discussion because I really thought that there was such a thing as a female sensibility. And I would love to say the rest is history. The rest is history.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: At what point did you know of the work that was going on in LA and the feminists there and Judy Chicago—and the others.

JOAN SNYDER: Probably around 1970, '71. I don't know exactly, but we did hear about Judy Chicago, and I knew Miriam Schapiro on the East Coast. So it was one of these East Coast-West Coast things, Judy and Miriam, who became huge enemies. So in some ways you had to pick your battleground at that time.

And I was friendly with Mimi [Miriam Schapiro] more than I was friendly with Judy. I would go to L.A. once in a while and—so I met Judy and I'd spend time with her. We were never friends. And then, I don't have the exact history in front of me but there was Women Against the War, the WAC [Women's Art Collective] group. They had their first meeting in my loft on Mulberry Street. And Lucy was very involved with all of that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Lucy Lippard?

JOAN SNYDER: Lucy Lippard and Joyce Kozloff and Elizabeth Hess. We all got to know each other and—I don't know, when did *Heresies* [:*A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*] start? Sometime—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: That's 1976.

JOAN SNYDER: So that was in '76, so we're earlier than that now.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes

JOAN SNYDER: We're really earlier.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: As you were doing the paintings that you, I assume, later, called flock paintings, you weren't calling them that at the time—

JOAN SNYDER: [Yes I was. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I read that there's a point where you had what you considered a breakthrough with these stroke paintings. Can you talk about that moment of evolution in your work?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I think that was in '69.

JOAN SNYDER: The first breakthrough came looking at that wall.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Right.

JOAN SNYDER: I was working towards something [that I –JS] called the anatomy of a stroke. I wanted—and this is what I was struggling to do—I wanted, in one painting, to be able to see—I was very interested in process, and I think I kind of learned about that through children's art; through the idea that the process is as important, if not more important, for kids making art than the product; that what they go through as they're making the art is really—there's so much there that maybe gets covered up, but it was very important to them and to their whole process.

So I was interested in process and I wanted to show the raw canvas. I wanted to show the gesso. I wanted to show lines. I wanted to show the first layer of paint. I wanted to be able to see all those things in one painting; [one –JS] could look at a painting and you could actually see the anatomy of that painting, of how it evolved.

And so, that's what I was working on in 1970. By the way, I got married in 1969.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I was going to ask you to go back to that. [They laugh.] Do you want to talk about how you met and—

JOAN SNYDER: How I met?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Larry, right?

JOAN SNYDER: Larry. Larry is a photographer. I was doing a favor for a friend of mine—I'm not going to remember her name—Susan—I can't remember her last name right now—who was a painter and had to get her paintings out of her loft. I don't know; some drama was going on. So she stored all her paintings at my loft because I had this extra half of a loft that I wasn't using.

And Larry was a friend of hers [as well so he came –JS] over to photograph her paintings. [He –JS] did such a bad job on the first go-round on her paintings because he was [not –JS] an art photographer. He never was. Larry Fink we're talking about. And so he messed up [and –JS] came back a second time. By the second time back he asked me out on a date, and nine months later we were married.

I fell in love with him and—I remember at one point there was a little Chinese woman walking up ahead of me in Chinatown and I thought it was Larry, and I said to a friend of mine, if I'm starting to think that little Chinese women are looking like Larry, I must be in love with him; I better marry him. I don't know. But anyway, we eloped and got married.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you both live on Mulberry Street then?

JOAN SNYDER: No, he was living—was he living there? No, he was living on the Lower East Side when I met him, on 10th or 11th Street. And he had a photography studio also on the Lower East Side, somewhere around where he lived.

I guess we were together for several months when he said he would be as quiet as a mouse if I let him move in. What a joke. The first thing he moved in was his piano. [They laugh.] That's how quiet he was.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Because neither of his spaces he could live in anymore or—

JOAN SNYDER: No, we just decided to live together.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You wanted to live together.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It was obviously better for you—

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —to not have to go to one of his spaces. You wouldn't have a painting room.

JOAN SNYDER: I was going to stay on Mulberry Street. It was a great, great space. I was on the fifth floor. It was wonderful. So Larry and I lived together and then got married in October of 1969.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was he someone, at that point and in succeeding years, that you talked to about your work?

JOAN SNYDER: A lot. He was amazingly helpful in that way. First of all, he built racks for me because my paintings were all leaning up against one another. He helped me organize. He loved my work. He would come in and talk about my work almost every day. We would have dialogues about the work. He really, really knew and knows painting and can talk about that kind of thing.

So when we divorced, that was the thing I thought I was going to miss the most, and I did miss it, was Larry wandering into my studio every morning in his underwear to talk about what I was doing.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you talk about his photography?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I didn't know anything about photography, so over the years I did but it was a—I was definitely on a learning curve about photography. I knew absolutely nothing. So I didn't—I don't think I could have offered him what he could offer me about painting. And he also introduced music into my life.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I was going to say that he brought this piano, if you—

JOAN SNYDER: He introduced music—I mean, classical music, jazz. It was just—it was amazing. He really did [do that for me. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You had been in the band and so you had some music.

JOAN SNYDER: I had been in the band but that was [the –JS] kind of music you play when you're in the high school band or orchestra. And he was very involved—and he still is—very involved with jazz.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Were you still playing the clarinet?

JOAN SNYDER: No. No. Years later I started playing the recorder, which I still play but not so actively these days. I wish I would.

So he introduced me to a lot of music. That was great.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: At that point, were you supporting yourself by doing odd jobs, in the late '60s?

JOAN SNYDER: I remember in the late '60s I worked at Yeshiva University [New York City] on another one of these anti-poverty programs and—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you aspire to teach?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, there was no art department that was hiring women. They wouldn't hire me. I tried. So what I did was very clever. I talked myself into a job at Stony Brook [University, Stony Brook, NY] in the education department to train teachers to teach kids art because I had really worked up a whole thing about teaching children art through the anti-poverty programs. I taught in Bed-Stuy [Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, NY]. I didn't teach regularly anywhere but I would go into Bed-Stuy [for –JS] these programs.

And I had a whole art—I even wrote a book, which never got published but it's called *Lines and Strokes Have Many Different Feelings*. And I would use this lesson on children and then I [did another book about shapes –JS].

And I would get [the children to make beautiful, beautiful paintings on paper –JS]. In fact, I have a few paintings [using the children's drawings in my paintings. –JS] One [is –JS] at the Modern [Museum of Modern Art]. It never gets shown but it's there in the basement somewhere. And the Met [had –JS] another.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you talked yourself into—

JOAN SNYDER: I applied for a job at Stony Brook in the education department to train teachers to teach art. Now, I had never taken an education course. But I knew how to teach kids art. I was a contrarian because I ended up spending two or three years at Stony Brook, commuting out there. So I had a job at a university, which was very impressive.

But I was kind of a renegade because I would have my students [who were –JS] future teachers -- and I would tell them how absolutely important art language is to kids, that it's another language that often when a kid can't do math or doesn't—isn't successful in English or reading or whatever -- they can make beautiful art, and it's really, really important to them and their development and their language.

And this was a big passion of mine, and I was very much—of course, given that credo that I had, I was very against holiday art. So that was a big thing. Forget about it. We're not doing turkeys on Thanksgiving. We're not doing Christmas art. We're not doing any of that stuff. And I had [students –JS] out in all the different schools [in the area who –JS] were teachers in training.

And I would go around and I would have them—having kids really be painting and doing all kinds of things. But after a while it started grating on Stony Brook, you know. I had written a lot of treatises. I had written a lot and spoken a lot about it very passionately.

After a while Stony Brook got tired of my art education [laughs] bent because I was making trouble. I was saying to these kids, you know, you're going to be an art teacher. You're going to end up affecting the lives of thousands and thousands and thousands of children, and I can't let you just go in there and make stupid little turkeys for Thanksgiving. You really have to be letting these kids speak a language and talk about what it is that through their artwork [is –JS] going on in their lives.

I can't remember—something happened. They took my course away and then offered me some silly thing in return, and I just said forget about it. If I can't do what I'm doing and what I really love doing, I'm not going to do it. So I quit. And by 1971 I was selling paintings.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I was going to say, at that point you were starting to get important recognition.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

[Audio Break.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So this is in the early '70s, and you said you were starting to sell paintings.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How did that all begin? You had an important—well, one of your important early showings at Bykert [Gallery]? That sounds like a really key—

JOAN SNYDER: That was crucial.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: Klaus [Kertess] was—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It was one of the most important galleries. How did Klaus see your work?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, what happened was that I, as a young artist, went around [to –JS] the galleries—I'm just stretching out here a little—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Sure.

JOAN SNYDER: —and tried to find galleries that I thought would interest me and might be interested in me, in my work. And Bykert Gallery really did interest me, and I started talking to Klaus. And Klaus agreed to a studio visit, and he came down—this is when I was making flock paintings—and he came down and he saw my paintings and we had a very nice visit and he said, "Call me in about six months or a year when you have more paintings and I'll come back again." The response was positive but he didn't say, be in my gallery or anything.

And then six months later I would call him and he would come down again. And he came down until I was making the stroke paintings—*Big Green* [1970] and those kind of paintings. And that was in '71 or '70. It was '70.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: The show was in '71.

JOAN SNYDER: So it was '70. Klaus started coming in '69, maybe even '68 and the show was in '71. And then he saw the stroke paintings and he invited me to be in a group show at his gallery. I had three of the large-stroke paintings in that show, and that was really an important show.

And then—you know, what was interesting was Klaus didn't invite me to be part of his gallery but he told Jillen Lowe and Jeff Paley about me, and they were about to start a gallery, Paley & Lowe [New York City].

So I got a phone call: We're starting a gallery. You know, we're a couple. We want to come see your paintings.

[… –JS]

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I'll check on that because something's off with that because Klaus told Marcia Tucker about me and he told Paley & Lowe about me. And Marcia ended up writing a big article in *Artforum* about my work, and Paley & Lowe came and visited and invited me to be in their gallery. And I thought that was in 1971. So I will go over some of that with—I'll look at the announcements.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

[END CD 2.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Joan Snyder on February 25, 2010 in Brooklyn, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

Joan, in 1971, around the time when you had the show at Bykert, along with the people who you knew in your building, what other artists did you know and talk to, and possibly exchange studio visits with. and were part of your circle of friends at that time? I don't know if at that point you knew Pat Steir or Mary Heilmann or any of those other painters.

JOAN SNYDER: Well, Pat and I were very good friends in the early '70s, and so we did exchange studio visits quite a bit. Mary, I remember going to her studio maybe once or so. Mary and I were not close. She was friends of friends. She lived on the Bowery at the time.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did Lynda Benglis live there at that point?

JOAN SNYDER: I didn't know Lynda at all. I knew her tangentially but I didn't know her. In the early '70s—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Louise Fishman; did you know her?

JOAN SNYDER: I knew Louise. I did because Louise actually lived in our building on the fourth floor. We rented out one floor. So Louise at one point was renting from us, and I got to know her through that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was it then that you became involved in women's consciousness-raising groups with other painters, with other artists, or was that later?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I don't remember what year our consciousness-raising group started, but it must have started in 1970 because I think it started not long after I got married. I had just gotten married when we started

our consciousness-raising group.

And for me, one of the significant parts about that was that I was very excited and happy to be married and most [of the women in the group –JS] were on the way out [of] their relationships. That was a group of artists and curators and writers—it was a really interesting group.

Marcia Tucker was in the group. Jane—oh my god, Jane—I'm forgetting her last name. I'll think of it. Who else was in that group? I do remember it was artists, writers, curators. Elke Solomon was in it. Can you think of somebody named Jane?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Livingston?

JOAN SNYDER: No. She's a painter. Anyway, a woman named—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Kaufman?

JOAN SNYDER: Jane Kaufman.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Kaufman.

JOAN SNYDER: Exactly. Yes Harriett [Snyder], who worked for *Ms*. was on it. It was very interesting for a couple of years.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Going back to your paintings, you were using a kind of a light grid—not a strict grid but a kind of a grid. How did that develop and how did it function in the paintings, for example, as part of the strokes works?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, it was really for structure and organization, and it was part of the anatomy-of-a-stroke idea, which is I wanted to see the pencil lines. I wanted to be able to see like the skeleton underneath the painting, and the grid was part of the skeleton.

The grid started, how I described it, [looking at the white –JS] tongue-in-groove wall. That was really the beginning of it, and then it went from there. And no—with my paintings, no two grids were ever alike because I always—the grid always had to do with the idea that I had for how I wanted the strokes to flow or fall, or where I wanted them to be.

And then I would invent the grid after I knew a little bit about what the painting might look like. I would figure out the grid. I don't know if that makes sense.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So it was a kind of formal element that in no way took precedence. It was at least equal to the intuitive painterly, almost narrative properties of the strokes.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And you weren't coming at it the way the Minimalists were, using a grid—

JOAN SNYDER: No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —as the organizing element exactly.

JOAN SNYDER: Well, it kind of settled me. You know, the grid was like a meditation almost. It was an underlying. Like the chant or the underlying basis of a painting, and the painting would sit on that. I don't know how the Minimalists were using the grid, but that's how I used it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Early on in showing your work and it being written about, a connection with music is made, and you were speaking just a few minutes ago about music starting to be important in your work when you met Larry. Were you consciously aware of this? When you were doing this structure—the grid, the strokes—were you thinking about notes and intervals and musical properties?

JOAN SNYDER: I think that the way I would think about it would be that when I would listen to a piece of music—and now we're probably talking more about symphonic music than anything else at the time—I would be very aware of the fact that in a piece of music, there was a beginning, a middle, an end. There was—you know, there could be a tragic part, a sad part, a happy part, a joyful part. There would be moments of great resolution and then it would sort of fall off.

And this was the sort of thing that I knew I wanted to put in—I wanted to make a painting that had that same—those same qualities. In other words, I wanted to be able to take a painting and be able to have many different

sections or parts or feelings or ideas in it, unlike, as I said, the Minimalists or the Color Field painters, which to me were like one idea—one shot, you know, one big idea.

I wanted a painting that was more narrative, and the narrative aspect is really what the grid—partly what the grid was about because the grid would set up the ability to be narrative for me. It's like a musical scale. That's all it was, but with each painting I would make a different grid.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What was the process of envisioning the painting? What came first in developing the idea?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, you know, it's hard to know because I paint in all different sizes. So I would sit and look at the size of a painting and I would get a feeling about what—you know, what you can do on a particular size, how much you can say, what you might want to be saying.

My drawings always preceded my paintings by a year or two. My drawings were always a little bit more—a little bit ahead and more sophisticated than my paintings were. So I would always be going back and looking at the drawings that I did maybe a year before to know where I was with the painting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Why do you think that is?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, because I think it's like you sit and make drawings, and partly it's unconscious, partly it's automatic, partly it's—you know, my process is moving along in a certain way and it's harder to actually physically embody that in a painting than it is on a drawing or a sketchpad or a diary. I mean, that was always—that dialogue just preceded the painting dialogue. That's all.

Now I'm looking at drawing books from—like here it says the summer of '08, so I'm still digesting things that I did then to see if I want to—if I want to put them in paintings or if I want to make them into paintings.

