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Oral history interview with June Leaf,
2009 Nov. 16 and 2010 May 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with June Leaf on 2009 November 16 and 2010 May 17. The interview took place at Leaf's studio in New York, NY, and was conducted by Judith Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

June Leaf and Judith Richards have reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing June Leaf in New York on Bleecker Street in her studio, on November 16, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

June, let's start with your family, parents or your grandparents, where they came from, where they were born, what they did for a living, before you were born.

JUNE LEAF: Oh, before I was born? My father's father came from a small village near Kiev, Russia, and he came twice—once to search it out when he was—perhaps he was, maybe, 18 to 20. I don't remember. He had some connections with people, perhaps from the village, or cousins. He stayed alone, and then he returned—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did he come when he came here?

JUNE LEAF: He came from a small village near Kiev.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did he come to the U.S.?

JUNE LEAF: He came to New York City, right, I'm pretty sure. Perhaps he went to Chicago, where I was born, because of the connections to the people that he might have had connections to. But I'm not sure of that. But it would only have been New York and Chicago.

Then he returned to Russia and came back with—and he then made a family. So there was quite a bit of time in between, because I think my father was the firstborn, was maybe 10 to 11 years old.

So he came with, I think, five children.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you know what year he came the second time?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I can say that it would be about between 1910 and 1913. The first time was 1900, and the second time was probably 10, 13 years later.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what was his name?

JUNE LEAF: His name—born with the name Max Lifschitz. And like many of the people with that name, they shortened it to Leaf. So that's the name that I was born with.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So that's your grandfather.

JUNE LEAF: That's my grandfather. My mother's—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what about your grandmother?

JUNE LEAF: Well, she was his age. They married at 18, I believe, and her name was Betsy.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Her Americanized name?

JUNE LEAF: Yes, I have no idea anything about her, and I guess that's all I have that seems significant, other than it being my father is the one I'm interested in. He had brothers and

sisters, but we won't go into that. They were okay.

My mother's family, her mother was born in Poland, in Bialystok, which, I guess, is a very large area. I really don't know anything about the specifics. And she came when she was 13 and stayed with an older sister in Kansas City, Missouri. She met my—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's her name?

JUNE LEAF: Her name was Fanny.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was her last name?

JUNE LEAF: I'm sorry, for the moment I can't remember. I'm sorry. I don't remember. Fox, Fuchsman; that's right, Fuchsman was the name in Poland, and Fox would have been the shortened name. And she never saw her family again. She met also Max, my mother's father. He was from Kentucky, Louisville, and his parents—their name was Ettelson, E-T-T-E-L-S-O-N, Ettelson.

JUDITH RICHARDS: E-T-T—

JUNE LEAF: —E-L-S-O-N. They had a—I think they had a furniture store. I don't know where he met my grandmother. Perhaps she was already in Chicago by then. I'm not sure. They married, and they had my mother, the middle child, named Ruth, and her two sisters, Jenny and Viola.

My mother's father died when my mother was about nine, of pneumonia, and my grandmother had to take in boarders.

It was a very threatening time, as I understand from my mother, because my mother, resembling her father, the in-laws wanted to take her and raise her. And this was very traumatic for my mother, and I'm not sure whether she went. She pretends she didn't go; I'm told by my sister, after she died, that they actually did take her.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did they take her?

JUNE LEAF: To—what did I say—Kentucky?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Kansas City?

JUNE LEAF: No, to Kentucky, right. And she came back, and her interpretation of the event was very romantic, saying, "When they wanted me, my mother grabbed me and said, 'I keep my daughters together.'"

I believe that she was taken, and I think that has a lot to do with my mother's personality, because forever after she always had to prove that she was the best daughter that her mother had. And she was, actually, one of the best—very hardworking woman. She met my father perhaps when she was 20. And he was in Chicago, and she had been born in Chicago.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Your father's name was Leaf?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, so my father's name was Philip Leaf. My mother's name was Ruth Ettelson. And they married—I can't remember now approximately the dates she was born. She died in 1999 and she was 96. So you can calculate when she was born, okay.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your parents met, and when they married, they lived in Chicago, where you were born.

JUNE LEAF: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And just for the record, when were you born?

JUNE LEAF: Nineteen twenty-nine.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what part of Chicago did you live in?

JUNE LEAF: I think it was called Albany Park. It was the northwest side of Chicago, A-L-B-A-N-Y, Albany Park.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And did you have brothers or sisters?

JUNE LEAF: I had an older sister, named Selma.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Selma?

JUNE LEAF: Selma. She was about two years, eight months older than I. She died two years ago.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So as you were growing up, a young child, did you start having a strong interest in art? Do you remember the beginnings of your interest in art, or were you equally interested in other things as well, as a small child?

JUNE LEAF: Actually, I have a rather frighteningly good memory of my early years and my selection of events, and I think I review them almost every day, actually, because they were sort of landmarks, decisions that I made very early that, now I realize, showed that I was destined to do what I do, to work with my hands, figure things out.

So everything that I remember, I connect to what I do now. I think my first memory was of wheels, of buggy wheels, watching them. To this day, I like wheels. So there it was, waiting. Another memory would have been, yes, I think I was about three and a half [years old]. I remember it because of the height I was at my mother's table. So I would say I was this tall. What is that? That's the age of a three-year-old, right. And she was sewing, and I was drawing, and I guess she was very nice with me and always getting me things to do because I was home alone with her.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because your sister was already in school?

JUNE LEAF: Because my sister was already in school, and my mother was not a working woman at that time. And so I had a very idyllic time with her. I loved everything about her. And since I used to sit under the table, I loved her shoes. And I remember she gave me a piece of cloth.

You know, this is in an interview I did for the National Project of the Arts. I mean, it almost sounds comical, but it is true that I do have this amazing memory. But I remember the color of the cloth, and I remember it was actually that blue over there, which I use continually. And it was a transparent cloth with little, tiny, white—I guess it would be called dotted Swiss—and to me they were stars, and I got very excited about being there with my mother and the stars that she gave me. And I got so excited, it was almost an ecstasy.

I tried to wrap it all over me, and I decided I wanted to make everything with my hands, for her, and then I think I decided I wanted to make a shoe. Maybe I'm mixed up with days. Maybe this was one day, and then there's another day. But I decided I wanted to draw her shoe. So I drew her shoe. I didn't like the way it looked. It wasn't right, and I had a very strong instinct about my mother, and later in years I realized how children know everything about their parents, their character. Their babies know.

And I knew that she was a person that didn't like to be disturbed in her rhythm of life, and it was okay, up until that moment when I wanted to do the shoe correctly. And I remember thinking, she won't like it if I ask her, how do you do this correctly? I didn't say correctly, but I knew it. I said, "It's wrong," and I went up to the table, and I watched her very carefully, everything about her, because I felt it was a very important day.

And I showed her my drawing, and I said, "Draw me a high-heel shoe," because I had made a drawing, and it wasn't right. The toe didn't touch the ground. I didn't like that, and right away she shook her shoulders, and I knew it disturbed her. But I thought I had to know how to do it. It didn't matter anymore. It's like I risked everything. And she said, "Oh, all right," and she drew it, and I looked at her, and I remember thinking, it's wrong. She doesn't care how the toe goes on the ground. I care. She'll never care. I'll never ask her again.

And I never asked her ever anything about what to do, because I knew she was a temperamental woman—very nice to me, but I knew that she was potentially a very explosive woman, not to me—I felt I better go gently with this one, and besides which, drawing this shoe was absolutely essential to me, and that continues to this day.

That's why when I say when I select my memories, I see that these were landmarks. Like

today, I thought, I want this hand to touch this glass. I thought, I'm going to make it first out of tin. I wanted to feel the hand touch the glass. And I remember I was thinking of writing to someone who wants to—is doing a sort of research about me, and I don't want her in my studio anymore. And I thought I should maybe write her so she can think about what I'm doing. But I want to write her one sentence. I want to say, "I've always been interested in construction." That's all. So the two things get connected. So you know, it goes like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Once you started school—

JUNE LEAF: Right, grade school.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Grade school in Chicago—

JUNE LEAF: Right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was school like for you? Did you enjoy all the subjects, just some, or were you especially recognized for your art by teachers, or by fellow students, or did you excel in other things?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I was a very passionate student. Because I was the wrong age, I couldn't go to kindergarten. So I had to wait a whole extra year, and I used to stand outside the school practically breaking the gates down so that I could go to school. So I didn't get to school until I was six, and I was over-ready. And I think I learned to read in a day and a half, and it's true.