And I go over and over and over them. I edit myself really, really carefully. Every one of those little drawings has maybe four or five dates on it—when I've looked at it, considered it, made notes about it, said yes, said no. So it takes a while for a painting to become a painting. That's just the way it is. It's my process.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You did a painting in 1972 called *Squares*.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It reminds me of Klee a bit. And people have talked about the squares of Hans Hofmann when they think about it, but it's very different. How did that painting develop? Was it an experiment? Was it something that was important as a stepping-off point?

JOAN SNYDER: That painting happened because I got tired of making the stroke paintings. The stroke paintings became too easy for me. They would happen too quickly. It was sort of like jazz music. You know, I would—not that I wouldn't think about it for months on end, but then when I would get the canvas ready, lay my under-painting down, make my painting, it would maybe happen in a couple of days.

So what I really wanted was to be able to make a painting that would last longer—would take me longer to do. And that's really what I wanted. I wanted a painting where I would walk in my studio every morning for months and be working on the same painting. That's all I wanted then.

So what I decided to do was to fill in the grid. I mean, I wasn't looking at anything or thinking—I just wanted to fill in the grid and make a painting that took longer.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What about the color choices? Did that change from the colors you were using in the stroke paintings?

JOAN SNYDER: I think they're similar.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You think so?

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So the color functioned in about the same way.

JOAN SNYDER: I was using the same materials. I was using molding paste and gel, and I think there might be some flock in there. And I was using paint and I was making some edges really straight and some edges were more loose.

So I was playing with the grid and using it in a different way. And then I did something called *Houses* [1972] which I—in *Houses* I was making paintings of different places that I had lived plus places that I fantasized about living—you know, about owning a real house because I had, up until then, hadn't owned a house.

In fact, in that painting there is a white stone house, which Larry and I ended up buying a white stone house in Pennsylvania. A lot of my paintings are—not a lot, but quite a few of my paintings are prescient in that way, I mean where I'll put something in a painting and then it happens.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Somewhere I read that one of the reasons you went to Pennsylvania, that you and Larry moved out of the city, was that you had had so much recognition, that it was distracting. I want to understand what that was like, and what part of it was the difficult part that made you take the dramatic step of leaving the city.

JOAN SNYDER: I always had a fantasy of living in the country, so that was a big part of it. Larry was terrified—although he liked the idea also, it scared him more because he was such a city guy. And I had lived in New Jersey and lived on a farm in [Englishtown, N.J. –JS] and I knew a little bit more about nature.

I had a loft [on Mulberry St. –JS] that had something like 200 plants in it, so I was busy having my own, you know, farm in the loft. So part of it was that that was my dream. I wanted to live in the country.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So it had nothing to do with pressures of—

JOAN SNYDER: Well, and part of it was getting away from what was going on. I had begun collecting people like you collect butterflies. You know, when you get known, you don't have a clue who your friends are and who your friends aren't. And by 1974 I think it really all started catching up with me, and that's when I made the painting called *The Storm.*

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Well, right before that; you moved to Pennsylvania, in '73.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. Before that we moved to Pennsylvania but *The Storm* was actually painted in the loft in New York. But we owned the farm and it was spring and it was really muddy and, you know. I mean, that's where the palette [for –JS] *The Storm* comes from.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So *The Storm* came before *Small Symphony for Women*. They were both done in '74.

JOAN SNYDER: Good question. *Small Symphony for Women*—I can't remember; did I do it in New York or did I do it in Pennsylvania? *The Storm* really followed the stroke paintings and the squares, so that probably did come before *Small Symphony for Women,* I would guess. .

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes. In that painting you continue the squares.

JOAN SNYDER: In—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In *The Storm.*

JOAN SNYDER: Well, *The Storm* was a whole other story, though. What *The Storm* was, I was making a beautiful stroke painting and I decided every time I made something beautiful I was going to cover it up, because I felt very vulnerable and very confused about the New York life and world and art world and people.

So every time I would put something beautiful in that painting, I had a grid and I would cover it over with a square of [a] brown mud color. And occasionally I let a little bit show, and that's what *The Storm* was about.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Were you disturbed by the critical response or the responses of viewers in those early years, that your paintings were called beautiful—

JOAN SNYDER: No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —by any elements of that kind of visual pleasure?

JOAN SNYDER: No. No, no. No, it wasn't about that at all. It was—what could it have been about? All I remember was that I felt over-exposed and vulnerable, and that's why I stopped doing the stroke paintings and I started covering things up the way I did in *The Storm.*

There was actually a long list of people wanting stroke paintings. The gallery had a list of people waiting, but I just stopped making them. And that's when we moved to the farm, and that's when I was able to do—I mean, I cut [myself –JS] off completely from New York, and I was able to start making paintings that dealt with female sensibility.

I made *Heart On* [1975]. I made *Vanishing Theater* [1974]. I made *Mom's Just Out There Trying to Break that Grid* [1975 –JS].

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: All those paintings that I made in 1974 were because I was so—I chose to be very isolated.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you just coincidentally buy a farm because it was the house and the place that you wanted or did you want a farm?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I wanted to be able to have a garden but I didn't necessarily—what happened was that we didn't have enough money. We were looking in New Jersey at property, and Larry's mother could have lent us the money. [We needed –JS] something like $6,000 or $8,000 more for [the –JS] house that I wanted in New Jersey, in the country.

But she wouldn't, so we ended up—the reason we ended up in Martin's Creek, Pennsylvania, was because we found something we could afford. And it ended up to be not the place where I wanted to spend my life. Larry is still there, but—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was there a space you could use as a studio? Was that one of the reasons?

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, yes. I had a great studio. It wasn't exactly a barn but it was like an old tractor barn, and Larry built a [photography –JS] studio on the first floor of the cow barn.

So we had beautiful studio space. We had gardens. It's a beautiful place, but it was very primitive and isolated when we bought it. It still is in many ways.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You talked about wanting to spend a lot of time on a work and on listening to symphonic music, and you did many paintings with the word "symphony" in them—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —in the title, and they were major works—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —so they did take quite a bit of time.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: They're also about feminist issues and women—and of course the first one,*Small Symphony for Women*.

JOAN SNYDER: Right, but some of the symphony paintings have nothing to do with feminist issues. I'm a feminist so obviously it gets in there. But like *Symphony* [1970], *Symphony II* [1974 –JS] was filling in the grid but inventing a different kind of grid altogether so that I could do something else with that symphony.

Each symphony is different. *Small Symphony for Women I* [1974] and then *Small Symphony for Women II* [1976] did have to do with feminist issues directly, where I was writing in the painting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is the division of that triptych connected to, as you were talking about, the different phases that you would hear in a musical composition?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, what it was about in my mind was—the first section was me making lists of what—of materials, of thoughts, of feelings, of political statements in that [panel –JS]. The second panel was really visualizing—making a visual list of [the –JS] verbal list. And the third panel was the resolution of the first two. I always need resolution.

So that's what *Small Symphony for Women* is. It's lists of all different kinds, it's the visualization of those lists, and then it's the resolution. The cymbals and the drums, whatever; you know, the end of the symphony.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was that the first painting in which you included a substantial amount of text?

JOAN SNYDER: I would say yes, it was, because it was the first time I think that I actually glued drawing paper down to my canvas so that I could write on it with pencil.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you see that at the moment as being an important change in your work, a door opening?

JOAN SNYDER: No. No, I had diary entries around that time where I talk about the Douglass College Women's Series and different things that were going on, and making this painting, which really was about women and my own personal feelings about certain things, political feelings about Rutgers, and then about the paint, and the painting and the colors and the materials; it [also –JS] listed materials.

Well, we didn't know the word then but it was really deconstructing a painting, and deconstructing it, going towards political ideas and writing—just putting everything down and then moving along, visually with those ideas.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: The painting *Vanishing Theater* has a text I think that's from *Middlemarch* [*A Study of Provincial Life*. George Eliot. England, William Blackwood and Sons. 1871].

JOAN SNYDER: It is.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was that unusual for you to use text from a novel and not your own text? How was that novel particularly important to you?

JOAN SNYDER: [. . . –JS] [I was reading *Middlemarch* and Dorothea said "The theater of all my ideas has vanished." At that time that remark for me was about Emily [Alman] leaving my realm. That's what that painting was about. It's in three sections. The first section says "PART I LAMENT WITH WORDS". The second section says "PART II VANISHING THEATRE/THE CUT". The third section says "PART III TAKE YOUR CLOTHES OFF LADY AND LET'S SEE WHO YOU REALLY ARE." The last sentence was an allusion to the emperor having no clothes. This painting was about Emily, my experience with her, the possible end of that experience and at the same time reading *Middlemarch.* –JS]

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was that because of issues in your work—

JOAN SNYDER: I really had that little breakdown.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —or was it more personal?

JOAN SNYDER: It's never issues in my work; it's personal issues.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It wasn't that you didn't know what to paint.

JOAN SNYDER: No. I just couldn't paint. I really had been so totally overexposed and these are the dangers that I talk about with students sometimes, or graduate students when I see them. The danger of becoming known too soon. I was 30. It's very young—31. It was way—you know, it was just too soon, and how do you deal with that when you're that young. It wasn't easy.

I could go back and look at my books and everything and figure out—remember what happened, but I remember it was a really, really hard time, and I didn't paint for six months. We were probably buying the farm—getting the farm, and there was probably a lot going on in building the studio and not being in New York. Who knows?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes, six months isn't that long anyway.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And then you did the *Small Symphony for Women*—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —and *Symphony II* and the *Vanishing Theater* and all of those other major paintings.

JOAN SNYDER: Right, but I had totally changed. I mean, everything had completely changed—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: —the work. I remember Carl Solway was getting a space in New York. He's an Ohio dealer. And as Judy Pfaff says, Carl is the real deal, and Carl really is the real deal.

And so Carl called me up and said he wanted to give me a show. This was in '74. And I said, "Look, Carl, the work is completely different. You haven't seen it. You better come see it before you tell me you want to give me a show."

So he actually flew out and came to the farm in Pennsylvania and saw the work and really loved it. He was

definitely visionary because this stuff was so different and so kind of crazy and over the top. But he actually even bought a few and gave me a show and—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: That was at the [Carl Solway] gallery in New York?

JOAN SNYDER: That was in the gallery in New York. I think it was on Spring Street or Prince Street.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I think it's '75—1975.

JOAN SNYDER: Mm-hmm. And he showed those paintings, *Vanishing Theater* and—and I don't remember; I think it took a while to sell them, but he did sell them. [And as I said, –JS] he ended up buying a few of them so he gave me some money, which was great.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You talked about those early years—about too early success. Just to go back there for a second, there was the Bykert show, but then you had work in the Whitney Annual in '72 and the Whitney Biennial in '73. Now, that is substantial, plus then, soon after that, the Corcoran.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What part of that was the most difficult to take in and still be able to continue to paint? Was it the critical attention? Was it what you called "collecting people"? Was it the personal attention, people somehow wanting to get to know you for reasons you didn't quite understand? Was it the expectation that you should continue making more of the same because since there was a waiting list to buy them—those kind of pressures?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I don't know. It was all of that but—I don't know. There was something in me, and it still exists, that I knew not to take anything too seriously that people were saying. If I read a review of mine, I read it once. I've never dwelt on that kind of stuff. But obviously it got to me in '74 big time, and now that you're saying all these things that I was in, no wonder. It got to me.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What about the issue that you were gaining recognition. You were a woman. Not every woman was getting that recognition.

JOAN SNYDER: No. No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You might have had issues of a sense of—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —why me and look at all these other women who aren't being included.

JOAN SNYDER: I don't think I had that in that sense, but I think that I always wanted to be part of their groups. What I always used to talk about with people like Mimi Schapiro was I don't necessarily think that we should want a piece of the pie. I think we should try to change the nature of the pie. Let's make the pie different, because the way it is now, it's not functioning right, you know?

I always knew it was a boys' world out there, and I felt that all the time, which is why I identified with women who were in the struggle. I mean, I was part of it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: But you were open to the idea of having these new paintings show in New York.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And they were shown.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. I was lucky. I knew how lucky I was. It wasn't like I didn't realize that I was very lucky. I was selling paintings and the other part is that I was dealing with my marriage, which was difficult, dealing with Larry. Things were never really easy. He smoked marijuana and I was very naïve. I knew nothing about drugs or —I didn't know that this was going to be a potentially huge problem.

There was a lot that I didn't know. You've heard my background. I was doing a lot of catch-up in a lot of areas. The women's movements were really wonderful because we were a collective. We had each other. It was really pretty special and important. Once that stuff went away, New York never was the same, for me anyway.

The reason I love Woodstock [NY] is because I have friends up there. I don't have friends in New York that I see. There might be a few people that I really care for but I never see them.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You had a first show at Solway in '75 and then in '76, but you were one of the founding members of *Heresies* in '76—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —and I wanted to ask you, how did that come to be and what was your role?

JOAN SNYDER: In *Heresies*?

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

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I don't know; a group of us must have been together talking and said let's start a magazine. I have no idea. I wanted to do it because I was more of a groupie. I was there for all the brainstorming in the beginning, and in fact the [cover of the –JS] very first issue is my handwriting.

But I wasn't involved like a lot of the members were involved in different issues, editing. Some women just worked like hell on it. I went to the meetings. I went to a lot of meetings, but I really just loved the group. The group was great. We had a lot of fun, and it was really interesting.

And we had a retreat at our farm in Pennsylvania, where everybody came out and I took great pictures of it, which were attributed to somebody else in Joan Braderman's film [*The Heretics*, 2009]—attributed to Mary Beth Edelson. How she got her name on my pictures I'll never know, but I've straightened it out with Joan and I don't care. My name doesn't have—anyway, they were pictures I took at the retreat, black and white pictures that Larry printed.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you didn't write for them or—

JOAN SNYDER: No, I didn't—no, I didn't write for *Heresies*. Nobody really wrote for *Heresies*, but we gathered for Heresies more than anything—you know, got everything together and thought about what the subject matter of each issue would be. We brainstormed all of that. That was all really interesting. And that went on for several years, and then it stopped.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about a major painting that you did in '77, *Resurrection*—eight panels.

JOAN SNYDER: *Resurrection.*

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Could you talk about that painting and how it came to be?

JOAN SNYDER: *Resurrection* is 27 feet long by six-and-a-half feet high. In the mid-'70s I was doing a lot of lecturing. Whenever any school in the country would want a woman painter to give a lecture, they would call me and I would go. That's one of the ways I made money for us. So I did a lot of traveling around the country giving talks. Most of the places I went didn't have women [on the faculties of their –JS] art departments.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What would be the subject—I mean, obviously your work—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: But was there some other message that you—

JOAN SNYDER: Well, yes, I talked about female sensibility all the time, and sometimes there was great contention in the audience, but that was my theme. Is there such a thing as women's sensibility? What is it? What's going on? Why aren't there women [teaching] in the universities?

Why did I go into three students' studios today, three female students, and [be] told that their teachers don't understand their work [and –JS] I thought their work was exceptional and beautiful and wonderful? Because [their teachers are –JS] men. They don't get it, what these women are doing. They just don't know the language. So that's what it was about.

While I was doing all this traveling, I would be in my motel room at night reading the local newspapers, and I was horrified by the many, many stories of rape and murder and horrible things that went on and that happened to women out in the world. So I started collecting those articles, and in fact I had my mother collecting them in New Brunswick and in Florida.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you became closer to your mother.

JOAN SNYDER: I was always somewhat close to my mother. I always loved my mother. My mother was just very,

very difficult and negative. I was a much, much better daughter to my mother than she was a mother to me. In a million ways. I can't even get into it.

But I began collecting those articles and then slowly it evolved into the idea of a painting. And what happened was that then one day I went to a yard sale and bought a whole collection of—a woman's sewing kit, of all these tiny little pieces of cloth and material and threads and—aha, you know, that relates to the rape and women and maybe I can do something with this woman's collection of cloth.

And then the other thing that was happening was that I began to get a sense that something had happened to someone at the farm; that someone had been murdered at the farm. It was just a feeling I had, that an old lady had been murdered there.

[. . . –JS] [So that became part of my theme in the painting. Then I decided to make many different sections. The first section was an actual list of all the victims' names mentioned in the articles and what happened to them. The next three sections were a (Robert) Rauschenberg-style collage of the articles. The fifth section was an abstract painting depicting the violence previously listed. The sixth section was an ascending angel made from the material that I had bought at a yard sale. The next section, which was the largest, was a landscape of the farm with that house with little wallpapered rooms. I placed the old lady's body in the landscape dressed in a black crape dress with a hat and a veil and buried her under a green mound of earth. I painted in a dark moon and a sun because I was laying her to rest, this person who I was sure had gotten murdered at the farm. So I took all these people's stories, horrible stories, and I distilled them, as the painting went on, into one old lady's story. The last section was heavenly made of laces and other materials, using very pastel colors. So in the end she just floated away. What I found out years later was there was someone murdered at the farm. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: At your farm?

JOAN SNYDER: At the farm that Larry and I had bought, which is where I thought this old lady had been murdered, because an old lady had lived there before us. It turned out the old lady murdered somebody. She murdered her helper. Well, there was a murder at the farm; I was just wrong about—[Laughs]—what happened. But [in any case –JS], that's *Resurrection*.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Where is that painting now?

JOAN SNYDER: That painting is in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you show it shortly after you painted it?

JOAN SNYDER: I showed it, yes, at Hamilton Gallery [NYC].

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: The next gallery you had after Solway.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. And Pat Hamilton showed it. It was beautiful. She had a really beautiful space on 57th Street.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: At some point shortly thereafter your daughter was born.

JOAN SNYDER: My daughter was born in '79. I had an abortion in '77, a miscarriage in '78 and a baby in '79. So I was actually pregnant for three years in a row, if anybody wonders what happened to me for those three years. I was busy. The miscarriage was really hard because after the abortion I decided I definitely wanted to have a baby.

Larry had convinced me and I had convinced myself that we could never raise a kid, you know. It would be too much for me, I could never handle it, blah, blah, blah, so that's why I had the abortion. And then that didn't sit well with me, [so I got pregnant again. I then had a late miscarriage. I was four months pregnant when I miscarried. I had lost a son who was going to be named Oliver. The minute I was allowed to get pregnant again I did and gave birth to Molly, who was born on June 4th, 1979. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you stay on the farm after that?

JOAN SNYDER: I had the baby at Lenox Hill Hospital, and then we brought her home to the farm, and I stayed for approximately—maybe less than a year and then I left Larry and moved to Mulberry Street with Molly. We still were renting the loft, so I held onto it. It needed complete renovation. There was no bathtub for a baby. There was nothing—it was not baby-proof in any way whatsoever, so I had to end up renovating it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you have your same neighbors?

JOAN SNYDER: No. As a matter of fact—well, Keith and Jackie were still there. Were they still there? They might

have moved out. I think they bought a place or something. Mark was still there. I can't remember who was on the third floor. Anyway, but Pat Steir moved into the building. She moved in as a friend then we became—we really became heavy enemies, deep.

What can I say? She started writing in her paintings. She started putting strokes in her paintings. She, you know—I got her into Paley & Lowe and then she told Paley & Lowe that whenever she would show she would not want my paintings to be in the room with her paintings.

And then when Paley & Lowe closed, she wouldn't tell me where she was going. She was going to Fourcade—Fourcade, Droll [Gallery, NYC] or—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes, Fourcade, Droll.

JOAN SNYDER: —but she wouldn't tell me.

When I moved back with Molly, I needed to get into her floor because the plumber needed to put in a kitchen and a bathroom and a bathtub and everything else. She wouldn't let me in to her room, to her loft to get—she was renting from me—to get access to the plumbing in her ceiling.

We actually had a physical fight at one point and I just told her if she ever, ever goes near me again I would— I don't know what I would do, because I was like a mother bear with a baby. I had a baby up there, and the baby was nine months old, I'm having construction done, she's not letting me into her place, and she thinks she's going to beat me up at the same time. So that was a big problem.

Anyway, finally I got my renovation done, and I don't remember what happened to her. I can't remember.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And how did you end up—sorry.

JOAN SNYDER: No, go ahead.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It was something more mundane—going back to the gallery -- how did you end up meeting Pat Hamilton? , Did you leave Carl Solway because he closed the New York gallery?

JOAN SNYDER: I think Carl just did it for a year or two years. It was not a long-term thing for Carl. He was an Ohio guy. And he had three boys, and he had custody of them—three kids. So he couldn't be a New Yorker. He did that space with, I think, three other people, or two—yes, two or three other people. One was Edward Thorp, I think.

So he closed, and then—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So were you actively looking for a new gallery?

JOAN SNYDER: Paley & Lowe came first, then Carl. I don't know how—Pat [Hamilton] must have just heard about me and called me or something. You know, it happened kind of smoothly. It wasn't—I don't know when my first show with her was but—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I think it was '78.

JOAN SNYDER: '78?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So there wasn't too much of a gap between '76 at Carl Solway and '78.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes, and then she showed *Resurrection.*

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You've had a very steady history of showing.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: -- and then she showed *Resurrection.*

JOAN SNYDER: Right, I'm sure I had at least two or three good shows there—three?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was that a good relationship?

JOAN SNYDER: It was. She was really a good, energetic, incredible dealer for a couple of years. I think she burned out or she had money problems, other kinds of issues, but—and the interesting thing was that Jay Gorney worked for her at the time, so that's how I got to know Jay.

But Pat was good. Pat was really good. And she showed good people. I remember she was one of the first people to show Louise Bourgeois. So it was an interesting gallery. I liked it.

I remember Molly was really young. I used to dress her up for my openings and—I was a single mother then—literally carry her into every opening because she was dressed up so cute and so beautifully, but she would be sleeping by then. So I carried this beautifully dressed baby in, lie her on the couch in the back room and have my opening. That's the way it was.

And then Pat closed. What happened after that? I'm trying to think.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: To you?

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In '81 you had a show at Nielsen in Boston and you had many shows there. So as far as I know, the next New York gallery was Hirschl & Adler [Modern].

JOAN SNYDER: Right. So Pat closed and Donald McKinney called me. He worked for Hirschl & Adler at the time, and that was up on Madison Avenue. And I liked Donald a lot, and, you know, he had an interesting crew that worked for him, Betty [Cuningham] being one of them. Look at it; I've been very lucky because these were all really good galleries.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you didn't have to walk the streets showing galleries your slides.

JOAN SNYDER: I wasn't walking the streets, no. I honestly can't remember exactly how each thing happened but it wasn't me going in blind or not knowing anybody.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Cold, yes.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes, it wasn't going in cold.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was it very important to you to be in a gallery that showed other artists whose work you respected, or was that not that important?

JOAN SNYDER: I think that's important to any artist but you don't always get to choose, you know? But then dealers hopefully have sensibilities, so they're going to choose people that fall within some kind of a similar sensibility.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you ever have an issue of wanting to control the context that your work was presented in, let's say in a museum show or even a gallery show, if there is a theme that you knew in advance and you felt it wasn't right for your work? Or were you very hands-off about that?

JOAN SNYDER: I'm very hands-on. I'm very hands-on. That's why I have an assistant and that's why I keep very careful records, and that's why I make all the decisions and know what's going on and where the work is. I'm pretty hands-on, and I've always been. It doesn't mean that I say no a lot, but I'm very careful about where the work goes.

[END CD 3.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Joan Snyder on February 26, 2010 in Brooklyn for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc four.

We left off yesterday around the late '70s, and so we can plunge into the '80s more or less and talk about that time after your daughter was born in '79 and you had had a number of shows in New York and you were still living, at that point, on Mulberry Street.

JOAN SNYDER: In '79?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes, when she was born.

JOAN SNYDER: We still had the loft on Mulberry Street but we were—and we spent time there, but we were really living on the farm in Pennsylvania.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Ah.

JOAN SNYDER: Because when Molly was born we took her back to the farm.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes. I guess we got a little further than that.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. Right, and then I came back to the loft with Molly, right, in about '80.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes. I wanted to talk about your paintings at that point. I know there was a painting in '82. Maybe we're missing something before that that we should talk about, but it's called *Love's Pale Grapes* [1982]. It's one of at least two with plastic grapes—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —adhered to the surface.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You have always added objects and elements to the surface—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —but that was a pretty dramatic piece right there in the center.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And it introduced a new kind of reality, I think, into the painting. We could talk about that or something right before it, if there's something else important.

JOAN SNYDER: Well, do we want to go back to the *Lines and Strokes* [1969] for a moment?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Sure.

JOAN SNYDER: The painting that I consider my major breakthrough painting—I think I said earlier that when I started painting—all I kept saying to myself as a young painter was, all I want to do is make a good painting; all I want to do is make a good painting. And I said this over and over again to myself for years.

And the reason I wanted to go back is just to mention the fact that when I did *Lines and Strokes* in 1969, that was the good painting. I mean, that was the painting that I felt like, ah, I finally made a really good painting.

And it was just a major breakthrough for me because it was so—it was so simple and so clear and so strong, really, and it had all the elements that I had been trying to get at, where you could see—you know, you could look at the raw canvas—in fact, it was painted on raw canvas, which I would never do again. I mean, you really have to put rabbit skin glue down if you want to show raw canvas. But I didn't with this painting, but it does have acrylic under-painting on it, on the strokes.

Anyway, I did that in August of '69. And the kind of interesting story surrounding that—well, it was right before I got married. And I always felt like I was bringing a kind of resolution and simplicity to my life in some ways, because I got married in October of '69, but I also was bringing it to my work. So the two things happened simultaneously. And I know that they were definitely related.

My daughter always used to say to me, "why didn't you go to the Woodstock festival?" which was in August of '69, and I never had an answer for her except that I don't do those things. I mean, I don't—I certainly was not in the least bit connected to popular culture, had no idea who any of those people were, and could have cared less. Larry went to photograph. So Molly always used to say, "Well, Dad went; why didn't you go?" And as it turns out, Maggie went too, because she's also very hooked into popular culture.

But the interesting thing was I was giving a lecture at Brandeis University at the Rose Art Museum there—I having a big show there. Carl Belz [was the curator of the show –JS]. And I was giving a lecture and it was really hundreds of people sitting around the whole museum, and they had me in the middle sitting there.

And Molly was there, and I was talking about the work and suddenly—I was talking about *Lines and Strokes* and suddenly it dawned on me why I didn't—or what I was doing when Larry was in Woodstock. And that's when I said, "Molly, now I know why I wasn't in Woodstock; because I was home painting *Lines and Strokes* in August of '69."

So I just think it's, for me, a crystal clear, wonderful painting. And then I went on from there to make a lot of stroke paintings, [in] the next few years. So that's all.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was there some part of the process that brought you to that breakthrough that you realized was different, and that you applied to the process of developing your paintings after that?

JOAN SNYDER: I think that like anything else, with me it's one thing leads to another. You can't—unless you go

back and—unless I went back and looked at my diaries and notes where I've probably written all that down.

The paintings that followed *Lines and Strokes* I think were equally—had the same kind of clarity that *Lines and Strokes* had. They got more intense, they got more dramatic, they got—they were more involved in the idea of the symphony [painting] that I spoke about where I wanted a painting to have many different emotions and parts and sections to it, so that someone could be engaged and involved for more than just a few moments of looking at a painting.

So I think—I mean [*Lines and Strokes* –JS], all I can say about the paintings that followed it is that they were true to what was going on in that painting, and I just kept going. It was just a simplicity, a clarity. It's great when you make a breakthrough, because I had been struggling up until that point when I made *White Layers with Red Rectangle* [1969 –JS]. It still had very much of a landscape feeling. It still had a rectangle in the middle because I was—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: That was the same year but earlier?

JOAN SNYDER: Same year but earlier. I was hanging on to the rectangle, that's the painting where I was very delicately dripping things, because of looking at my wall.

But, anyway, I don't know what other paintings came between these two paintings. I'm sure that if I looked at my slide box I'd find them. But in the meantime, *Lines and Strokes* followed *White Layers,* which was then followed by paintings like *Big Green* [1970] and *Summer Orange* [1970] and *Symphony* [1970 –JS] and things like that. Does that—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Sure.

When you think about the next breakthrough and the next breakthrough, is there anything similar in the questions you were asking yourself, a change in the kind of intuitive process or mental editing you were using? Have you ever thought there's any link between the methods—looked at in retrospect, of course—that brought you to that breakthrough and subsequent breakthroughs, let's say the field paintings that you did in the '80s?

JOAN SNYDER: I think there are answers to these questions. I just think that—I'd have to—after the stroke paintings came the so-called very feminist paintings, you know, like *Vanishing Theater,* and that was '74. And then there was a whole series of that kind of painting.

And then I'd have to ask myself, where did I go after that? I know when Molly was born there was a painting called *Altar* [*Painting*] [1979], where I was pushed—well, I had had a miscarriage, so I was making paintings that had totems in them and trees and things that were very—the iconography—I didn't know it at the time but [iconography that –JS] related to death— a lot of death symbols.

And I certainly was involved in all that between '77 and '79, and when she was born I did something called *Altar Painting* where I cleared all that out, put those screaming faces and totems all around the edge in dark colors, and the whole center is just a white field. So that was '79.

The painting—and by that time I had done *Small Symphony for Women,* [1976] I had already applied paper to canvas and written on it, and then the painting that followed that pretty quickly in the very early '80s was *Apple Tree Mass* [1983], and *Apple Tree Mass* is another one of my major, significant paintings as far as I'm concerned.

It's very autobiographical. It's talking about a lot of pain that I was going through leaving my marriage. I remember painting that painting and it was kind of wet when I sent it up to Nielsen Gallery for a show. But I remember doing it in the loft on Mulberry Street, and it was soon after I had left Larry, and it talked about all the things that I loved at the farm that I had to leave, leaving him, about my gardens. And it has Latin words in it, "*lacrimae rerum*," which means the tearfulness of things.

The left side of the painting was really about what was going on at the time with other women that I knew. With Etan Patz being kidnapped.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Who was that?

JOAN SNYDER: Etan Patz—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Oh, yes.

JOAN SNYDER: —being kidnapped in the West Village.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In SoHo.

JOAN SNYDER: In SoHo. I'm sorry—yes, in SoHo on Prince—I think he walked to school from Prince Street, went to get on the bus and they never saw him again.