I mean, I remember, because I remember I couldn't get it the first time, the sounds of the alphabet. I'll get it the second time. I did, and I had to wait in the back, it seemed like two weeks, until the rest of the class caught up to me. This might be delusions of grandeur, but that's how it seemed to me at the time. And I would draw. I always liked to draw. I always liked to draw. No one in the family was interested in what I did, because it wasn't the time for that. Nobody was interested in whether children were artists.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because that was the Depression?

JUNE LEAF: Exactly, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was your father working at then?

JUNE LEAF: My father was not capable of working at anything. He was a dreamer, and my grandfather, Max, was the solid part of the family, the patriarch. He started out—he had a cigar stand, and then it enlarged to a liquor store, and then my father was to work with him. My father couldn't do it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you know now why your father—was there any physical reason why your father couldn't?

JUNE LEAF: Well, he was just like me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think he should have been an artist?

JUNE LEAF: Yes, we were just the same. I mean, that's something I understood right away, that we were the same. I understood that we were dreamers, except I had the example of my mother, who was so practical and so efficient and so outstanding in everything she did that I knew I better train myself just as hard in the other area. But I know that that's what my father lacked.

So I don't know what—perhaps I could assess life; I could assess things very well. That's something I seem to have had. I remember my grandfather didn't like to talk, like many men of that—that brooding—he was a scholar, a Talmudic scholar. And I used to watch him every night, when I was at their house, my grandparents' house. And I was fascinated with these gigantic Bibles, and I watched him for a long time, and I knew that you don't talk to him.

But one day I was alone with him, and I thought, nobody's around, and I went up to the table, that high, and I just watched him lean over, and I said, "Is there a God?" Just like that. And he said, "No," and I remember thinking—I was so glad I waited—and he said, "No." I said, "Why do you do this? Why do you read the Bible?"

"Because it's a habit." And then he said, "God is in you." And I thought, hmm, worth waiting for. That was a kind of a model of my approach generally to life, which is, there's the right moment. I'll just do my job. And I think that served me pretty well, probably better as a child than it does now. It served me well.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So as you went through elementary school, you were a very good student.

JUNE LEAF: Very much—very good student. But in high school I wasn't a good student at all, because I was interested in boys. I lost all my interest in anything else.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you went to—finished elementary school, and you went to junior high, I guess.

JUNE LEAF: Just regular high school.

JUDITH RICHARDS: High school.

JUNE LEAF: I was 13.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You continued—did you feel that you were an artist by that point or you would be?

JUNE LEAF: Well, at that point, I only cared about boys. I mean, nothing—with the same devotion that I do my work. [Laughs.] I didn't have a boyfriend. I never had a boyfriend, because in my neighborhood, there was no such thing like social life like that. You just had groups, and you passed each other at the corner, and you lowered your head and hoped your bobby socks were perfect and all that, and your barrettes were in place.

No, I tell you, when I knew that—another moment that you talk about knowing about being an artist—when I was in the third grade, again I was in the back of the room doing my drawings, because I guess I was pretty quick and they would put me in the back with my crayons and whatever.

I wasn't interested in the Bible, but I had gone for a short semester to a Hebrew school—my sister and I did—and we only studied the early Bible, the Old Testament, and I was very moved by the stories. And I was especially moved by the Jacob and his brother [Esau] story, and I made a drawing, and all of a sudden I must have rubbed the paper, smearing my drawing because I didn't have skills, like a draftsman, but by doing that, I guess I did what is recommended.

I remember da Vinci talked—you look at a blur, and you'll see the figures there. You'll project them like a Rorschach. And I must have made the drawing; I must have blurred it, and right suddenly there appeared exactly like a photograph to me of the moment that Joseph meets his brothers and they discover that he's not dead.

I almost collapsed when I saw it. It was like some light went on, and I got so excited. I raised my hand, and I wanted to tell the teacher, and, "Ms. Anderson, Ms. Anderson!" And she wouldn't answer. And then finally she said, "Come up," and I came up holding this. I felt I was holding a light in my hands.

I went up to her, and I shoved it under her face, "Ms. Anderson!" I said, "Look!" and she said, "Okay, you can go to the bathroom." And I remember I thought, oh, oh, so that's how it is. You make something, and then you spend your life getting people to see it. That solved the whole problem. Oh, so that's how it is. Good, I can do that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Meanwhile, were any of your friends noticing your work?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah. I wasn't—I had one girlfriend. She was very loyal to me. I only played with her. There was no discussion of it. I just played with her. I mean, I never even thought I was going to be an adult, so why would I think about the future? Nobody ever asked me anything. I studied ballet. That was my job. Twice a week I used to have to go.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were very young?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, from the age of six to 12, but then I knew I wasn't good enough for that. So I had to tell my mother, and she wouldn't even talk to me ever about it. It was just such a

disappointment to her. That was her personality.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you enjoy it, even though you might not have thought you were good?

JUNE LEAF: Later, because I think I gave it up when my body was changing and my legs were too long. I had no understanding of movement, understanding of art and dance. I only knew about the things I was supposed to learn how to do. But when I was about 15, I met a young woman who was studying again, and I got very excited. I went back and studied, and then I danced very well.

But I wasn't good enough. So that was okay. But it was nice that I was able to grasp movement and beauty in movement, and I think that affects my work very deeply to this day. I love to dance, and I think that I'm dancing all the time when I draw. I feel that I'm dancing, turning, everything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you sought out dance performances to see throughout your life?

JUNE LEAF: I used to. In the '60s I went religiously to dance concerts. But I haven't—since we moved to Canada, my life is not about that anymore.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Through those early years, did your family go someplace in the summer, or did you have particular other activities in the summer, when school wasn't on, that were meaningful to you?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I went to summer camp when I was about nine with my sister. No, I was eight or seven or something. I was too young to go. But my mother told me to lie and tell them I was eight going on nine, because you had to be a certain age, and that had a very strong effect on me. I would say that, being pushed like that, before I was ready, had a very strong effect on my relationship to boys, because I didn't—

JUDITH RICHARDS: What part of you wasn't ready?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I was only eight.

JUDITH RICHARDS: To go away from your parents?

JUNE LEAF: No, I just—I was with adolescent girls, and I didn't even know that they grew breasts. I mean, I was a very innocent child. I was horrified when we all slept in one room, and I thought there was something wrong with them. They had these terrible ugly bumps on their chests. And I didn't know why I couldn't walk around without my T-shirt, and I had to lie about the fact that I was not really their age. And I felt that I was concealing.

I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready for whatever it was they were—the society they were in. That made a very big effect on me, because I remember we went to a walk through the woods, and I'd never been to the woods, being a city girl.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This was someplace in Illinois?

JUNE LEAF: It was someplace in Michigan, in the country, probably. And I'd never smelled pine needles, and I practically fainted when I smelled them. And then I imagined that I saw a little boy in the woods, and I actually did. There was a camp across the way, and being seven, I got so excited.

I thought, I'm in love with him. Who is he? That's my love, my true love. There he is running through the woods. And I ran back, and I told everybody. See, that's where I was seven, and they laughed and they snickered.

I didn't recognize that right away, and then they—that night, they had a schedule where children were chosen to make sure the lights were out at night. I think it was a Hebrew word called mishmar. They give you a lantern, and then they told you a little boy was going to come walk with you, and they said, "That little boy is going to come," and I—I said, "You should never do that. He doesn't even like girls. Why did you do that," you know, and they laughed. Of course, he never came, and I remember, again, it was like that same moment with the teacher, oh, that's how it is. Oh, you love them, but they run away from you, possibly. [Laughs.] So be careful. Don't push yourself on them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you went to that camp for many summers?

JUNE LEAF: No, one summer, and then later we went to another camp. I went for about seven years. I became a counselor there. I wouldn't say that—I don't know, maybe I just don't really remember the truth, but I have a memory that I've never quite figured out what it meant. I remember once in crafts class—I was very good in crafts. I was good with my hands. But I wasn't wild about being in crafts.