That experience changed everyone's life. You could never again—and I had a—Molly was two years old or three years old—you could never take your eyes off your child again after that. You just couldn't. I mean, it was the most horrifying thing.

And then a few—I noticed that I wrote in this painting that some of our children were committing suicide, because they were. I mean, that was—I think that was around when May's son's [May Stevens] may have committed suicide.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This painting is 1980?

JOAN SNYDER: '83.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: '83.

JOAN SNYDER: So there's a lot being written in this painting that's autobiographical and otherwise. And then—so that's '83, which followed *Love's Pale Grapes* [1982]*,* which also has writing on it. The interesting thing with that painting is that I was already spending summers in [Cutchogue, Long Island, at a rental on the water –JS] with Molly. [I rented a house from my then-accountant Marty Meltzer—rented a farmhouse, which I ended up buying from him ultimately. But I just wanted to get my kid out of the city. I wanted her to be able to ride a bike, you know, down a street and not have to worry about her every moment. This was later in 1984-85. –JS]

So my friend Ardele Lister, a really good friend of mine, who was a filmmaker, bought me some plastic grapes at a yard sale. That's where those plastic grapes came from. She bought me the plastic grapes and before I knew it they were in the painting.

Often when I'm making serious paintings there can be a very sardonic element or funny—you know, I mean, I don't mind having a sense of humor when things are serious, and *Love's Pale Grapes* certainly was a serious painting. In the briefest way I can say that I got emotionally and physically involved with my psychiatrist [Lily Engle –JS], and that's what these two paintings are about; especially *Love's Pale Grapes.*

And I think *Love's Deep Grapes* also—I mean, that was sort of near the end of the [affair –JS], I'm quoting Virgil in *Love's Deep Grapes* [1984]*,* a beautiful poem by Virgil. And it's made on a—the whole painting is put on a piece of wood, and it has a wood carving on one side with the poem, where I had to write the words backwards, of course. And the other side of the painting is a print of the right side. I made many prints and picked one and adhered it to the left side of the painting.

And the middle of the painting has a piece of velvet and grapes—you know, plastic grapes and other elements in it. Anyway, that's *Love's Deep Grapes.*

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: There's a kind of a reliquary feeling to the square and the object in the center, and a kind of a—

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —worshipful or ritualistic sense about it.

JOAN SNYDER: Ritualistic—yes, I would say that that's true. I mean, that happens with my work sometimes. It's not something that I'm thinking about necessarily but it's definitely there if I want to bring two things together, it's like an altar. I've made a lot of altar paintings.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is actually one—

JOAN SNYDER: Piece of wood.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —one piece of wood. It isn't physically a triptych but it's an image with three parts.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. It's not physically a triptych. The middle part has cheesecloth and then it has velvet nailed on with little gold nails. It has a piece of driftwood on it and plastic grapes in the middle.

And it says—the poem is, "I thought one day I was bound to die, until one day possibly standing on June's"—I'm not going to be able to read this so easily—"June's Earth, glistening, I saw stones weep." That was the thing that got to me—"I saw stones weep." And then it says, "There is a sadness in things apart from, connected with human suffering." That's also Virgil.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: The stick figure-like forms, childlike you could say, on the top, you had used that kind of imagery before, I think?

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, these little carved images?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: Me and everybody else and every other child in the world. You know, that's what they are; they're just little stick figures. But I had used this in a painting—oh, my god, it's at the Phillips [Collection] [Washington, DC] but I can't think of the name of it [*Savage Dreams*, 1981-82]—where Molly had drawn a figure in the sand and I copied it into a painting. I mean, I did the same—you know, I just copied what she had done.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I think also it was noted maybe in that book that you were listening to Mozart's *Great Mass*—is that correct—when you were doing these or at that point in time?

JOAN SNYDER: No, Mozart's *Great Mass*—well, I don't know if I was listening to Mozart's *Great Mass*. It's possible. What you might be remembering is when my mother died I listened to it over and over again for a year, Mozart's *Great Mass.* But that was in '92. We're still back in '83.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes,—'82, '84.

JOAN SNYDER: Right, where I'm really, really, you know, suffering the pangs of the end of the marriage because the marriage—you know, no marriage ends—I mean, most marriages don't end quickly and easily, and mine certainly went on for years not ending.

And of course I went to therapy to help me end the marriage because I knew I had to get out of the marriage; I just couldn't get out of it. And she certainly helped me get out of the marriage—[Laughs]—by taking me into her bed. But it was about as unethical—she's dead now or I probably wouldn't be able to say that. [Now –JS], there's no reason why not.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I want to ask you about this painting or any other related painting that uses text. Can you describe the process and the relationship between selecting the text and the images, and how that all comes together; what comes first, what plays off what, what is subordinate and what takes precedence? If you have a text you decide, the first thing—I want this much space devoted to the text. I'm trying to get the sense of how those two things come into—

JOAN SNYDER: Yes, I think it's really hard for me to know the answer to that because I think that in the end, while I don't like to label myself at all, I think I really am an expressionist, and I think that's what happens. I think that the text becomes very much a part of my imagery and I just use it in that way.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: But this text was one of the initial factors that propelled you to create that painting in that three-part form.

JOAN SNYDER: Here's that child painting. *Savage Dreams* was the name of it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What's the year of that?

JOAN SNYDER: That was 1982, where I put the two stick figures in that painting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: But this painting we were looking at—

JOAN SNYDER: *Love's Deep Grapes.*

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: *Love's Deep Grapes,* or it could be another one. Could you describe the process of creating this painting, or a different one that's more relevant in your mind, and the layering of text and image and how that—

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I can talk about it with this brand-new painting, which I'm having quite a struggle with, and this I started about three days ago.

I've always wanted to make a painting where I put the names of women who were just, you know, extraordinary, exceptional women in the world, in our lives and whatever, and I'm struggling with that right now because I'm putting the names in and then I'm going over them and then I'm putting them back in, then I'm saying, well, maybe that's not what I want to do with this painting; maybe that's another painting. And then I'll find myself just sticking them in again.

It's like—it's a struggle, where in some ways I allow myself, at a certain point, not to be in control. Now, that

explains that painting. This doesn't explain a painting like *Oh, Marie,* where I got a letter from my friend Marie Foley.

She wrote to me about the death of her daughter. In 1984 she wrote a letter to me. And in the letter she talked about my own breakup—my own marriage breakup. And she and her husband Andrew are Latin scholars, so they, at a certain point, started feeding me Latin phrases like "*lacrimae rerum*" and "*sunt lacrimae*." [I actually recently found the letter, the original letter. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I was going to ask you where those Latin phrases came from.

JOAN SNYDER: Right, from Marie and Andrew Foley. They've always sent me these things. They sent me "*lacrimae antique*" several years ago, which is the tears of ancient women, which is so beautiful, that phrase, which I then put in a painting.

But [in] *Oh Marie*, I copied out exactly word for word what Marie had written to me in her letter about how—it starts with "Dear Joan," and it talks about how hard and painful her life has been since she lost her daughter. And then I used the Latin words in here.

I don't even have an answer for you about how this happens. I think that I put text in paintings when I absolutely have to. It's not something that I necessarily want to do, want to do all the time, but there are times when—I'm making *Apple Tree Mass, Loves Deep Grapes*, *Oh Marie*—when words just had to go in. *Women in Camps* [1988], there [are –JS] words.

And then my other problem of course is that I get chastised for this by the press always; you know, "she writes in her paintings," "she's a feminist," she's, whatever they say about me they don't say about Cy Twombley or—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You talked about [Anselm] Kiefer. Well, there is an example of someone writing in work.

JOAN SNYDER: Or Kiefer or Julian Schnabel, who writes in his paintings. When Julian writes something in his paintings, everyone thinks he's such a hero: "Oh, my god, he's being emotional. Isn't that wonderful; he's written in his paintings." You know, I write in my paintings and they call me a feminist, and it's a dirty word.

So I'm gun shy. You know, I'm really shy in some ways about writing in my paintings. So I write in them only when I feel like I absolutely have to write in them. Otherwise I don't write in them. But I don't really have a clear answer, but during this period, I can see—during the early '80s I was writing away. And obviously there were times when I really felt like text was very important to me.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How important was it that the viewer be able to read the text fully? Sometimes it looks like it doesn't really matter because some of the letters and words are difficult to read, obscured.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes, I don't care if some of them are obscured because sometimes the painting takes over and I want that look, with that color or that line or that gesture, and if it obscures a word, it obscures a word. These paintings look very wild and emotional, but believe me, I know about every drip [in –JS] every painting and I control everyone in some way. I don't control every one because I let it happen, but then I can always stop it out or blot it out or move it or—you know, I'm constantly working this stuff.

So the words—sometimes I want it to be very clear and other times it's fine if it's obscured. On that new painting over there, I wrote *Brooklyn 2010* because that's when I [had just gotten –JS] back to the city and I made a painting. I don't care if anybody can read *Brooklyn 2010.* That's what I'll end up naming the painting anyway, so they'll know.

But sometimes, I've done paintings with requiems and the Kaddish—you know, Hebrew writing from the Kaddish. Sometimes it's clear; sometimes it gets a little obscured.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is it the same with not caring whether people can understand the meaning of the Latin words?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, if they want to understand them, they have to look them up. They have to work if they want to understand the words that are [mostly in the –JS] prints where I've written in Latin and Hebrew.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You talked about going to Eastport and then later—I think in '84, that you bought the house and you moved there. And then there was a major change, I think.

JOAN SNYDER: A major change in my work. That was significant because I decided to move Molly out of the city and we moved to Eastport, and I felt like the work needed—I needed fresh air. I needed to make some kind of a change.

So what I usually do when that happens is I look back on early work and I say, was it that I was doing that might have been light, refreshing and open and easier than what I'm doing. There were so many heavy paintings that I was doing between the late '70s and early '80s, and it all had to do with the miscarriage, the breakup of the marriage, the relationship with the psychiatrist. It was all so intense. It was an opera and I wanted to get away from that.

Well, when I moved to this place in Eastport, the house—it was a little farmhouse, a white farmhouse, on a street, Seatuck Avenue, and the house was surrounded by bean fields, lo and behold, there were these gorgeous bean fields surrounding our house on either side.

And I thought about my stroke paintings, not wanting to go back to those, and decided that I would make bean field paintings because I could do that, you know; I could make fields. I just thought I could do it. I'd never made a field painting before.

But, interestingly enough, I think I made *Beanfield with Music for Molly* [1984], the really big one—it's six foot by 12 foot—I think I made that in New York. It was not unlike making *The Storm*— buying the farm, seeing all the mud, being in that state. I made *The Storm* in my studio on Mulberry Street. Well, I think I made *Beanfield with Music for Molly* in the studio in the city, but that was after I had experienced the bean fields. The rest of the "bean fields" might have been made out in the country. I don't exactly remember right now.

But then, [I had painted –JS] the other interesting thing was that after we moved out there, the farmer had a stroke, who made the bean fields, so they turned into weed fields, which were also absolutely gorgeous, with [wild –JS] flowers and, because nobody was taking care of these fields, so they turned into two huge weed fields, and I made paintings about those—*Weed Field with Music* [1990 –JS]. I don't know; there was a whole series of weed field paintings. So that was the mid to the late '80s that we're getting at.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you went out there in '84 that would be the time that Molly would be starting school. I guess she would be about five.

JOAN SNYDER: Molly went to—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In '84.

JOAN SNYDER: —kindergarten and first grade in Little Red Schoolhouse in New York, and thank god because she got a really, really great basis for her reading and writing at Little Red. And then I moved out when she was in the second grade to the Eastport public school system, which was terrible. It was just terrible.

That was the downside of being out there was how awful the schools were. So I started a book club with a bunch of her second grade friends, and we met every Saturday. I met with five or six little girls. I don't think there were any boys.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And their parents?

JOAN SNYDER: No, not their parents; just me. I'd prepare food for them, you know, strawberries and cookies and cheese and whatever, and—probably not cookies, knowing me. And I had them make books and use the phonic way of writing and making art, and they all learned that system that Molly had learned at Little Red and they all made books about their lives and their families. It was kind of amazing, this little group of kids.

And some of them were from pretty bizarre kind of family structures and they made books about—stories about their lives.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you were actually becoming the teacher that you taught the teachers to be.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. Right, I didn't think about that but that's what I was doing. I was getting them to do something creative, which they weren't doing in the school system. I would sit and do Molly's homework because it was so stupid. It was fill-in-the-blanks crap and I just hated it so much I would go, oh, I'll just do it.

I didn't do that all the time. Molly obviously was—[laughs]—educated, but she used to get such a headache from her third grade teacher. This woman screamed all the time and Molly would come home with a headache.

We lasted second, third—in fourth grade I was already involved with Maggie, who came into our lives when Molly was eight, We tried this shenanigan of putting Molly in the West Hampton [public –JS] school system which was a better school, and using a friend's address in West Hampton.

Well, we got busted big time. They put a nurse outside of our house in Eastport, unbeknownst to us, to watch [when –JS] Molly came out of the house in the morning to go to school. Of course, they had high school football players who were also going from one town to another, but they didn't [bust them –JS] because they were

keeping their team in first place.

Molly was kicked out of school the day before Halloween. It was just awful. [They wouldn't let her attend the Halloween party. –JS] So she went back to [school in –JS] Eastport and then we decided to move to Brooklyn. Maggie was living in—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: That's Maggie Cammer.

JOAN SNYDER: Maggie Cammer—C-A-M-M-E-R—was living in Manhattan [in Chelsea –JS] when I met her. She was a sitting civil court judge [sitting –JS] in Brooklyn, and she really wanted to live in Brooklyn. So we found a huge apartment in Brooklyn.

Right before that I had a very, very severe case of Lyme disease in '87, so I was pretty much debilitated in '87. And then Molly got Lyme disease and she was also [sick –JS]. She wasn't as sick as I was but she was pretty bad because it lingered. It went on for a long time.

Anyway, we [all –JS] decided to move to Brooklyn.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What part of Brooklyn?

JOAN SNYDER: Park Slope, we rented [a large –JS] apartment because at that time Maggie was not out of the closet, and so we set up a phony bedroom that was Maggie's bedroom, and lived in this—it's actually a house that is a replica of 10 Downing Street on Carroll Street in Park Slope. Needless to say, we all ended up in the same room all the time. It was like a 10 or 12-room house.

[. . . –JS] [A couple of years after that we bought a house on 6th street in Park Slope. We all really loved that house. During those years I had rented studios in several different locations in Park Slope. Finally, I got tired for the trips to the studio. I liked having a studio where I lived, so after searching for several years, we found a house on 11th Street that had a carriage house in the back, which I turned into a studio. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: There was the house on 6th Street between the Carroll Street and this one?

JOAN SNYDER: [. . . –JS] [Yes there was a house on 6th Street that we owned. Molly went to high school while we were living there. She loved that house and was very upset when we moved.

It was on the shade side of the street so gardening in the back yard was always frustrating. But more importantly I didn't have a studio there. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You had a studio on Carroll Street because it was a big house?