But one day, for some reason, I kept drawing all these heads with crayons, like what I do now. All of a sudden, it just burst. It just came out as if it had been waiting. It didn't surprise me. I just drew them and drew them, and they were pretty good. I remember this counselor—this is how I remember it. What actually is the reality, I don't know.

Roslyn is her name. She looked—she picked up the drawings. She said—she looked at me, and she didn't say anything to me. And she took my hand, and she dragged me over to the director's office, and they called my mother to tell them about these drawings. Now, I don't know whether they called my mother to say I'd misbehaved. I have no idea.

But it was such an unusual thing for them to do. So to this day, I don't really know what happened. Perhaps it showed a tremendous—perhaps it showed my precocity, a maturity, which is connected to another story, which could be why it might have been that they saw that I had a very natural talent.

[Audio Break.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: So your mother?

JUNE LEAF: So this would be connected to something that happened later. So it might explain what actually happened that day because—maybe they thought I had mental problems or something. It could be—who knows—because all of a sudden a child sitting down and doing about 50 drawings of heads with colors and lots of expression in them.

At that time, they didn't understand outbursts like this. [Laughs.] So maybe they thought I—and it's true, I needed my mother, and she never visited, and I think they knew I was lonesome for my mother. She had to work so hard all the time. She never came. So it could have had something to do with it, now that I think about it, their interest in my stability.

But I do remember that the Art Institute of Chicago would choose children from grade school, and they would be given Saturday classes for free at the Art Institute, and my sister and I were chosen. And we went, and I remember making my first drawing from life. It was a woman holding a baby—a doll, a baby, a mother and child.

And I made the drawing. I was so happy. I felt I was home, you know? I made the drawing, and I was so happy. They put the drawings up around the room, and I stood behind while people looked at them, and I remember two, perhaps adult students from the Art Institute, looked at my drawing, and I heard them say, "That's a real artist." And I thought I understood that, what they meant.

So I don't know. Maybe I think I'm closer to interpreting that other incident today more than any other time. But the one at the Art Institute was a fact. I can understand that. If I had been a student, and I'd seen a child's drawing—with feeling—we often think those things. We see one child's drawing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: As a child and through high school, did you on your own or with friends or even with your mother or father, go to the Institute to look at art?

JUNE LEAF: No, no, no, no. Not only did they—maybe they knew it was there, the Art Institute, but there was not one book in the house except maybe the Reader's Digest.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And no artworks or reproductions of artworks?

JUNE LEAF: Nothing, nothing.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And even though your father, you felt, was very sensitive and possibly artistic, he didn't talk about it?

JUNE LEAF: My father was not in the real world. I mean, when I had a—I was in a show in—I

think it was '66—at the Art Institute. It was not a vicinity show. It was a show—James Speyer selected my work. It had people like [Edward] Kienholz and Marisol [Escobar]. I made a piece called *Vermeer Box* [1965-66], which I—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, we'll talk about that.

JUNE LEAF: Okay, and I remember I was very proud, because it was an international exhibit. I told my parents about it, and my father went. And the piece is a room, and it's shown in the dark. And I went and saw it, and it was very nice. You had to stand in line to look at it. And it probably was influenced by the Thorne Miniature Rooms [located in the Art Institute of Chicago]. Since childhood, I used to love those rooms, these miniature rooms.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you went to the museum when you were a child?

JUNE LEAF: Sometimes, maybe a few times, yeah, not—

JUDITH RICHARDS: On your own?

JUNE LEAF: The Thorne rooms, I don't know. I don't think I was such a sophisticated child. I don't know when I saw them. Maybe I saw them once or twice. Everybody liked the Thorne Miniature Rooms. You didn't have to be interested in art; they were dollhouses. Okay, so that was one association.

But my father came back to me, and he was very excited—he had a look always on his face like a child—because he believed in me. He used to say funny things to me like, "Someday you're going to be in the Smithsonian." Now, he didn't even know what the Smithsonian was, but he just saw me as somebody. He projected onto me his own dreams about his success he never had. I don't know. He just had this idea about me.

So he came back, and he said, "I know why that piece is in the Art Institute." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because if you look in the piece very carefully, there's a picture on the wall." It's true. It's a reproduction of a Vermeer scene, and it's true, there is a picture. But I mean, who could ever explain how he explained it to himself, like some kind of magical thing happened because there was a picture on the wall in the box; that's why it was in a museum that has pictures on the wall, not because it's chosen by a curator. Words like curator and all that were meaningless to him.

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

JUNE LEAF: I did. I did, but it's funny, the first one I took—and I remember we had to illustrate a poem in ink, and I remember I did very nice—I mean, not saying nice; I was interested in doing it, and I illustrated a poem. Now I'm not sure who wrote it, but it's a very famous line. Perhaps it's Longfellow. Who knows?

It's called "She Walks in Beauty like the Night" [poem by Lord Byron, 1814]. I liked that line. So I made a woman walking in the night, a beautiful woman, and my teacher held it up, said, "This is the way I want all of you to work." And I remember thinking, "Oh, I don't want to be the class artist. I want to be popular. I don't want to be set apart," and I never paid any attention to art classes after that, until my last year, when I had a wonderful teacher. And I remember he was very smart.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember his name?

JUNE LEAF: Mr. Molds.

JUDITH RICHARDS: M-O-L-D-S?

JUNE LEAF: Yes, a most charming man. Everybody loved him. And he didn't talk much, but I remember one day when I was working—I must have been a very bubbly, active girl—and he handed me a large roll of paper, like shelving paper, because he saw me draw a horse, and he said, "I want you to draw horses." And I drew about 50 of them, and he put them all around the room. And that was a very good moment for me. So he was very understanding somehow. He must have understood something.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were finished with high school, how did you decide what to do next?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I'm embarrassed to tell you, because it always had to do with boys. But I was madly in love with my girlfriend's older brother, who had no interest in me. And later, since he turned out to have mental problems, he had no interest much in anything real. But I was madly in love with him from the age of 15 onwards, and he told me that I was an artist.

I could draw very well. I mean, I could do very good pencil drawings of people, very good likenesses. But that was not my main interest. And he'd say, "You're an artist." And then he told me about a school called the Bauhaus, the New Bauhaus in Chicago. I didn't know what he was talking about. I didn't care what he was talking about. He said, "You should go to that school." I thought, I'll go anywhere he is.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh he was going there, too?

JUNE LEAF: He had gone there. I thought he was going to be there. As it turned out he wasn't there and—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did your art teacher give you any direction or any suggestions?

JUNE LEAF: No, nothing. No, it's all about that drive, love, and I got some—I went down there, and I got these books, the *Vision in Motion—Vision in Motion*, right, by Moholy-Nagy. I didn't know what on earth they were doing or talking about or what they were making. I thought it was just awful, but I didn't care, because he would be there. And how I got in is very comical, because I ended up teaching in that school.

I was a very, very precocious student, as it turned out, because—not at that—I mean, to other things besides longing for a boyfriend—and I remember there was an application. It was 1947. It was very hard to get into art schools—the GI Bill, all that. It was a small school. And I found my letter of application. When I was teaching, I went through the files, and I found it. It was written in pencil on airmail stationery, bumpy airmail stationery.

It was an irresistible letter. I understand now why they accepted me. It said something my father had told me the day before, because I had no intellect at that time. I remember he said to me, "Well, you're not really very pretty, but you're a very honest person," and I thought, right. So when they asked me about myself, I wrote down, "I'm a very,"—I didn't write down I'm not pretty, but I wrote, "I'm a very honest person."

I mean, now there were—all my fellow students were all ex-GIs. I was the only young girl there, and it was a marvelous situation for me, not that I was interested in them, because they were too old. I got into this school. I found out Marvin wasn't there. And my first teacher was actually Swiss.

His name was Hugo Weber, and he had just arrived from Switzerland. He could barely speak English. I could barely speak English or any other language, you know. But we looked at each other, and I remember how he used to smile when he looked at me. And he would give these assignments, and the first assignment that they gave us was by him: "I want you to bring to school the largest sheet of paper you can find."