JOAN SNYDER: No. No. On Carroll Street my studio was on Union Street. No, I never had a studio until now in Brooklyn—until the last 10 years.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Going back to these field paintings, I'm thinking about *Beanfield with Music,* which is an amazingly beautiful painting, and the color range is very simple. Was that color a representation of the natural world or was there any kind of symbolism involved?

I mean, one could imagine that this was like an Impressionist painting, the green and the yellow, because that's what you were seeing. Obviously there is no sky showing, but was the selection of the color in that a rendering of what you were seeing?

JOAN SNYDER: No, as I said, I was in Brooklyn making this painting. So for me it was a bean field stroke painting. It was really using the idea of the stroke paintings, but it also—*Beanfield with Music,* it had intervals in it of purple where in my mind that's the sound that I hear in the painting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You've talked about sound in color.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Can you tell me more about that?

JOAN SNYDER: I can hear colors sometimes, you know, or colors have different sounds to me. So if I want a painting to sound a certain way, I use certain colors.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When did you start hearing that? [They Laugh.]

JOAN SNYDER: Very early on, like really early on, because I have a painting that has a lot of writing in it, and it

talks about red—this is when I was involved with the Almans. It's called—*Yellow was a House* [1976 –JS], and read, "Yellow was a house, red sometimes [you], white for anxiety." It's a little painting that's very poetic with writing on it, telling what my colors were about.

So that had to be in the mid-'60s or the late '60s when I did that painting. And I think that's when I started thinking about [color and sound –JS].

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Were you aware of painters in the past who had thought about sound and color?

JOAN SNYDER: Why do I think Kandinsky was involved with that? Whatever I was aware of—when I read something I'm kind of reading it but skimming it. The only painter that I look really deeply and carefully at these days—and when I was doing *Beanfield with Music,* I knew nothing about Anselm Kiefer. I love Kiefer's paintings. I just absolutely love them, and I have all his books and I look at them.

But I think that over the years I can't honestly say that I was deeply involved with anybody—Kandinsky, for example, that I was following his lead or something. I think these are things that—with me it was about my knowing that I was naïve. I had no background and one thing was leading to another, and it really was about my own dialogue and my own work and my own scenario and what I needed to do when.

So when I came up with the sounds of color, I think it was because I was so emotionally involved in some ways with the Almans and the anxiety and their yellow house that I had made an impressionist painting of; one of my earliest paintings was a painting of their house.

When I did that yellow house, I remember sitting with my easel in front of the farmhouse in Englishtown, New Jersey, and thinking, I want to make very clear geometric lines on this painting. That's what I want it to be; a very clear yellow house that's almost architectural.

And I sat there painting outside, looking at the house with the canvas on an easel, and I made a very impressionistic painting of a house. Why do you do that? You do that because that's your handwriting. You might have something in your head about how you think you're going to paint, but that's not how you're going to paint.

You're going to paint who you are and how you are, and that's what's going to come out, not some thought that you had seen a Mondrian or something and you're going to sit there and make that. It's just coming from within.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: One of the paintings you did that you—did you call these the field paintings or did someone—

JOAN SNYDER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So one of these paintings, *Ode to the Pumpkin Field*—

JOAN SNYDER: Yes, I was just looking at that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —1987.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Someone wrote that in this particular instance, but it could relate to others, there is a kind of connection to nature that's been in your work for a long time, a spiritual connection to nature. Is that true, and did it ever enter into your consciousness that this had a spiritual element to it?

JOAN SNYDER: I don't think the word "spiritual" is part of my anything. I remember when I wrote my thesis paper for graduate school. I remember talking about art is my religion. It's where I bring my—it's my altar, you know, where I practice whatever religion I have. It's done with my paintings.

So I suppose that's spiritual, but the word "spiritual"— people can say whatever they want about me and it's fine, and sometimes it resonates and sometimes it doesn't. If I was sitting and talking about my work, I would never use the word "spiritual." That's it. Bottom line. [Laughs.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Later in the '80s there is a painting called *Morning Requiem for the Children,* [1987-88] and what I read was that it was initially inspired by reports in a newspaper maybe from Boston about child abuse.

JOAN SNYDER: It was a [story –JS] that the Christian Science Monitor was doing over a period of many issues, or several issues, about child abuse around the world, and things that were happening to children around the world with land mines going off and, you know, kids being made to work in factories at very young ages. That's when I began doing a whole series of paintings about that [subject –JS].

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Were you aware that other artists were engaged with the issues? May Stevens did a series of paintings about the same subject I think around the same time.

JOAN SNYDER: Really?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And I think that she referred to it as being inspired by a series of newspaper or magazine articles.

JOAN SNYDER: Interesting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I have to look in the book and see if it's actually the same time.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes. Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: But I was wondering if you had spoken to her about that.

JOAN SNYDER: No, not at all. I knew about May's—what were they called—big something paintings.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Big Daddy [series].

JOAN SNYDER: Big Daddy paintings.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Those were a decade or more earlier.

JOAN SNYDER: And I knew about her paintings, about her mother—[in –JS] which she had a lot of writing. I don't think I ever knew her work intimately or that well. I knew her from groups we were in, but I also wasn't living in the city, I don't think, at the time. That was in the mid-'80s and then we moved back to Brooklyn.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Among these paintings was one called *Black Marbles Boy* [1989].

JOAN SNYDER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: They're very black and disturbing. I mean, obviously they're reflecting the subject that you were involved in. And they seem to be a moment when you stepped outside your usual work, your ongoing work, and looked at the subject, and obviously what resulted were very dark—or at least that painting was very dark and had a sense of violence in it.

JOAN SNYDER: Really? It's a tiny little painting, you know?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I didn't realize that from the image I saw.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes, I just saw it in the book, but it's just a tiny little painting, and I can't honestly say that I was thinking about much when I did that painting, *Black Marbles Boy,* but it is—yes, it's pretty disturbing. You're right—1989. [Oil, acrylic, papier-mâché, –JS] sparkle, marbles, metal nut, nails on wooden panel.)

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you have a feeling that you were pursuing this body of work, this subject, as a kind of a detour?

JOAN SNYDER: No. I think it was just part of the process, those paintings from the late '80s where I was thinking about children and wanting to do work about that. I have no idea. I think it's really tough to make political paintings like that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: Because they're not popular. *Women in Camps* was the highlight of all of those in some ways, and that became very controversial too because I'd put women that were being held in Palestinian holding camps together with women in concentration camps.

And I've had survivors at my lectures who have said, look, it wasn't the same thing. How dare you say that it was the same thing. And I've had to apologize in some ways and say, no, it's not the same thing; I understand that. On the other hand, how can Israel turn around and do to a people what in some ways was done to them.

But it's beyond my imagining, actually, what's going on in Israel, even though I understand that both sides are crazy and insane and violent. I don't know what's going to fix that problem because nobody seems to be able to.

How did I break out of that, I wonder, because that led right into all [of the –JS] AIDS-related paintings, *Faces* and *Journey of the Souls* [1993].

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was this the time when the image of a dark oval first appeared in your paintings?

JOAN SNYDER: I think so.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What's the title of this painting?

JOAN SNYDER: *Journey of the Souls.*

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you remember how that image evolved?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, did it—I'm wondering if—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I mean, I know that it was in the paintings in the '90s, that oval. You could see it as ponds or graves or just black voids [1993 –JS].

JOAN SNYDER: Well, that's what I was going to say was that then when I was—Maggie and I were together in '87, '88— I don't know exactly when I sold my house in Eastport. It was probably '89 or—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: '89, I think.

JOAN SNYDER: Maggie already owned a cabin—a house in Woodstock, [NY], which I began going to. That house was dark. [Almost –JS] the minute I got there we took some trees down, we put in skylights, because it was really—it was a shade house. I ended up loving this place and doing a lot of great work there. That's when the ponds and darkness [in the paintings began. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I was going to ask you how being there affected your work.

JOAN SNYDER: It affected my work. It definitely affected my work because it was in a valley. It was gorgeous. It was surrounded by beautiful little streams and ponds. But, you know, I would sit at three o'clock in the afternoon and then go into town and realize it was still daylight in town, and we were already getting [a bit –JS] dark. So [one –JS] couldn't take enough trees down.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Because it was in a valley.

JOAN SNYDER: It was in a valley. It had a mountain right behind it. So it was really in a valley. It was gorgeous. It was this tucked-away little beautiful spot, but it was a house that wasn't properly winterized. It wasn't winterized at all, really, and my studio had no plumbing and had one little heater. So every time I moved into it I had to—every summer I had to move everything in and out of there—every bit of work, every bit of material. And I did that for, I don't know, 18 years or so, until we bought a new house [in Woodstock –JS] two years ago.

I was schlepping gallons of water to my studio, which was about a [three-block –JS] city block walk up hills to get to the studio. And at a certain point I just said to Maggie, I can't do it anymore. I need a real studio where I can leave stuff in the winter, where the mice [aren't –JS] eating my paintings. It was serious. I had bat droppings all over [the floor –JS] because there were [many –JS] openings in this little studio.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is the new house near the old house or—

JOAN SNYDER: It's not—the old house was in Willow, which is eight miles outside of Woodstock. The new house is in Woodstock. It's only about a mile-and-a-half, two miles out of town. [We went from a –JS] valley of pine trees and ponds to the most magnificent mountain views that you would ever want to see.

And we're only half a mile up a hill but it's just extraordinary, and I built a studio. And the only reason I was able to do this was because we had been looking for a different place for three years and couldn't find one. And the day after I got the McArthur [Fellowship] in 2007, this house came on the market, and it was about $100,000 more than we [had been –JS] able to do.

We looked at it and we were terrified because it was still scary to spend—

[END CD 4.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Joan Snyder on February 26, 2010, in Brooklyn, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

I was going to ask you later but we can talk about it now, the impact of the MacArthur that you received in 2007. Not your first award but—

JOAN SNYDER: Well—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —certainly the most—

JOAN SNYDER: The most amazing award. As I was saying— I'll just finish that, which is that I was able—we were able to buy a house where I knew I could afford to build a studio. I knew I was going to be able to do it because I got the MacArthur. I wouldn't have been able to do it [otherwise –JS].

So the MacArthur was just an amazing, amazing—what can I say?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You had no inkling that it was coming?

JOAN SNYDER: Several years before I had had a little bit of an inkling because a few people had mentioned to me—which they're not supposed to do—but had mentioned to me that they were asked about me concerning the MacArthur. But this was three, four years before. So no, it completely was out of my mind. There was absolutely no possibility. I was getting older. I never even thought about it anymore.

And you get the phone call, I thought he was calling to ask me about giving a reference for somebody. And Dan Socolow called from the MacArthur Foundation and says, "This is Dan Socolow. I have something to tell you. Do you know what the MacArthur is?"

And I said, yes.

And he said, "Are you sitting down?"

And I began thinking, oh, my god. And Maggie was right there. They called us when we were in Willow, upstate. They knew exactly where I was. They know everything. It's amazing. It's creepy. But they know everything. They know everything about a person. They follow them in many different ways. It takes years for them to make this decision.

And then he said to me, are you holding a baby? [Laughs.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It could have been a wine glass or something.

JOAN SNYDER: So I said—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In other words that you would drop.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. That I'm going to drop. And I said, "I'm not holding a baby." Then he told me. And then I made a joke and said, "Hold on; I have to put the baby down."

But anyway, the wild thing was that we weren't allowed to tell anybody for a week. Because they weren't going to announce it for a week.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And they had to take time to reach everybody because—

JOAN SNYDER: And they had to reach everybody. I had to go back to New York to get filmed because they wanted to put it on their Web site. They had to send somebody [to Willow –JS] from a newspaper to take pictures of me. So it was all going on, Maggie and I knowing and no one else knowing.

And I was going to tell Molly, [who –JS] was in journalism school. And Maggie said, "You know what? The last person you want to tell a secret to at this point is someone in journalism school. Maybe you shouldn't tell Molly right now." Molly [probably –JS] wouldn't have known what the MacArthur was anyway, but she certainly did catch on when we told her.

But it's a recognition I feel like I've worked really, really hard for 35 or 40 years. Really hard. I've never—I don't think I've ever done anything in the art world where I've gone somewhere, done something to promote my career or my—I don't do that. It's just not something I've ever done. In fact, I'm not out there and I feel guilty that I'm not out there.

But when I got the MacArthur, I thought that it's recognition of the work that I've done. And Dan made me feel really good. He said, "Well, you know, we love your work. You're a wonderful painter." It's just a great, great satisfaction after working as hard as I've worked for so many years to have that happen. And then you feel guilty because everybody else doesn't get one and it's so unusual.

So I do have a certain amount of "Oh, my God" feeling. Do I deserve this? Should I have gotten this? That goes on a lot too.

You know, what's interesting about doing this archive is that I often feel insecure and unsure and I forget

everything. You're in the middle of working or trying to figure things out or figure out your career. You don't remember all—I don't remember all the stuff we've been talking about, about how hard I've worked and different breakthroughs and different thinking about the painting. And so it's why it's interesting to me to do this because it reminds me of what I've done and where I've been and the accomplishments I've made.

And just even autobiographically how much I've been through or what I've managed to—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Survive.

JOAN SNYDER: —survive and end up in a fabulous relationship with an amazing daughter and now an amazing son-in-law. Maggie married Molly and Orlando this summer in our new house in Woodstock. It was extraordinary with the mountains in the background. So I think I'm pretty lucky.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What's Orlando's last name?

JOAN SNYDER: Orlando Richards. He's Jamaican. And he's an absolutely wonderful, great, great young man. And I mean, he's so talented that it's scary. And he's a kid that had no education. In fact, when Molly met him he was illiterate and we managed not to know about that. We pretty much didn't have a clue. She used to read to him at night upstairs.

And now he's highly educated—[used my Brooklyn –JS] studio two summers ago, made the most amazing art. He takes the most amazing—I'm not just saying this. His photographs are brilliant. He's a brilliant cameraman. He makes films. I mean, he's—who knows what he's going to be. He's 30 and he's just so gifted.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Going back to some things of the '90s, we were talking about—I asked about the black oval. And there was a series of paintings about death, or it seems like they were about death, *Cherry Tree—Journey of the Souls* in '93-'94.

JOAN SNYDER: So—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And there are paintings that were much more joyful later, something called *Carmina* [1995] and—

JOAN SNYDER: *Carmina* was a return to the stroke paintings, definitely. But it was taken over—inspired by *Carmina Burana* by Carl Orff; it's just an extraordinary piece of music.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: *Carmina* what?

JOAN SNYDER: *Carmina Burana.* By Carl Orff.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Composer.

JOAN SNYDER: Composer. What happened in the early '90s was that my parents became ill and died. My mother was 86 when she died. My father died about nine months later and he was 92. And that was in '92 and '93. Followed by Maggie's parents' death in '93 and '94.

So when we met we had four older but relatively healthy parents and then within three years they—all four of them died and it was major. It was very major when my mother died first and—so I think that's where a lot of this darkness that you're talking about is coming from.

And coupled with the AIDS crisis and [so many –JS] people were dying—I didn't necessarily have close friends that were dying of AIDS. I [knew –JS] a few people.

But if anybody remembers the early '80s and every, every single day we'd look at the New York Times and see the obituaries and it was—well, women too, but young men—talented, brilliant young men between the age of 20 and 30 were all dying. And it was just horrific. So that's when I—between my parents' death and that going on, that's when I made all these [dark –JS] paintings.

And then what happened was that I was making a lot of paintings in the mid-'90s and I suddenly realized that my pallet had gotten very monochromatic and dark. And that's when I made *Red Field* [1993] and *Blue Field* [1993]. I [had –JS] to take myself out of these—this dark place that [I was] in.

So I made *Red Field* and *Blue Field*. *Red Field* has a pond in it. And then I made *Blue Field*. And what else? I kept going on from there.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I'll just switch to a few—

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, and *Cherry Tree* [1993]. That—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: That was a nice story because—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: —because that became [a metaphor, –JS] a symbol. I'm still putting cherries in paintings.

The *Cherry Tree* story was that my father was in a nursing home on Fort Hamilton Parkway in Brooklyn, which is probably one of the least attractive places in the United States. You could easily say that.

I was driving out to visit him and along the way I saw a little house—[several –JS] little houses. In front of [one –JS] little house—this must have been in August—was a cherry tree. And it was full of cherries and there were rotting cherries on the ground and there were cherries falling off the tree and there were little [red–JS] flags on the tree; I guess [they scare the birds off. But that image of the tree laden with cherries and the flags –JS] reminded me of my incidences of sound and music in a painting.

So I stopped and I rang the bell and I asked the woman if I could photograph her cherry tree and she said yes. And the next paintings I was working on—well, one of the next paintings was called *Cherry Tree* in '93 and it really related to life and death. It had cherries on the ground rotting. It had cherries falling to the ground. It had cherries on the tree. If you want to talk about a "spiritual" element, it had this white, silk, altar-like—it's not a stroke but it's a piece of silk in the middle of the painting that I placed the cherry tree on. So I guess that's spiritual. Maybe I use the word—I use "soul"—the word "soul." I'm sure I've used the word "spirit" in a title of a painting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Just a couple of practical questions. It looks like, sitting here in the studio, you're working on more than one painting at once. Is that usually the case or am I misreading this?

JOAN SNYDER: I often [work on one major painting and also several small ones often at the same time. –JS] [Some –JS] paintings need time, they need gestation, and slowly I figure them out. Some paintings take longer than others. I put those out and I work on those along with a larger painting and figure out the [other –JS] ones. But I rarely am working on two [large paintings –JS] at once.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is it an issue for you, to determine when you're done with a painting, or is that just a natural part of the process?

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, it's always an issue. I once said something really dumb in an *Art News* [interview –JS] about—did you read that, about being done with a painting? I said it's like sex; you know when you're done.

But you know, sometimes it's hard because often I'll have many paintings in one painting. Often I could stop but I'm not satisfied so I keep going. And then finally, I'll get to the point where I do tend to push and push and push until I have something really extraordinary.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So you may start with one concept and it evolves into something completely different.

JOAN SNYDER: Often, yes. That can happen.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What happens when you're just stuck and you don't know what to do—

JOAN SNYDER: Well, that's when I put a painting aside and I start a new one and then know that I have to look at that one for longer and worry about it and think about it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Some paintings take longer than others, you said. Are you finding that your work in general takes longer than it used to?

JOAN SNYDER: No, I think it's the same, which is sometimes a painting can happen relatively quickly and then sometimes it'll take much longer. It's hard to know. And it also has to do with life and interruptions. If you weren't here I'd be pounding away on this painting and trying to figure it out.

But this painting did get more complicated because I had a very simple idea in mind. Well, you can't have a simple idea and make an 18-foot painting. Simple and 18 feet don't go together unless you're somebody else; not me.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: But you knew you wanted to make the painting that size because you—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —had to have the stretchers constructed.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. That was planned to make a bigger painting.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you ever declare something a failure and just give up?

JOAN SNYDER: I have a few in the racks that—you know, even some things that I've shown that I've put away in the last several years I find myself at times going back to older paintings and painting over them, which I never did when I was younger.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: As a way of destroying it, taking it out of your history?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, painting over it, making it better, making it into a different painting than it was because somehow it got by me and it wasn't as good as I thought it was.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What about titling the works? Has that changed, the way you title things? And do you think of a title before the painting is started?

JOAN SNYDER: Sometimes it happens before, during or after. Titles are [often –JS] hard. I have to sit around with a bunch of paintings and come up with titles if I'm having a show.

Sometimes a title comes very automatically. Like this painting was inspired by a movie that I saw. The movie is called *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* [2008]. It's about the women in Liberia who actually a grassroots group of women—normal, regular, everyday, average women—stopped the civil war in Liberia. It's an amazing film.

This painting was inspired by the women of Liberia. And in fact, I had written in there "Women of Liberia" until I finally took it out; but the title remained, *Inspired by WOL*, *women of Liberia* [2010 –JS].

So sometimes a title's easy. Sometimes it's a lot harder. Often if I can't think of a title I try to think of some kind of description of the painting or using a color word if there's a certain color that's predominant in the painting, I'll use that in the title just so I can describe it or be poetic somehow without giving too much away, you know?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What about archival issues? You're using nontraditional elements on the painting. Is that something you've always thought about, or only after a certain point has it become an issue?

JOAN SNYDER: I think about it. But I think my paintings are very stable because whenever I use herbs in a painting—and we didn't talk about the herbs—but whenever I use any kind of herbs or—like these have rose hips in them and little rose petals and things like that—they're always dipped in an acrylic glue.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And also the straw?

JOAN SNYDER: The straw has glue in it. The burlap has glue around it. So everything's preserved in this glue. The paintings don't fall apart. Honestly, I have no idea what's going to happen 100 years from now, but for now they're very stable.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I did want to ask you about the herbs—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —how that started and how you decide specifically which herbs—

JOAN SNYDER: Well,—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —and where you get them.

JOAN SNYDER: The herbs is an interesting story.

[Audio Break.]

JOAN SNYDER: When we were living on Carroll Street I had a studio in Brooklyn on Union Street. And I rented [work –JS] space—it was above a bike shop. It was a beautiful space and it had an office in the front part of it. I rented it out to an acupuncturist who [in her practice used –JS] Chinese herbs. Her name is Rachel Koenig, K-O-E-N-I-G.

At one point [she decided that the herbs—the loose herbs were [not clean enough –JS] and that she wanted to move to capsules for her patients. So she literally gave me all of her herbs. I am still [using them in paintings –JS]—this was how many years ago? Fifteen years ago. I have bottles of them. I have bags of them.

So for a year or two I made healing paintings using the herbs. Whenever I heard somebody was sick, I just got into this thing of healing—making healing paintings, like voodoo.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I don't think you believed that someone was going to be healed from it.

JOAN SNYDER: Sort of. Sort of I did. Yeah.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did they [know –JS] that you were making the painting?

JOAN SNYDER: Sometimes they did, sometimes they didn't. I made quite a few of them. And then I started just using the herbs as part of the painting and they weren't healing paintings anymore but I was just using these incredible—putting them in the glue and then using them in the field [paintings, etc. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Not representing what the actual herb was.

JOAN SNYDER: No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Just representing nature—

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —and natural element.

JOAN SNYDER: Yeah. Because they were gorgeous in one way or another, how they dried and what they did.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you about print making before we go to more recent work, about your history of print making and when you decide to make a print—oh, yes. There's *Red Field*.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. With a red velvet center and a black velvet center. So I still hadn't let go of the black velvet and I still hadn't let go of these—well, I was making music—these marks.

But I'm sorry. Where were you?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Print making.

JOAN SNYDER: Print making.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is print making an important part of your practice?

JOAN SNYDER: [Printmaking –JS] is really important. I love print making.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When do you decide to do a print? Is it when you're asked or when you decide you have ideas that would best be explored in prints?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, it's both ways. Because I started making prints in graduate school, so that was a long time ago in the mid-'60s. And you know I'm having a print retrospective?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I wanted to ask you to—please talk about that.

JOAN SNYDER: It's going to cover 35, 40 years of print making.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Who's organizing that?

JOAN SNYDER: Marilyn Symmes at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers [University]. She's been working on it for almost two years now. It's going to open in January of 2011.

I've had some shows with prints but mostly no one's ever seen most of my prints because I often don't have—I often publish my own prints and they end up in my [flat files –JS]. It's not that I haven't had a few [print shows –JS]—I had one catalogue of prints and I've shown prints in Boston, but New York dealers don't want to show prints.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When we're talking—

JOAN SNYDER: —because they don't sell for very much.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you're talking about your prints, what print making mediums do you use?

JOAN SNYDER: I started with lithography and then made etchings and wood blocks and—and now in the last many, many years I started putting it all together, so I often have a print that has lithography, etching and wood block on it. And then in some prints I've incorporated digital imagery also. [They're often –JS] mixed. Some of them are editions and some of them are monoprints.

In answer to your question, sometimes I get asked as a commission to make a print and I'll do it. And other times if you resonate with a printer—as I do with Jungle Press, with Andrew Mockler, M-O-C-K-L-E-R—then—Andrew and I have made a lot of prints together. I love working with him.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Where is he?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, he's been in different places. He was in the West Village and then he moved to another space in Brooklyn. Now he's way out in Brooklyn, in Greenpoint, I think. Right before Long Island City, right before the bridge.

I've made a lot of prints with him.

I started mixing the medium with Bob Townsend when I made some prints for the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center. Bob really pushed me in terms of print making. It really informed my paintings that I did after making prints with him because he had me carving and pounding pastel into the grooves and doing all kinds of—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: He was suggesting things for you to experiment with.

JOAN SNYDER: Right. Right. And that's what a good print maker does. They know your work, they're familiar with your work and they push you in different ways. I've worked with a lot of different print makers and made a lot of prints, which will all be in this retrospective.

Marilyn has looked at every single proof I've ever made. We—my [flat files –JS] got so organized because of this show. All the drawings got sorted out and all the prints got sorted out.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Have you consistently sold them through any particular print dealer?

JOAN SNYDER: I don't have a print dealer. Years ago Diane Villani [published my prints –JS] and I had a show with her. I had one show with Victoria Munroe many years ago. But that was it. I really don't show the prints.

I've shown them in Boston. And my Woodstock dealer, Elena Zang, sells prints. She does do well with the prints. But they're never featured. It's never a print show because everybody wants to sell paintings or drawings or—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Would you like to have them shown with the drawings and paintings if you could?

JOAN SNYDER: I would. Or I'd just like to have them shown on their own. I don't think New York has any print dealers that I know of.

Anyway, we're trying to travel the show. Not easy but we'll see what happens. There's going to be a book.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Did you have a hand in deciding how it would be organized? I mean, in terms of chronology or subject matter?

JOAN SNYDER: Yeah, I've been involved. Marilyn's been here once or twice a month for the last year or two. And my assistant is very involved in it also.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you go to the printer with preparatory drawings? Have you already thought about what you wanted to—

JOAN SNYDER: You have to. But you don't I never know completely, but I have—you have to have some idea where you want to go when you go because—among other things, it's time and money. They're there. They're ready to make a print and you have to have some idea where you want to start. It's the usual, which is one thing leads to another, but you have to have some idea.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is there a certain master printer who you've gone to, worked with repeatedly?

JOAN SNYDER: Andrew Mockler.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Oh. He's the—

JOAN SNYDER: I've worked with Randy Hemminghaus at [The Brodsky Center at –JS] Rutgers and he's great.

He's a great printer.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you decide on the edition size or does the print shop do that?

JOAN SNYDER: We decide together because often I'm publishing. So I'm paying for it. Sometimes I share the publication with the printer and [they get some of the edition –JS] or half of it, so we decide together.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You mentioned that you've had commissions to do prints.

JOAN SNYDER: I have. Quite a few. The Jewish Museum [NYC] [commissioned me to –JS] make a print. I made a print with Andrew called *Our Foremothers* [1995], which is a print that [is almost –JS] all words. It names every woman who is named in the Old Testament, whether they were Jewish or not Jewish. Not only does it name the women, but it tells their histories in the print, [which is etching, woodcut –JS], lithograph.

JOAN SNYDER: Then I was commissioned by the Madison Print Club I did [a print –JS] called *Requiem: Let Them Rest* [1997], which has Hebrew and Latin [phrases –JS] in it.

I was also commissioned by the New York Print Club I did a print for them called *Oasis* [2006] a few years ago.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Have you been commissioned to do any permanent painting installation or any—

JOAN SNYDER: No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —painting—

JOAN SNYDER: I was asked to send some slides recently by someone who works for the government. They commission work but I've never been asked to do anything like that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You haven't pursued commissions then?

JOAN SNYDER: No. I wonder how that would work, given the fact that my paintings are somewhat—I don't think they're fragile, but to have them in a big public space I don't know. No idea.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In terms of your studio practice, you mentioned digital imagery in the print making. Has technology impacted your work or your studio practice in any other way?

JOAN SNYDER: Not in any other way, I can safely say. These are all hand-made, one person.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And you don't have any studio assistants?

JOAN SNYDER: I have a studio assistant, but she's—you might meet her today. I don't know if she's coming to work. She's mostly at the computer dealing with all my—dealing with everything. There's so much work to be done, the archives, the [locations of works –JS], things moving around, things in storage, new photography. Everything that has to be dealt with, Mira deals with. Her name is Mira Dancy and she's a painter.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How do you spell Dancy?

JOAN SNYDER: D-A-N-C-Y. She just got her master's degree from Columbia. And she's just the most brilliant young woman. She's been an amazing assistant. I think she's been with me for four years already.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you have a regular routine? Have you always started work first thing in the morning in the studio or on a different kind of schedule?

JOAN SNYDER: I'm a morning worker and I usually start around 8:30, [much earlier in the summer –JS]. I work for several hours—three or four hours. I have lunch. And I usually go back in maybe for an hour or [two –JS] after lunch, just to poke around. I do my best work in the morning.

And in the mid-afternoon to late afternoon I always need a nap because I wake up very early. But it's usually a nap combined with the *New York Times* crossword puzzle, which is very meditative to me. It almost puts me to sleep every day, but that's the purpose. I do the puzzle. I can do Monday through Thursday fairly well. Forget Friday and Saturday. And then Sunday's fun again—the Sunday puzzle.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What about light? Do you always try to have a certain kind of light, use natural light, or incandescent or—

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I have the lights on now.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —try to duplicate gallery lighting?

JOAN SNYDER: No In this room I can often work without light on at all because this—now the skylights are covered with snow, but normally the lighting here is absolutely gorgeous. It's like Long Island light. There's nothing blocking my [light –JS] right now in this Brooklyn studio.

So I like to work in natural light. Or if I can't see, I put the lights on. It's not a science with me.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You're not trying to adjust the lighting so the color reads the same way?

JOAN SNYDER: No. No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You talked about things being meditative. Do you have any other kinds of activities, like yoga, that you do on a daily basis or a regular basis that affect your work in the studio?

JOAN SNYDER: That affect my work?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Well, as much as everything affects your work.

JOAN SNYDER: Well, everything affects your work. You need to have the energy. When I left Larry and Molly was a baby, I started doing Iyengar yoga.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How do you spell Iyengar?

JOAN SNYDER: I-Y-E-N-G-A-R. And it changed my life because when I—I was so, so depressed after we split up that it was hard for me to put one foot in front of the other. And after the yoga class I felt—literally felt like I was six inches taller. That's how amazing it was.