Well, my parents had a tavern. So they had rolls of brown paper. So I came to school with the largest sheet of paper anybody could ever have, and he said, "I want you to do motor control drawings." You have to understand, I am a really simple, uneducated girl; things like motor control drawings, functional art, the art they showed me looked so ugly.

I only understood Norman Rockwell, maybe Thomas Hart Benton, even though I thought they were ugly, too. But I was a completely uneducated girl. But I had all this physical, pent-up energy, and I made the most wonderful motion drawings ever. And everybody used to stand back while this nimble, 17-year-old girl jumping around making drawings, and again, like with Mr. Molds, he would say, "Look at these drawings."

Well, I think that it was a wonderful sign for me, this event, because all of a sudden I had all this confidence. Here I am in front of all these old guys, and I do it better than they do and I'm just beginning. I think it is a wonderful story, because then any problem they gave me, I would run home and do it. And I would do it always with, as he used to say, "I know your work by your fingerprints." He used to laugh.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you have a good place to work at home?

JUNE LEAF: No, a bedroom. By that time, my mother was collapsing all over the place, because here was her beautiful daughter that she could sell for lots of money to a nice Jewish guy. It's true, you know, and she'd already married my sister off at 18 to a nice rich boy from Texas, and I could see it in her eyes.

They sparkled when she saw me as I developed. And I remember her looking at me. I felt like somebody that's being fattened up to be slaughtered. And I remember my sister was married when she was 18. Perhaps I was 15, and I remember my mother thought, I got rid of that one, and then she glanced over at me, and I remember she looked at me, and she said, "You have green eyes." And I thought, "Yeah, congratulations, mother. I've had them all my life."

I mean, you have to understand the dynamics of my house. My mother worked in a tavern all day long. I never saw her. My father was sleeping during the day or going to play cards. I had no connection to them. I merely had my uncontrolled inner life. Nobody knew anything about what was in my mind anyway, least of all myself. So little did she realize that what was being developed in her house was a volcano. So when I was 17, I got into this school which was a big achievement to get in. I understand now why.

But when I told my mother, finally revealing to her what I had in mind for my life, I told her about this school. And the way I must have explained it to her, between my not understanding it and her lack of understanding of anything outside practical things, I must have said—dropped all these words like functionalism and Germany and Weimar and Moholy-Nagy, and she nodded her head, and I said, "I'm going to that school. I'm very excited about it."

I didn't tell her why, and she said, "Mmm-hmm," and so I told everyone. And I remember I wasn't a talkative child, but I was very excited about all that and talked more about what was on my mind. And I remember I went to my—we had these, quote, unquote, cousins, who were not really cousins, but they had the last name of Leaf. They were very rich.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did they get rich?

JUNE LEAF: They had the Overland Candy Company, which was a very big company. In fact, during the war they were the only people who manufactured chewing gum. It was called Leaf Spearmint.

So they were famous, and my mother was this girl, working, supporting her two daughters and her husband. And she had dreams about me marrying into that society on the north side of Chicago. There are wealthier neighborhoods for Jewish families.

So there's this equivalent north side, North Side Jews. So she used to drag my sister and I over there continually through our childhood to play with my so-called cousins, who couldn't stand us, naturally. And I remember I was there because—I would have went anywhere. I was so happy about the Bauhaus that my mother could have told me to go anywhere, and I went that night, and I remember my mother was there.

It was very unusual that she was there. And the phone rang, and my mother said to me, "Now, June, Naomi," the cousin, "is over at a rush tea." I knew what a rush tea was. There were sororities. They had them in that part of Chicago. We didn't have them on the west side. We were primitive. And I knew what a rush tea was. I knew about those girls; I knew them from summer camp. They went on dates and wore pearls and got pinned and all kinds of things. I didn't know what that was, but I didn't participate in it. But anyway, I didn't care. I didn't care where I was going.

"Oh, I'll go." So I go over to this place, and there were all these girls that I just described to you. And they're all very sophisticated. And I'm so excited because I'm going to this school, because it was February I graduated; that meant I would go the next week to that school, right away, the next semester.

"Oh, and then what are you going to do?" And I told them about this school, and I was full of life, and I thought, well, these girls are not so bad. I went back. My mother said, "What did you think of them?" I said, "Oh, they were really very nice." And then the phone rang, and my mother—I remember that triumphant look on her face—and she came over, "You got in."

I said, "What?" "You got in." Now for a West Side girl to get into a sorority in that—was a

big deal. I said, "But," and I remember thinking, "But I told them I'm going to this school. They didn't hear anything I said. They just liked the way I looked. They liked my energy." That's what it was. And I said, "But I'm going to the—" "You're not going." I said, "But I'm enrolled." My mother said, "You're not going to that school."

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mean being part of the sorority took the place of going to school? You couldn't do both?

JUNE LEAF: My mother said I'm going to the University of Illinois down in Urbana, and I'm in a sorority, a Jewish sorority, which was impossible for a girl from the west side to get into. And it's true. I was the only one. And I remember looking at my mother. She got me.

I remember thinking, she got me. And I looked at her, and I said, "Yeah, I'll go, but that's the last thing I'll ever do that you expect me to do." Maybe I didn't say it, but I thought it, because I never said much to her.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you go—did you have an art class that you could have gone to?

JUNE LEAF: No, I just took—I took biology, zoology, and what else did I take?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you live in a sorority house?

JUNE LEAF: I lived in a sorority house.

I don't remember going to any class except that zoology class or whatever. And then next term I went to the [New Bauhaus] Institute of Design. And I started to say—because you asked me how I was. So by that time, my mother had evidence of what she had spawned, and years later, when her girlfriends used to complain about their daughters, "She was a veteran with me."

I mean, I just—I used to bring home—like, I brought home a wonderful man I knew, a large African-American man, very smart. He was very smart. And I remember one day he looked at me, and he said, "You'd never take me home to your mother, would you?" I said, "Yes, I would," and I brought him and his friends, and my mother had kind of a heart attack that night.

She sent me to a psychiatrist because she had to go because she thought her daughter—this girl, this nice girl who never said anything—never wore the clothes, wore blue jeans every day, never combed her hair, rode a bicycle. I was like the girls today, but there weren't any like that at that time because—oh, yeah, and then I went three months to the Institute of Design. I was a very precocious student. It was like a total awakening.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that's when you had Hugo Weber.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, but I remember he used to show things, like Kurt Schwitters. He'd show this thing, and I'd think, what's that, you know, a record going around? Or show me Paul Klee, and I'd think, what's that, you know. But then, living with the work and the materials and all the slides they showed us, I remember one day I just saw it all. I saw it all. I saw contemporary art. It was like a flash. I almost wept when I remember looking at sidewalks and thinking, that's Paul Klee on the ground, the cracks, the textures, Mark Tobey.

I mean, all these—all these things—just suddenly, the language of art just came to me in a flash, an absolute flash. Does that make sense? I mean, it did. It was like language. It was like an alphabet that I hadn't had any awakening at all, no intellectual awakening at all, and there it was and I was made for it. So I quit the Bauhaus School after three months because —

[END CD 1.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing June Leaf on Bleecker Street in New York on November 16, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

So you said you left after three months.

JUNE LEAF: Well, what happened was, here I was—I would work and—I know maybe I'm imagining it in my simple mind—they would stand back and watch me. I mean, I know they

invited me back to teach a year and a half later as a full-time teacher, so I think I'm not so far off. Hugo Weber had me come back to teach in 1951. Because I remember, I met him at the—I had a piece in his show, and he said, "I want you to be the teacher, now, at the Institute of Design."

I said, "I can't teach!" And I went down there, and I said—and he showed me this class—"and what am I going to do?" And he shoved me into the room, just shoved me into the room. And I thought, oh, I know what to do. I'll just repeat what I—my awakening.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Can you explain that?

JUNE LEAF: Well, because I thought—I used to see these visiting artists come. They were Abstract Expressionists. And they would have parties, and my teachers would love them and wish they were them. And I just—I got it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you mean you should never go to art school, or you shouldn't be a teacher at art school?

JUNE LEAF: No, I mean, you shouldn't stay, I'm sorry. No, of course you go, but get out, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But only three months?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I tell you, this was a very accelerated awakening, you have to understand. I have waited my whole life for this awakening. I mean, everything was dormant in me until that moment. And you know, that's a very Moholy-Nagy phenomenon. I mean, you take an 18-year-old, untrained, raw material, and he had exactly the right treatment for someone like me. I had nothing to unlearn. Everyone else had something to unlearn. I didn't know anything about art. I was just total raw material. And Hugo must have understood that.