I continued doing Iyengar yoga for years. And then I stopped, unfortunately, and started again maybe five or six years ago. Started back doing Iyengar yoga and now have gotten into Pilates.

[. . . –JS] [I still incorporate yoga as part of my own practice. I've been doing Pilates regularly because the yoga was—my knees were so bad for so long and at some point the yoga became more difficult because of my knees. I've had both knees operated on: I have two new knees—Pilates has been really brilliant for post-surgery. It's just a great form of exercise.–JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I wanted to ask about music. We talked about it before. Do you listen to music regularly while you're working?

JOAN SNYDER: Always. It moves me. It pushes me. It inspires me. I mean, I choose carefully what I'm going to play for different paintings. And I learn from it as I listen. I mean, it actually keeps me going in a mode in a way, in a—it's part of the work, really. It's part of my work process.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is it always classical?

JOAN SNYDER: [No. I also listen to world music, jazz and folk as in Pete Seeger, Paul Simon sometimes. Mostly I listen to classical vocal music, opera, Bach Cantatas, Handel, Mozart, requiems, etc. The artists I tend to listen to these days are Sofie Van Otter, Renée Fleming, Kiri Te Kanawa, (Édith) Piaf, Janis Joplin, Mercedes Sosa, Oliver Mtukudzi, Judy Garland, Leonard Cohen, Martha Wainwright, Nina Simone, Bob Dylan, Sondheim, Kurt Weill. I tend to get hooked on a singer or a composer and listen to them over and over. Recently I listened to almost every Bach Cantata. My daughter had given me a complete set of Bach CDs. A few summers ago I listened non-stop to *La Nuit D'ete* sung by Sofie Van Otter. At one point an album called *Ulysses Gaze* played over and over and over. Years before it was Strauss' *Four Last Songs* of which I have at least 5 different renditions by female vocalists. This month, after the death of Amy Winehouse, I have been listening to her songs over and over and find them haunting and powerful, especially "Rehab" and "Back to Black". (This last remark was made white editing this interview in August of 2011.) –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What about reading? Are there certain books that have been very important to your work? And is that something that's a continual inspiration or not so much?

JOAN SNYDER: [. . . –JS] [I'm a novel reader, although I also read non-fiction.

Our book club in Woodstock reads classics. We've read *Anna Karenina* (Leo Tolstoy), *Portrait of the Artist* (James Joyce), *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert), *Swann's Way* (Proust), *The Magic Mountain* (Thomas Mann), etc. This winter Maggie and I read *Ulysses* by enrolling in a course at NYU, the only way we would ever read it.

Reading novels is not as critical or crucial to my work in the studio as listening to music but reading is crucial no matter what and reading these great authors the last few years has been a great experience. Proust came as the biggest surprise. I loved it and found so many correlations in his writing to my own work. For example:

certain of his descriptions of things in nature exactly described a painting that I had recently done. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Have there been any travels that have had an impact on your work?

JOAN SNYDER: I would say not necessarily. I'm not—I don't travel a lot. I'm not— we definitely are not as mobile or flexible as we could or should be in terms of traveling. We're going to take a trip to Italy at the end of this month; we haven't even figured out where we're going or staying, nothing. But we had these tickets that we had to use, so we're going to use them.

[. . . –JS] [The still new to me mountain views in Woodstock have changed and inspired my work. There is no doubt that the light and the mountains, not to mention the gardens that Orlando built, the tiered gardens in the back of the house, the vegetable and flower garden which are extraordinary and have made a difference. He built it from scratch. It was a huge hill of little oak trees, pine trees, berry bushes. He created a fabulous tiered garden with stone walls and birch paths. All that inspires my work. –JS]

I fantasize, wouldn't it be nice to see a poppy field in bloom in southern France? Am I going to get there in May? I doubt it. To catch it. We went to Hawaii last year where I was hired to work for [The] University of Hilo. And it was very disappointing. They paved over paradise, pretty much. I didn't find it moving or inspiring. And maybe we were in the wrong places but we [did go –JS] to a few different islands.

When we go to Provincetown and we're by the sea or by the bay I get inspired by that. But it doesn't take a lot to inspire me. [Laughs.]

When I was doing the field paintings and I went and visited my parents in [Florida –JS] with Molly and she was really little and, this was in the early '80s. I took her to the beach one night and there was a gorgeous moon out. And that's when I said, why not make moon fields? If I can make weed fields and bean fields, I can make moon fields. So I started making moon fields.

You can see amazingly beautiful things just driving around the city, walking around the city.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Before we get back to your work, just a couple other subjects. You haven't been a full-time or permanent teacher at a university have you?

JOAN SNYDER: No.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I know you've done a lot of lecturing.

JOAN SNYDER: I've had jobs. I taught at Yale for—before Molly was born I taught at Yale for two years, [I had –JS] some kind of special chair. I wasn't part of the faculty. I did the same thing at Princeton [University, NJ]. I had a special chair and [I taught –JS] there for maybe two or three years, also before Molly was born. Once Molly was born I didn't do as much of that kind of thing.

But then I worked at Parsons, which I loved. Parsons was a wonderful experience.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What did you do there?

JOAN SNYDER: I taught junior painting. And I had a class of something like 18 students from 16 different countries. It was extraordinary. It was really an amazing, wonderful thing.

[. . . –JS] And then I taught at SVA for maybe three years, while Molly was in the United Nations school. And my rationale was, I'm making $18,000 a year. That pays for her tuition. I'm doing it. [. . . –JS] Then I stopped because I didn't—I really didn't like what was going on at SVA anymore. It was really very against everything I believed in in terms of teaching students and communication and—so much was off for me in that place. [The students –JS] were paying so much and their studios were so paltry and toxic.

So since I quit SVA, I haven't taught in any kind of regular fashion.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And with the gallery representation—where we left off, I think you had just started at Hirschl & Adler [Modern –JS]—I think it was '85. You showed there for many years. And with other galleries a short time.

When you were having shows there and then Rena Bransten [San Francisco, CA] and Jay Gorney [Modern Art Gallery, New York City] and Marian Locks [Locks Gallery, New York City], all these other—Robert Miller [New York City] once I think—until—

JOAN SNYDER: No, I joined Robert Miller Gallery.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I didn't know how many shows you had there.

JOAN SNYDER: I was there for three years. I probably had—did I have two shows there? I don't know. But I was there for three years.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And you had, fortunately, all these different representatives; however, you moved from one to one. Was that basically because you were trying to—

JOAN SNYDER: I wasn't—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —have a better situation?

JOAN SNYDER: I wasn't moving from one to the other; I was [in –JS] shows. Like Jay—the show at Jay's was a show with Jessica Stockholder.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes.

JOAN SNYDER: It was a two-person show. I wasn't part of his gallery.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Right.

JOAN SNYDER: The show at Rena Bransten's was in San Francisco; I had one show there. I had a show at Locks Gallery and that was one show.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was it a struggle over the years to find someone who would really be the right person to represent your work?

JOAN SNYDER: Still is. I don't think artists are ever satisfied. I think that's the nature of the beast. There's nobody I've ever spoken to that says [that they are –JS] solely content. I think it's hard.

I'd have to look at that history, but Hirschl & Adler [Modern –JS] probably closed, which is why I left. I had a show downtown on Broadway—on West Broadway when they were there. And then they moved back uptown to be on top of Hirschl & Adler Gallery—Hirschl & Adler Modern opened there in the same building. I had a show there. My memory is that it disbanded [at some point –JS]. And maybe that's when I had the shows in other places. I'd have to look back at it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How did you end up at Betty Cuningham?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I ended up with Betty because Betty worked at Hirschl & Adler and then Betty went to work for Robert Miller Gallery, and that's how I got to go to Robert Miller Gallery. By that time Robert Miller was gone. He was in Florida and Betsy [Miller] was running the gallery—was the director—and Betty was working for her and that's how I went to the Robert Miller Gallery. I was there for three years.

And it really was a three-year experiment. I remember before I started that Maggie said, this is a three-year experiment. If it doesn't work in three years, [you're –JS] going to leave, which I did.

And then I was on my own for I don't know how long, a year or two, not knowing what to do. And then Betty announced that she was opening her own space, so I went with her.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is it a—it seems like a good space physically for your work to be shown in.

JOAN SNYDER: I'm sure people think it's a big, gorgeous space, which it is; but it's a hard space. I don't think it's an easy space, even for Betty. It's a hard space because it's so huge. It's not huge like Pace [Gallery, New York City] but it's a big, long space. I always like more intimate spaces to show my work in. That's just me. I can easily show in a smaller space.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you have a relationship with a gallery, and you're having a show coming up, how involved are you in what the image will be on the announcement, what kind of announcement to do, how the exhibition will be installed, the promotional activities and the actual physical—

JOAN SNYDER: I'm very involved. I said that the other—yesterday, that I'm very involved in every aspect. They show me the ads before they—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And the press release?

JOAN SNYDER: Yeah. They show me that stuff before it goes out because now with the computer, it's easy to shoot back and forth e-mails. That's what makes it so great, that you don't have to get things in the mail and

wait. Things can happen pretty quickly. So I'm on top of every aspect of when I have a show. I like to be.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Are you involved in who buys your work?

JOAN SNYDER: Not so much in control of that, no. I'm lucky. A lot of really wonderful people have bought my work, and I've met a lot of them and I've become very close friends with some of them. But no, you can't control that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In terms of critical response to your work, you talked yesterday about how maybe you'll just read something once. Have there been things written about your work that were wrong and in some way took the wrong approach and you want to set the record straight?

JOAN SNYDER: Good question. I don't know. I mean, things have been written about my work that I thought were dumb or stupid or not getting it or negative, but no, there's nothing you can do about it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Is there a common error that people make continually?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I don't like to be labeled. So I don't like to be put in the "women" category or the "lyrical abstraction" category, which happened years ago. I don't have too many beefs about all that stuff.

I think I sometimes have beefs about people who have learned a lot from my work and then use it in their work, and then when it's written about, nothing is mentioned. It's, like, glossed over. So that really bothers me, actually, if there's something that would bother me where I would want to set the record straight, [that would be it –JS]. But I don't.

[END CD 5.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Joan Snyder on February 26, 2010, in Brooklyn for the Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution, disc six.

We were just talking about criticism and I was thinking about what you have written. I know you were asked in 1975 by *Artforum*—you're one of a number of painters to comment on whether painting was dead.

JOAN SNYDER: Really?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yeah. I think so. And—

JOAN SNYDER: I don't remember.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And then in 1992 you published an essay called "It Wasn't Neo to Us." Why did you decide to write that particular piece and how did it come to be published?

JOAN SNYDER: I wrote it for the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series because that's where it's published, in a book of essays. I'd have to get the book out.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So that essay from '92 was published in a book of essays?

JOAN SNYDER: [. . . Yes. –JS] What it's just very basically about is about women's art and the women's movement. And I had read a piece by Hilton Kramer talking about Neo-Expressionism and talking about it as if the men who were known as Neo-Expressionists had invented writing in paintings, using material, all sorts of stuff that women had been doing for many years. And that's where I got "It Wasn't Neo to Us"—that's where I got that line.

But that's what that essay's about. It's about the history of the women's artist shows and that we had been doing it long before Neo-Expressionism came along.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What was the response to that essay from women and from others?

JOAN SNYDER: I don't know. I don't remember. I don't think it was widely seen or widely read necessarily, so I don't remember what the response might have been.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Was it quoted recently somewhere?

JOAN SNYDER: I don't know.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you think now about the shift in artistic practice and all the artists who don't work from a studio, what do you think is the future of painting?

JOAN SNYDER: The future of painting? Ha!

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In artistic practice, there's been a gradual movement for decades to other forms, video, new media, all kinds of ways of approaching being an artist that don't include making objects in a studio.

JOAN SNYDER: What can I say? I know what I'm addicted to and this is what I do. But I think it's probably true that there aren't that many terrific painters around anymore and probably less—fewer and fewer people are painting or using paint. But I really, really, really don't think painting is dead in any—with any stretch of the imagination at all. I mean, it—you know, different things happen at different times but I can't imagine it going away.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Picking up where we kind of left off, around 2000, you talked about the moon fields. And you did a painting, actually in 2000, called *Blue Moons*, which is in the book—kind of irregular circles that look like moons or fruit scattered.

JOAN SNYDER: In this book? Oh, yeah. Here.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And then a painting in 2000 called *Ghosts*. And I thought that that painting with the text "the dead"—

JOAN SNYDER: Yeah.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —I wanted to ask you about that. I don't know what else you may have painted over. You can't see anything besides "the dead," I think. And it has these very lively red splotches of color, which are an interesting contrast to the text that says "the dead."

JOAN SNYDER: [. . . –JS] [*Ghosts*. It did have other writing on it, a longer sentence or sentences at one point. It could have been a James Joyce quote about the dead. It was a question about the dead, about ghosts. "Do the dead rise?" or "Do the dead speak?" It was the summer that I felt the presence of the ghost of my mother (who was dead) in my studio almost on a daily basis. Thus the painting *Ghosts.* –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: This painting, as many others do, combines the strokes, the fields, and the narrative. Would you say that over the last 10 years that you're drawing on all those languages and that they all are part of the work, more or less, in different paintings?

JOAN SNYDER: I would say that, yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: That there's a layering and a recombining.

JOAN SNYDER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you look at this painting here in the studio, which is titled—

JOAN SNYDER: *Inspired by WOL*.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And you look at this painting, *Ghosts*, there seems to be some direct correspondence. Do you see that?

JOAN SNYDER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] In this one I'm using a completely different kind of paint and so the pallet is a little bit—it's quite different than this.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What is the paint you're using?

JOAN SNYDER: I'm using Guerra paints and oil paint. But the Guerra paints are an acrylic suspension medium. It's a paint that you have to add mediums to.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Have you been using that—

JOAN SNYDER: I've been using that for several years now—maybe three, four years—and I just absolutely love it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In place of oil or in addition?

JOAN SNYDER: Sometimes in place of oil but often I use—I might use oil in addition to that, on top of it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So they go together. They can be used—

JOAN SNYDER: Well, they can be used together but one has—Guerra paints have to go on first because it's a water-based paint.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When September 11th [2001] came, even though you weren't in the city, how were you Affected?

JOAN SNYDER: I was in Woodstock.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You were in Woodstock.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You ended up doing a few paintings in response to that.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —one of them is called *Elegy* [2001], I think.

JOAN SNYDER: [I was working on *Elegy* with 9/11 happened. So I wrote the date right into the painting because on that day I was with that painting. And then I did several more in that series which were unlike what I was about to do anyway but I'm sure that they changed somewhat, given the enormity of what was going on. I was painting in Willow in my small studio in the woods, an idyllic setting and lower Manhattan had just blown up. It was surreal. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you think there's been an evolution in the imagery that you use that one could see as feminist? Over the last 10 years

JOAN SNYDER: I think I'm pushing it now more towards the feminist imagery. I'm definitely pushing that way.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Why is that?

JOAN SNYDER: If you look at that painting "WOL." I just think that's where I want to go. That's where I wish the world was going. It's just such a violent and often male violent place, and wars and—even [President Barack] Obama, who we all voted for with such hope, is having this wonderful little war in Afghanistan. So I feel myself pushing that [imagery –JS] a bit more.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: That started several years earlier?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, it actually started with the last show I had at Betty's in '07. I mentioned that in the catalogue.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: I think I read it even earlier, too. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I think around '04. When you think of wanting to include more of what you would consider feminist imagery, what aspect of that comes to mind? How would you define that?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, like in this one [where the middle section is the seam of a burlap bag. To me that speaks to female imagery, of openings and then the rose hops and flowers, breast shapes, it's all part of the female sensibility.–JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you think that your process of beginning the painting and developing it has been fairly consistent over the years? Or do you see that it's really different now than if you look back 10 or 20 years?

JOAN SNYDER: [. . . –JS] [I actually think it's fairly consistent. I really do. I make small sketches in sketch books, always have, often when I'm at a concert I'll draw on the playbill. I look at those books and sketches over and over again and write the word 'yes' on a sketch that interests me in terms of making it into a painting. If I look back and have said 'yes' often enough I know that that sketch ill soon turn into a painting.

I think if anything my last -- this last series of paintings is more over the top in a certain way. I'm letting loose. That's the way I feel with these paintings. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What does that mean, "letting loose," to you?

JOAN SNYDER: I think they're more full, they're more busy, they're more—it's more cacophony, there's more going on.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Would you say that you were holding back before and now—

JOAN SNYDER: I wouldn't say I was holding back, but I feel this new surge of visual imagery that looks to me like it's fuller than what it was. Or I keep pushing it to be fuller than what it was.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In the past did you feel content when you made a work, but sensed that you had more

to say that you were—

JOAN SNYDER: I don't know. If I look back at paintings from two years ago, I probably feel like those were very full also. But right now that's the way I feel about what's going on. In fact, I want to push this one back. It's moved out—it moved too fast in the under painting. A little bit out of control with it. So now I have to push it back a little bit.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You just started three days ago, you said.

JOAN SNYDER: Yeah.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You talked a bit about the influence of your work on other artists. Do you have younger artists approaching you or talking to you about your influence on them?

JOAN SNYDER: I do. I definitely do. And sometimes I don't know their work, sometimes I do. Sometimes when I see it, I don't see a connection. Sometimes I see such a connection that it's scary. There's a young woman, in some ways she's making better paintings than—they're like Joan Snyder paintings but they're even more. So I can't explain it but—I see it. I'm not saying it happens a lot, but it does happen. I might get—hear from three or four people a year.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you usually hear by e-mail or by—

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, god, now it's Facebook and e-mails and [notes and –JS] letters left at the gallery, that kind of thing.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So—

JOAN SNYDER: And that's always gone on. That's always happened to me.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Has it?

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And what about young artists whose work you're interested in, regardless of how it's connected to—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —the way you paint?

JOAN SNYDER: [There are –JS] several younger artists whose work I definitely watch, who interest me.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How did you come to see their work?

JOAN SNYDER: Just through—I don't know. Family connections, my daughter.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: We were talking about galleries earlier. This is a general question, but how do you think the art world has changed since you were first here in the last '60s—for artists?

JOAN SNYDER: I can't really speak to the art world so much because I'm not—I mean, I'm in the art world but I'm not out there. I do speak to people—artists—I have some friends who I speak to about the experiences in the art world but—

You know, it was really a boy's world in the late '60s. It was—that was their world. And a lot of them are not around anymore. Some of them have survived. But I personally actually hate the New York art world with a passion. I think it's the most ungenerous, silly place. I don't know what it's about. Hustling and money and career and—it's not about anything remotely human or friendly or generous or kind; it's none of those things. I just—I can't stand it, actually, which is why I don't go there very often. It's never been any place that makes me comfortable in any way.

So has it changed? There's always new hot shots and—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you think women have a better chance to have their work seen and be recognized?

JOAN SNYDER: I think that women do have somewhat better opportunities now than they did, for sure. But I think that there's definitely a glass ceiling that we've hit. And I guess that's part of my dialogue. Did I hit the glass ceiling or is maybe my work just not very good or not good enough? What's it all about? And it's a question that you can never have an answer to. You just never know.

But it's like my father always used to say: It's not what you know, it's who you know. And I think he was right. He's always been right about stuff like that, simple as he was.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you think there's as much of a sense of supportiveness among women—

JOAN SNYDER: There's no support among anybody in the art world, forget among women. No. I don't see it. I have a few women artist friends who are very supportive and who I'm supportive of, and I can count those on one hand. But that's good. I mean, at least I have that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you want to mention who they are?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, I'm very—I love Ida Applebroog. She's a good friend and has always been very supportive and—I'm not close friends with Judy Pfaff but Judy and I definitely have a rapport that's always interesting and [there's –JS] somebody like Hayden Herrera [who –JS] I feel very close to but I never see her.

That's the thing about New York; you never see anybody. You know, to make a lunch date might take about three or four months or more. And then if you see somebody once a year, is that a friendship? I don't know. I don't think so. So that's why I find it very hard.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you're up in Woodstock is there a circle of—do you have a—

JOAN SNYDER: Yes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —community there that's different than the New York community and—

JOAN SNYDER: Totally.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And are those artists?

JOAN SNYDER: They're not artists. Some of them are, but they're writers, they're psychologists, they're musicologists, they're—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Who are the artists—

JOAN SNYDER: —a few painters.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —up there who you are friends with, you see and—

JOAN SNYDER: I'm friends with Mary Frank. I see Mary. I see Alan Siegel, whose wife Mamie Spiegel is a terrific ceramicist but she stopped making work a few years ago.

But then we have a whole circle of friends [who –JS] aren't artists, which is what I love because it's—we really see people. They're real friendships. It's a community of amazing people.

Grace Wapner is a friend. She's a sculptor, painter. Collagist lately. And her husband Jerry Wapner's a lawyer who's great. [Henrietta Mantooth, a wonderful unrecognized painter.–JS].

It's different from New York, which is why I love being up there, because I feel like I'm in a community. I walk down the street and I know people and we chat and it's just—

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Does it have any of the drawbacks of small towns?

JOAN SNYDER: Not that I know of. It doesn't have any drawbacks, this place. Word spreads very quickly about anything, but that's fun. It's Woodstock. You can't keep a secret more than five minutes.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: You talked about the print retrospective and organizing your files. Are you doing anything about your archives and preparing the work to survive after you're no longer here, your legacy?

JOAN SNYDER: [. . . –JS] [I'm trying to organize things and have been spoken to by both the women's Archives at Rutgers and the Smithsonian. I haven't made any decisions yet. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you had this major show in 2005 that was at the Danforth Museum [of Art, Framingham, MA] and the Jewish Museum, a retrospective—

JOAN SNYDER: It wasn't really a retrospective; it was a survey.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: A survey, but it was a fairly extensive survey.

JOAN SNYDER: Yeah. Right. Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Sometimes artists talk about those kinds of experiences as having a major impact, either inspiring more work or freezing you a little bit because you're so involved in looking back. What was the impact of that show and this book on you and your work?

JOAN SNYDER: Well, the book took a couple years of work. We worked—me and my assistants really worked hard on this book. But the show was—the history of the show is very complicated because it started with one curator at one museum and then she had a complete nervous breakdown and overnight—

The Jewish Museum always was going to take it, but they did not want to originate it because they don't do shows of live artists. They wanted it and they wanted to be very controlling about it in some ways, but they wanted somebody else to originate it, to say that they originated it.

Overnight we found the Danforth Museum to do that, literally, because Abrams [Publishers] was not going to do a book unless we had at least two museums. It was all very intense and very difficult. The Jewish Museum show was amazing and it was amazing what they did for me. But it was in August.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: It opened in August.

JOAN SNYDER: It wasn't advertised. It didn't have an opening. It was really in some ways very low budget. It didn't have one advertisement anywhere. We sent out cards. My New York dealer was not involved in it at all. She just—I don't know what happened. My Boston dealer was very involved in trying to save the show. And it really was a show that got saved.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Because of the problems with the originating curator—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —it was almost dying.

JOAN SNYDER: [. . . –JS] [Because she wasn't raising money or doing what had to be done to mount the show that she imagined which was much larger in scale than the 35 painting survey it ended up to be. Nobody realized this until it was too late. She was coming undone over a period of months. A new director had come on board at her museum where she was going to originate and the new director basically killed the show, would not allow the show to happen. And to the show had to be caught, rescued in midair.

My dealer in Boston called Katherine French, someone she was friendly with, who had literally just gotten the director's job at the Danforth Museum in Framingham, MA. "Would you be interested in taking—in originating the show? You wouldn't have much to do. It's already been curated" etc. etc.

Nina Nielsen raised money from some of my collectors in Boston to enable the Danforth to do the show.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And how did you decide—or who decided that Hayden Herra would write the major essay?

JOAN SNYDER: Hayden's very familiar with my work. She has written an essay for the show I had that the Neuberger Museum years ago and she has always followed my work. I wanted Hayden and a younger person. I had been interviews by Jenni Sorkin years before and was very impressed with her. She was the younger voice.

And then Norman wrote the introduction.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Kleeblatt

JOAN SNYDER: Kleeblatt—Norman is the person responsible for getting me the show at the Jewish museum. I love his writing and asked him to write the forward for the book. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: So it sounds like having that show, the reality of it and walking in and seeing it, didn't really have any negative impact whatsoever on you.

JOAN SNYDER: Oh, no. I loved the show. They actually hired a designer to design the rooms and we sat with the designer many times he said to us, once we get the paintings down there, it could change, which some of it did. I absolutely loved the Jewish Museum show. I just wish that I had a better time slot, more advertising, longer show.

But on the other hand, there's always the good news and the bad news. The good news was that I got this huge, huge review in the *New York Times*. It probably was the most dead spot of all because it came in early

September, I think, before any galleries were open and they gave me this—[Michael] Kimmelman just gave me two or three pages. It was amazing.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Yes. Did you decide that your work would be divided in the groupings that it's divided in—in the book and the exhibition—the lines and strokes, the fields, and the narratives? Did you conceive of that division?

JOAN SNYDER: Yeah, I did conceive of that division. [We played with lots of different ideas but I liked the idea of grouping work into themes that I've used over the years—grids, fields, strokes, etc. –JS]

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What would you say is your greatest challenge or—another way of putting that, what drives you to continue painting? I don't know if it is a challenge, if those are two different questions or not.

JOAN SNYDER: I don't think that I'm driven to continue painting. I think that the thing that I know the most about myself is that I'm absolutely happiest and most peaceful and the least neurotic when I'm in the studio working or when I have things going on in the studio. When I don't, when I stop working for a few months at a time—just ask Maggie. It's not fun. I become very neurotic and anxious and—

So painting is—it's the place where I need to be. I just feel lucky when I'm doing it, when it's happening.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: When you're working what would you say are some of the more difficult issues that you're dealing with?

JOAN SNYDER: When I'm working? It's not difficult. When I'm working, it's easy. It's when I'm not working that it's hard. Painting is not hard for me. Every painting is a different challenge. Every—they can be hard, but that's work. It's just hard work, figuring it all out. But I love doing that. That's when I'm happiest, when I'm in the studio working—or one of the times that I'm happiest for sure.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Do you have any kind of dream project, vision of something that you'd really love to do that you haven't gotten to do yet?

JOAN SNYDER: I wouldn't say so. I think I'm pretty lucky that I have this amazing studio in Woodstock that I built onto the garage of the new house. I bumped it out 14 feet two ways and it's just—it's about three times this space right here, with a storage space. It's absolutely beautiful.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: With natural light?

JOAN SNYDER: With a lot of natural light and some not natural light. I didn't put skylights in. I didn't want to spend the money because we had to make tunnels and all this kind of thing—the ceiling's quite high. It has some skylights in the front and some natural light in front. The painting area has lights. But it's gorgeous; it's absolutely gorgeous. So that was a dream, to have a beautiful studio upstate. That's really a dream.

But work-wise, I don't know. I just hope I continue working and—I amaze myself, actually, that I still have ideas, still have fresh thoughts, still have things I want to do. I think that I'm—nobody's more amazed than I am by that.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And you still keep diaries and—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —drawings.

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: And you're continually drawing in between the paintings or—

JOAN SNYDER: Right.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: —at the same time as the paintings?

JOAN SNYDER: Right. And I do work on paper and paintings on paper. And I'm still making lots of prints. And I'm into a whole new project at Rutgers now, which is I'm making paper pulp paintings.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: How did you end up doing that?

JOAN SNYDER: [Since my print retrospective was originating at the Zimmerli, which is at Rutgers University and the Brodsky Center is also at Rutgers, they wanted me to do a new project. I met with Anne McKeown, the head

of the paper pulp department at the Brodsky center and we decided that I would work with her on a paper pulp project, which, as it turns out, is not a print project at all and therefore the pieces could not be included in my print show. Anne claims that no one has ever done what I'm doing with paper pulp. I'm making pulp paintings from vats and vats or handmade paper pulp with is all dyed (to my specifications) different colors. I have to work with wet pulp, my hands in water the whole time, not to mention that I'm also wearing boots, standing in water.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Unique paintings, not prints.

JOAN SNYDER: Yes. Plus I have another new print that Andrew Mockler and I are working on. So I admit—I have so much going on now, I can't believe it.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: In order to maintain a certain amount of time in the studio painting, do you say to yourself, I'm going to be engaged in these print making activities just this amount of time per week or per month?

JOAN SNYDER: There's only so much I can do because there is traveling involved. I can only do the paper pulp thing once a week, if that and I sometimes stay overnight in a hotel in New Brunswick so we can work 2 days in a row.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What do you—oh, traveling, driving.

JOAN SNYDER: To Rutgers. Now Anne and I are going to work in her Jersey City studio which might be easier. Andrew's shop is a half hour drive so I can see him once a week when we're working on a project. Sometimes I don't see Andrew for months when he's editioning a print for me. There's also a new print called "See What A Life" that he egged me on to do after seeing a water color in one of my sketchbooks that I had done. I went over two days ago and worked on it. There always seems to be a print or paper pulp project going on.

And also I'm printing with Tandem Press in Madison (WI).

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What print medium are you using at Tandem?

JOAN SNYDER: I made a print sing digital imagery, lithography, etching and woodblock.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Are they the publisher?

JOAN SNYDER: They're the publisher. It's done. It's beautiful. It's on their website. It's called Altar [2010], speaking of spirituality. It has a lot of writing in it. It might be a little too far out for tandem press, we'll see. I like Paula very much, who is the director of Tandem.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: What's her last name? –JS]

JOAN SNYDER: Panczenko

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Judy Pfaff prints there a lot, too.

JOAN SNYDER: It's Judy Pfaff's kingdom. Judy got me there.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: She did. [. . . –JS]

Is there anything else you want to talk about before we end? [They laugh.]

JOAN SNYDER: What didn't we talk about? I don't know. I feel like we've talked about everything, didn't we?

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Good. Good.

JOAN SNYDER: Yeah.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Okay.

JOAN SNYDER: Yeah.

JUDITH OLCH RICHARDS: Thank you.

JOAN SNYDER: Thank you.

[END CD 6.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]