And I was young; I was an unmarked—a clean slate, I'm sorry to say. I was a clean slate. So I decided, I'm not going to hang around here and—one day, I'm going to be a visiting artist. That's what I'm going to be. Well, that's exactly what happened. But so I went to work. I worked in a candy store. My mother, meanwhile, was going nuts. But that didn't bother me. That's brutal, isn't it? I think that callousness came from, you know, realizing that I was lucky that she didn't try to influence me. I was lucky I could avoid it. I avoided it. Except for that moment at the University of Illinois.

But so I went to work, and then there was a friend I met—there was one other girl there. Lenore Lindner was her name. She was older than I was. And she was in love—she had a boyfriend—a husband/boyfriend who was killed in the war. I remember, Jack was his name. And she wanted to go to his family in Germany. But so one day, she said, "I'm going to Germany. I'm going to see Jack's family. Do you want to go?"

And I remember, thinking, where? France. France, hmm. I went home, and I told my mother. I said, "Lenore said she's going to go to Paris. I think I'll go to Paris." [Laughs.] I remember my mother looked at me, and I could just read her mind. And I remember I thought, ah. She said, "That's a good idea." And I remember thinking, yeah, Paris, artists, tell her friends, beret—you know, I just knew that this was the one thing in this kind of woods of chaos that she was in with me; it was the one, little clear light. Daughter, artist, Paris. And she said, "Oh, oh, that's a good idea." So I went. 1948.

JUDITH RICHARDS: May or June? This is just after school or—

JUNE LEAF: There was no school. I was out of school.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I mean, you finished—

JUNE LEAF: No, I was working. I left school. I quit. I went to—right, by winter of 1948, I was working in Demet's Candy Store in Chicago. Demet's Candy Store on State Street, selling chocolate turtles. And then Lenore—L-I-N-D-N-E-R—I wonder where she is.

We went to Paris on the Marine Jumper. It was a converted troop ship. And from the moment I left Chicago, all I did was paint. I painted in watercolors so I could carry everything in a suitcase. I painted images I saw on sidewalks in New York; I painted dirty, oily burlap on troop ships. All I did was look at the ground.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So in order to get this ship, you went from Chicago to New York.

JUNE LEAF: To New York, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was your first visit to New York [City].

JUNE LEAF: Right, my first visit to New York, right. I stayed on 42nd Street that one night—

JUDITH RICHARDS: With her.

JUNE LEAF: No, I don't remember her at all. I only remember that—I forgot to mention the simple fact that my eyes never left the ground. Because I saw everything in contemporary art on the ground. I saw everything—I saw all the art there was. I saw Paul Klee; I saw Tobey; who were some of the other people I saw?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Franz Kline.

JUNE LEAF: No, this was earlier. [Morris] Graves, [Adolph] Gottlieb—I don't know, I just saw it all on the ground. And I would make my—what I saw. It was just like, I guess, that time I saw Joseph [Jacob] and his brothers [Esau]. I just saw it, and I just reproduced these textures. I learned to make textures and beat paper up and, you know, step on it and bend it and find things and put them down. I had developed a technique. I still have some of these paintings from then.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you brought your watercolors.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, my little, tiny watercolor—I have it here. Let's turn that off.

[Audio Break.]

Yeah, so I remember, head down. Head down—that's the way I worked.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you stayed just one night in New York at that point, before you got on the ship.

JUNE LEAF: One night. And I remember going outside. I remember walking down, I suppose it was Broadway and 42nd Street. Piccadilly, I think, was the hotel. Maybe it was Piccadilly. I don't know. Then I got on the troop ship, and we all slept in bunks—all the women—for 12 days. Then I got to Paris.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you get—that ship landed in France?

JUNE LEAF: Le Havre. I also had a bicycle. I brought my bicycle with me. I got a hotel room with Lenore. Then we—I think we shared a room together. She went to Germany. But I remember, she used to just sit there every night, and she'd look at my watercolors, and she would say, "How do you do that? How do you do that?" And I remember knowing that that was the difference between her and me. See, I was through with boys. Just painting—took the place of all that, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember what part of Paris the hotel was in?

JUNE LEAF: Yes, I remember the address and everything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was that?

JUNE LEAF: I went to look for it last year—Hotel de l'Academie, on rue des Saintes-Péres. But it's not there anymore.

JUDITH RICHARDS: A modern building has taken its place?

JUNE LEAF: I think so.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Were you making watercolors all over the city of Paris?

JUNE LEAF: They weren't watercolor; they were thing—I made, like, just sections of the ground, cobblestones. I think I still have—I actually made cobblestones out of heavy watercolor paper.

And then one day, I got pneumonia. I was subject to bronchial infections. And they liked me very much at the hotel because I was, just, not like other girls, I think. I can imagine—long hair, bicycle, head down, staying in her room, trying to learn French. I was more like a child than an 18-year-old.

And they took care of me. They put me in a room. I was already on the sixth floor because it was cheaper. They sent me to the second floor. A Canadian woman had a beautiful room there. Her name was Margie. And she loved my work. She couldn't get over it—kept saying how mature it was. They put me in her room, so they could bring me soup and take care of me. And she asked me to bring my work into her room and I lined her room with my work. And she invited an Indian woman to look at it. And I was very happy.

And then this man came to bring my soup, who lived on that floor. He was an ex-GI. I don't think I'm going to tell you his name, because I wouldn't want him to know—I wouldn't want to put it down. But anyway, he saw my work, and he flipped. He was an ex-GI. He was an art historian. And he had a whole group of French intellectuals that he knew, like the editor of this art paper called *L'Art*. Eumeau, I think was his name—E-U-M-E-A-U. I don't know. I think that was his name—Mr. Eumeau.

JUDITH RICHARDS: E-U-M-A-U?

JUNE LEAF: Eumeau—E-U-M-E-A-U.

So I had a very good intuition about all that, and I—because you know, for me, this was an ecstatic period for me. I think it was one of the most beautiful periods of my life, except falling in love with my husband. You know, I thought, this is why I was born.

He called me, and he said, "Oh, I've invited all my friends over, and I've told them about your work, and please bring your work to my room. And I want to show them your work."

JUNE LEAF: So I put it all in a little suitcase.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And at this time, you're better?

JUNE LEAF: I was okay by then, yeah. And I brought down the suitcase, and I ran away—and handed him the suitcases.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is a room—

JUNE LEAF: This was in the Hotel de l'Academie.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the same hotel?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah. And I remember that it—you know, I had always a very good intuition. And I thought, you know, yeah, they're going to like the work. Sure enough, he called me a couple days later. I remember it was my birthday.

And I remember, he looked at me, and he said, "You've got it." And I remember thinking, too bad. Because I thought, they're going to push me. I can feel it. And sure enough, there were three of them—a poet and this man, Eumeau, I met with them—and they told me I had it. I said, "Who else do you know that has it?" He said, well, we support a poet, and there's a woman sculptor named Germaine Richier. I'll never forget that—Germaine Richier.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you spell Richier?

JUNE LEAF: She's a very famous French sculptor, like Bourgeois. R-I-C-H-I-E-R. I said, "What does she make?" She makes figures that come from animals, like praying mantises. I just saw a show of hers two years ago in Venice—great, great sculpture, great, great sculptor. And I remembered that. And that's all I remembered. And, "Who do you want to study with?" Now, you'll have to remember that from this moment on, I am no longer there. I mean, I'm sensing I'm being given something they think is very good; I think something is being taken from me.

They like me because I'm young, but that's not why my work is good. I'm just beginning. And I remember I said to them, "You don't understand. Someday, there are going to be a lot of girls like me." And they thought that was charming. But I had a very good understanding of what I was, where I was, who they were. But I didn't have the maturity to tell them, "I don't

want to have anything to do with you." See, that would be how I was 18.

And they gave me this incredible studio that belonged to a very famous critic who was away for the summer. And it had a balcony; it had a view of the cemetery. It's a very famous building. So they put me in there, took me out of the Hotel de l'Academie. They gave me a little French poodle to take care of. And I remember thinking, oh—

JUDITH RICHARDS: So this isn't just a place to work; this is a place to live.

JUNE LEAF: To live, yeah. It was a place to live, free. Fantastic studio.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you understand what they wanted in return?

JUNE LEAF: They thought I was a genius. But I know they didn't really think I was a genius—you have to understand. I—because there was a guy, a young guy, that was a good-looking—maybe one of them was homosexual, and maybe he had a crush on him—he was my age. He couldn't speak English.

But we assessed each other very well, because I remember, I asked this man, what does he think of me? And he said, "Oh, he doesn't think"—he says, your work is too influenced by Paul Klee. I thought, he's smart. [Laughs.] See, he was the only one that knew what was going on, you know. And—but all that happened in this place is, I sunk into an incredible depression, and I couldn't work.

One day, I went to the Musee de l'Homme.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which museum?

JUNE LEAF: Musee de l'Homme.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, yes.

JUNE LEAF: And I saw these beautiful engravings on Walrus tusks—Inuit, from Alaska. They were little scratched-in drawings of scenes of hunting and sleds and dogs. I almost died, I thought they were so beautiful. I thought, oh, God, if I could just find something white, I think I could paint again. And I thought, what can I find; what can I find? And I thought about it, and it came back to—the bathtub. The bathtub is white. So I thought, yes, that's right. And I took a big—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You wanted something three-dimensional that was white?

JUNE LEAF: No, I wanted something white!

JUDITH RICHARDS: And not a white canvas?

JUNE LEAF: I wanted something white—a surface. I wanted ivory. I wanted an ivory tusk. And I just thought, of course, the bathtub! I'll paint in the bathtub! So I took a big brush with ink on it—black ink—and I put that brush, and I painted a child in the bathtub, life-sized—not a child, but like children make on the—you know, a chalk drawing, like you see a graffiti. Because that's what I was seeing all the time, were beautiful graffiti. But I just did black on white instead of white on black, you know. And it all came back to me—my passion, you know. And I couldn't wait for them to come.

And they came to the door, and I was smiling, and I finally said, I have something to show you. And they were all excited as they came in the room. And they went, "Ah!" you know. They screamed. And I thought, good, now they'll get rid of me. It's true. They thought I was crazy. But I knew that I wasn't crazy.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You felt that they had to get rid of you; you couldn't just walk out on the situation.

JUNE LEAF: Right, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Because they had been too kind, or because—

JUNE LEAF: I don't know. I wasn't developed enough to assert myself. I was a child, you know. I mean, I couldn't get rid of them, because I was a child. They had to get rid of me.

And I remember thinking, oh, good. I'll never forget the looks on their face, because that India ink was really India ink, like they don't make anymore, and you can't get it out of the bathtub. So they sent me to a psychiatrist. It's true!

And I remember, they sent me to a woman. Because they found out, also—the neighbors said I used to paint on the dishes. I used to use her dishes—because I did use oil paint—and then I'd throw the dishes out. I was a child. I guess I was, in a sense, crazy, or whatever you would say—not crazy, but unconventional.

So they sent me to a woman psychiatrist, and she couldn't speak English very well. I didn't like her, and she didn't like me. But I understood enough French to understand—because I remember, when I went down the stairs, she shook her head. And I looked up at her, and she said, [in French] "You don't want to sleep with men."

See, I understood French well enough to hear her say that. [Sucks teeth.] She went like that. I thought, you don't get it about me, you know. And I said—well, they asked me what they thought of her, and I said, "I want to go to a psychiatrist that speaks English." So they sent me to this wonderful man. And I'm told later that he came from a very famous family. His name was Dr. Schlumberger [ph]—it's a very famous name, I'm told, a famous family in France—Schlumberger.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In oil.

JUNE LEAF: I don't know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: They're famous in oil.

JUNE LEAF: So I—all of a sudden, I have somebody I could talk to. And I just—everything came out, and he laughed and laughed and laughed. I talked about how I felt about the poodle and how I thought about how pretentious they were, and how they liked young artists, precocious artists. And I'm not a precocious artist. I'm young, but I'm not precocious. And I love to paint. And I told him what I liked to look at. And I remember, he's just—he said, there's nothing wrong with you. You are a little bit inhibited about sex, but that's okay. He said, go home.

So the story did not end there. So not only did I destroy the bathtub and her beautiful dishes, but I had a friend who actually was crazy, though I didn't know what crazy was at the time—a real schizophrenic friend. I'm not going to tell you her name—real nice woman, young woman—poet. And I used to love to hear her talk, because she would say things like, "Oh, your work is very anal." And I'd say, "What's that?" "Oh, don't you know about [Karl] Jung?" "No, I don't know about Jung." But I loved what she said. And I thought, anal, yes, Xs, cross marks. I can understand that.

But then I went home, and she stayed. And how did it happen? They kept my work. They wouldn't give me my work back because they wanted me to pay \$50 for all my—the destruction to the bathtub and the dishes. Fifty dollars, at that time, was, I would say, like \$1,500 or more, I would say—probably some enormous amount of money. And all my work—I left it there. And she took the—anyway, for some reason, it got into her possession. Finally, it got to a warehouse in New York.

Meanwhile, I was living in a separate place from my parents.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, you came back from Paris.

JUNE LEAF: I came back from Paris about five months later.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was in '48, '49.

JUNE LEAF: Forty-eight, right. And I was in a terrible depression. Still, I was in a depression about the effect this "discovery," so-called, had on me and the idea that I could never explain to my parents what being discovered meant.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you find a place to live in Chicago?

JUNE LEAF: There was a place where my parents lived. They had another apartment. I had a small apartment. They helped me before I went to school, because I did end up going back to school—not art school. Anyway, I was in a terrible depression for about a year, and I cried

a lot. I cried about these paintings. I felt they were my children, and I wanted them back.

And one day—I think it was almost a year later—my father appeared at my doorway with the paintings. And what happened is that he went to New York on the bus, and he went to the warehouse, and he got them. And people asked him why he did that. He said, "If she cries like that, it must mean something." And my sister said he took them to galleries and showed them to people.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In New York?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah. "Is my daughter any good?" And I said, What did they say? She said, "Well, they just told him it's a very hard life to be an artist," but he never told me. He just handed them to me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You heard this from your sister?

JUNE LEAF: Later, yeah. I think that's all I'm going to talk about now.

[END CD 2.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing June Leaf in New York City on May 17, 2010, for the Archives of American Art. And this is disc three, following up one and two that were recorded several months ago.

June, when we last spoke, you had just left from four or five months in Paris, went back to Chicago. And why don't we pick up there and talk about what you did—went back to school, at some point—some of the people you met, and how your work was developing?

JUNE LEAF: Well, it was a big thing to have the experience in Paris and then come back to, you know, culture shock. So I had to make an adjustment. I mean, and I'm 19 years old. I have very many strong adventures with strange people. I mean, I was very receptive to almost everything, and so sometimes, there would be negative things. Like, I met a woman who took drugs. I didn't know what that meant.

And she was unbalanced, and I was—all these were new things for me, and I had to adjust to a lot of things. And my family observed that I was not going the way their girl was supposed to go. I mean, I dressed, as young girls do now, blue jeans, long hair, but at that time, it was unusual. So I had to work out an adjustment, as did my family, about what I was becoming. So I think I—did I go back to school?

JUDITH RICHARDS: I think you did.

JUNE LEAF: I went to the University of Illinois at Navy Pier. I tried to please my mother, to reassure her, so I went back, maybe, to get a degree just to be a schoolteacher. And then I went from there to Roosevelt University, but I also was invited to teach at the New Bauhaus. I was a good teacher. I think that was a very important change in my life. Because I had to express my thoughts to, mostly, older people than I, and I found that I was gifted to share my experience with them, and I was a very energetic teacher. And then I also went back to school.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At that point, you met a lot of artists who were associated with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

JUNE LEAF: That's right. Well, mostly, it was—since I was not a student at the Art Institute, the New Bauhaus had a very different attitude. I wasn't interested in the academic way of teaching there, but they, apparently, were interested in me. There was an exhibition—actually, Leon Golub was the sponsor. It was called, *Exhibition Momentum* [Momentum Gallery, Chicago, IL, 1952]. And I submitted three works, and they were all accepted. And apparently, while I was in Paris, which was when they had that exhibit, Leon—and maybe his other friends—were very moved by my work. And he wanted to meet me.

And I met him at the house of Robert Nickle, who was a great painter, collage-maker, Robert Nickle. And he's died—he died fairly young. He was a great inspiration to me, and his wife, Janet. They sort of looked after me, in a way, until they got tired of it.

But I met him at their house, and he told me how much he liked my work, and he asked me if there was something he could do for me. And I said, yes, you could come up to the north

side of Chicago and tell my mother that you think I'm a good painter.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Leon.

JUNE LEAF: Leon. So we went up on the bus very far, almost near Evanston, and we came into my mother's apartment. And he said to my mother, "Your daughter is a great painter." And my mother was satisfied. I think till the end of her days, she always talked about how Leon Golub said that. It was a wonderful thing for him to do. And then I didn't—later, I met some of his friends. Nancy [Spero] was in Paris at the time. I didn't meet her. That was that phase.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At one point, around this time—you were doing collage drawings, paintings, but you decided you needed to learn to draw.

JUNE LEAF: That was maybe—let's see. This was—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you met Seymour Rosofsky.

JUNE LEAF: Well, the need to learn to draw was because—it's funny—I just looked at a video by Brigitte Cornand. It's called *The Red Bird* [*Red Birds*, 2010], where she interviews all these female artists, and she couples them with a bird.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's her last name?

JUNE LEAF: Brigitte Cornand.

And then she put together a film that's called, *The Red Bird*, and it has artists like Louise and Joan Jonas and Kiki Smith and Genevieve Cadeaux.

Anyway, and the reason I mention it is that I talk about that—about how I wasn't sure what kind of an artist I was. I didn't know if I was a modern artist, because I felt I hadn't gone to an academy. I was a very good product of Moholy-Nagy, where they want you to reject everything and start as though you've never seen a painting before. You know, you experiment with materials. I was so young and energetic, I was very good at that.

But at one point, I saw that I was—that really, I liked to draw people. I still wasn't sure I wanted to give all that up, you know. So I decided to—just maybe started with Giacometti, or, you know, who knows when it starts? But here, I can be specific. I thought, well, I do like Giacometti, but I'd like to know who he liked. And then I'd go back to works, Greek and Etruscan things he liked at the museum—then I could see he was connected to Cézanne, and then I wanted to know who Cézanne liked.

And then I wanted to know who Manet liked. And then I wanted to know who Delacroix liked. And then I wanted to know who this one—and I would trace them. And then I saw I needed to learn to draw, because I saw that's the basis of everything for these artists that I admired. That's when I got my Fulbright [Scholarship], more or less.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You got the Fulbright to study—

JUNE LEAF: Fifty-eight.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Fifty-eight and '59.

JUNE LEAF: But I think by fifty—oh, yeah, then I had done—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Fifty-four is when I see that—

JUNE LEAF: —made the *Arcade Women* [1956]. Yeah, I was very precocious. But I—this—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were teaching at the Art Institute in—

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, and then I taught there, too, right. I taught at both places—the Art Institute—

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you were in Chicago, did you ever meet John, or called Jack, Kearney?

JUNE LEAF: Oh, I remember him. Oh, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: He and his wife founded an artists' workshop that he owned.

JUNE LEAF: I showed at the Contemporary Art Workshop. I had a show there in 1953. Yeah, that's right—well, maybe it was earlier, because I remember Leon was there with me. Maybe it was '51.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Anyway, you were talking about your Fulbright.

JUNE LEAF: Well, I'm—you know, remember, this is already '53, '54, '55, but I'm skipping a lot, which is just as well. But I met, for instance, Seymour Rosofsky, and that was a kind of a romance, and disappointing for him, because I didn't pay enough attention to him.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were too independent?

JUNE LEAF: No, I don't know. I was the way I am. But actually, he meant a lot to me when he did decide that we wouldn't be good together. That was a very important point in my life. Perhaps it sort of woke me up to that other side of me—you know, the woman with a capacity to love. That's a big thing. So it all came together with my wanting to match, at least, the studies of artists, in terms of good drawing. So I made a big attempt at that, and I did get a Fulbright during that process.

And then I think that I—I worked very hard on that, sort of making up for not having gone to an academic school, I guess. Because Moholy's philosophy is very good: You learn what you need to learn. And so I was, then, a very good product of the Bauhaus teachings. That was my temperament, to be connected to humans. Other painters would become more abstract, go the way of Mondrian and [Josef] Albers. And I was, as they used to say, the school romantic.

So I did that. Seymour was a brilliant draftsman, and he shamed me. You know, I could see that he knew a lot. He was humbled more than I. And that's how I got into drawing. And then I gave it up, suddenly, in Paris, the second year that I was there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You decided, when you got the Fulbright—you applied to go to Paris. You knew you'd go to Paris.

JUNE LEAF: Yes, because by then, I was in love with Cézanne and—Monet and—Pissarro. I mean, I was madly in love with these artists—and James Ensor of course. He's from another country, but he had a powerful influence on me. And then I want to quickly say that the discipline that I imposed on myself, which included copying things at the Louvre—copying a Chardin, copying a Goya—was a very great strain on me. And I just sort of collapsed.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the strain about?

JUNE LEAF: Because I was repressing my volatile nature, which is what's my work now. It's more celebratory or explosive. Because I was disciplining myself. It was like—I remember saying to someone, I felt like I was making radiators, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Copying Cezanne.

JUNE LEAF: No, I used a graph of—in order to paint in the Louvre, you have to make it smaller or larger. Can you imagine copying a Vermeer? I mean, you know, it's insane, what I was doing. But then, I always go to the extreme. And then I just sort of snapped one day. I remember I was doing a Chardin of the two little sisters at the table and their mother is serving them breakfast.

And I remember, I put the knob on the top of the chair—there was a little knob. And I painted it. And it sat right in the space. I threw the brush on the floor, and I thought, that's all I wanted. I wanted to be able to put something on a floor, where I wanted it—exactly where I wanted it. And I dropped the brush. And then it took me several weeks to kind of unwind, you know. It was like I'd been boxed in by all this discipline.

And from then on—yeah, I remember I was copying a Goya, and I was fanatic about getting the eyes just right. And I did. I locked them in just right. I remember, it sort of snapped back at me. And then—and I heard this little voice inside of me saying, go home. Go home. This is Goya's dream. Go home. And I stopped.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And that point, you went back to—

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, there was another—the two things, the Chardin and the Goya—go home. It also said, "You're just a simple girl from Chicago, and that's okay. He reaches across centuries; you'll never do that. Go home." That was a very important moment, but I was exhausted, you know. It took a long time to unwind that spool, like winding up a wire on a spool, you know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you went back to Chicago, but soon after—

JUNE LEAF: Well, no, my sister's husband died, and so that was—I went back and took care of her. I went to Texas, stayed there a month. Then I went back to Chicago. What did I do?

JUDITH RICHARDS: You went to New York soon after.

JUNE LEAF: Oh, no, no, no. From the Fulbright, I went to live in New York. I never went back to Chicago after 1957 except to visit my mother.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you came to New York, how did you find a place to live and work?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I had a friend. I had just met him—a New Yorker, jazz musician. And he offered to help me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where did you meet him?

JUNE LEAF: In Paris.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What's his name?

JUNE LEAF: Joel Press—a very wonderful man. And he had great belief in me. Well, we got married, and I was married to him for nine years. And we lived together in New York.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you first came to New York, where was your home?

JUNE LEAF: The first time, we lived on 14th Street, across from Union Square. Then we got a place at 217th Street in the Bronx. We lived there for five years. Then I got a studio—then we lived on 33rd [Street]. Then I got a studio on Beekman Street—yes, that's when I—and I started teaching at Parsons [College, The New School of Design]. And then, that's when I began—

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was—what year was that, you started teaching at Parsons? Do you recall?

JUNE LEAF: Maybe '66, '67—yeah, '66.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you enjoy that?

JUNE LEAF: I loved teaching.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At Parsons?

JUNE LEAF: I loved it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And you were teaching painting?

JUNE LEAF: And they didn't even have a painting program. Marvin Israel was the head of the department.

JUDITH RICHARDS: He hired you?

JUNE LEAF: No, there was another. Marvin was a very intimidating, brilliant person, you know? He was Diane Arbus's friend, and I think he guided her—he had that power to raise the bar. That would be the way to say it. He could raise the bar.

There are two people in my life that raised the bar. One was Allan Frumkin [Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York City and Chicago], and one was Marvin Israel. They just refused any mediocrity in an artist. If you were mediocre, if you didn't go beyond your own limits, they

had no use for you. And that's a very important thing. I remember, the best lesson I ever had was in—I think it was 1967. He came to my studio on—

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Marvin.

JUNE LEAF: —on Beekman Street. And I was starting to make these ballroom, sort of, cutout—maybe I hadn't made sculpture, yet. No, I had, but I didn't use it enough. And I remember, he said, "Well, you're 37 years old. If you haven't figured it out by now, you never will." And I thought—it was like a slap from a master, you know. And that was a wonderful thing to say to me.

In other words, you'd better just go beyond yourself, you know. You're way off somewhere, and you didn't make that leap; you didn't make that final leap.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you recall, in the '60s, what kind of things were influencing you?

JUNE LEAF: Theater, theater, theater, theater, theater. And I remember *Marquis de Sade*. What was it called?

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Jean] Genet?

JUNE LEAF: What was it called? It was called *Marquis de Sade*. Anyway, I was very influenced by Michel de Ghelderode, the Dutchman. Ghelderode and Ensor. Ensor was probably my biggest influence, and through Ensor, I discovered Ghelderode, and then the Theatre of the Absurd. I loved—I mean, that was it for me. Yeah, the Theatre of the Absurd, Genet.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did you know the people who ran that?

JUNE LEAF: No, I didn't know any of them, but I used to go to Lincoln Center [New York City], and I used to get books on those people. I couldn't paint it. I tell you, the day it happened, that I broke through, I was taking the Second Avenue bus to my studio, Beekman, and I always—there was something I knew I was always trying to paint, and I never could get it.

And so I looked through the window of the bus, and I saw a waitress at the Thalia restaurant. She had a white face, bleach-blond hair; she was frowsy and fat—remarkable looking—with the light on her.

And I looked at her, and I thought—and then it flashed before me, this whole scenario, so-called, of what became *The Ascension [of the Pig Lady, 1968]*, where I—that's the piece in the Contemporary Museum in Chicago [Museum of Contemporary Art], now. And I came back to my studio, and for the first time in my life, I wrote the scenario out, about the waitress who turns into a pig. And that was when I—

JUDITH RICHARDS: I think that was 1967. Is that the last time you wrote a scenario, or the first time of many?

JUNE LEAF: Almost the first and only time.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I saw that, reproduced.

JUNE LEAF: I think it's a very good writing. Yeah, I remember—and I remember, I was so proud of this breaking open, you know. Like, I knew, now, that it was going to be a theater; it was going to be a play. And I began making this giant stage, you know. And everything happened from then on.

JUDITH RICHARDS: That's '68, yeah. Did you imagine that script, that scenario that you wrote, could be turned into an actual play by a playwright?

JUNE LEAF: No. Oh, no, I didn't—no, what did I say?

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the idea of the Theatre of the Absurd.

JUNE LEAF: No, my play—it had to be just one moment of a play, because I was a painter. I really wasn't a playwright. I mean, I just knew that I had to have some sense of time—just maybe 30 seconds, you know, of time, movement. That doesn't make sense, but I'm not a playwright, that's all.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Am I correct that you presented part or all of the theater piece when you had your first solo show at Frumkin in '68?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, that's right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So were you showing the theater—

JUNE LEAF: Oh, I've showed—I've made several theaters. I've made a mechanical theater with music—jug-band music. Joel put it together—very nice piece. It's at the Tel Aviv Museum [of Art, Israel] now.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh.

JUNE LEAF: It kind of doesn't work so well anymore.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is that the piece called *Tin Theatre* [1967]?

JUNE LEAF: Tin Theatre, yeah. Then I made one called *Bicycle Theatre* [1969]—similar scripting. A man on a bicycle chases a woman, but in one position—sitting in one position. And that's what the theater is—she dances, and he chases her, but they stay in one place. And then the jug-band music and yes, that's just a nice experience to make that theater.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was Joel's music an influence?

JUNE LEAF: The jazz—well, I only liked jug band. I mean, now, I look back and I like much jazz, but at the time, it was mostly jug-band music that I liked, like Willie "The Lion" Smith, was my favorite. He's an African American who became Jewish. I always thought he reminded me of—

JUDITH RICHARDS: The Lion of Judah?

JUNE LEAF: I don't know. I never went further. He just reminded me of my father, who had the same kind of wide-eyed, childlike quality. I never met him. I just liked him. And that went well. That was a good exhibit.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, so you were talking about how Frumkin really held you to a high standard.

JUNE LEAF: Very high.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you meet him and start showing there?

JUNE LEAF: Well, he opened the gallery in Chicago. I didn't know him. Somehow, word got around that June Leaf loved Joseph Cornell. Now, I saw Joseph Cornell in—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Loved his work or loved him?

JUNE LEAF: No, loved his work. I apparently almost passed out when I saw Cornell. I just couldn't stop talking about him when I came back to Chicago. And he was connected more to New York, more sophisticated artists, like [Roberto] Matta and so on—[Gaston] Lachaise and brilliant artists.

And then he heard this young woman from Chicago was talking about Joseph Cornell, so he invited me to see his Cornells that he was showing. And then he had to go away for two weeks, I think, and he asked me if I would take care of the gallery. That was in the winter. No one ever came. And while I was in the gallery, I went through everything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is in Chicago.

JUNE LEAF: I painted in the gallery.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, this is in New York.

JUNE LEAF: In Chicago.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In Chicago, okay. So you did go back to Chicago for—

JUNE LEAF: Oh, I'm always—I'm back—you're mixed up.

JUDITH RICHARDS: To see your mother?

JUNE LEAF: No, no, wait a minute. I came back in 1949 to Chicago, and I stayed there until I got my Fulbright. This is before my Fulbright.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, okay, we're going back, okay.

JUNE LEAF: This is, like, '52, '53. And then I also sort of—I pulled away from him because he liked me because I was an attractive young woman. I didn't want to be liked for that. I told him, I'm a very good painter. So I cut off my relationship with him, and I didn't see him for, maybe, three years.

And then one day I got a phone call from him, and he said, I hear you have these wonderful new paintings. And he came over to my studio—that was '55. And he bought them all—the Arcade Women and all that. They were very strong paintings for a girl who hadn't yet learned how to draw. That was when I decided to learn to draw, because I didn't—I had a hard time putting things on the floor, which I seemed to need to do. Can we jump ahead?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, sure. So you had the show at Allan Frumkin in New York in '68. That was your first solo show.

JUNE LEAF: That's right. He just—he took me into the gallery. He put me in a lot of group shows. He always would say, "It's not good enough," when he would see me in New York. When I lived in New York, he'd come to the studio, and he'd take some work; he'd put me in a group show, and he would say it wasn't good enough. Just like—you know, that's what I mean by raising—

JUDITH RICHARDS: No specifics, just, "It wasn't good enough."

JUNE LEAF: He was that way with all these artists. I've heard that Cliff Westermann punched him in the nose. You know, he could excite you because he was, like—you know, from *The Red Shoes* [film, 1948]. He was like a very demanding impresario—arrogant—and he's snotty, but you had respect for him. And it would drive you out of your mind, you know.

When he saw the beginning of *The Ascension*, I remember he walked into this studio, and he looked, and he sneered, and he raised his nose, and he said, "Hmm, I didn't think you'd be able to do it." That's how he was. And then he loved the show. And it was a really good—it was a good show.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was that around the time—we're talking about the late '60s—when you left Joel—that you and Joel weren't—

JUNE LEAF: It was just at the—when the show went up. And by that time, we had drifted apart, and I had met Robert.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Robert Frank. How did you meet Robert?

JUNE LEAF: I met him at a party. I knew his wife first. I didn't know they were married. Someone told me about him. In fact, a woman came and showed me his photographs—Diane Arbus's and his—to let me know that photographers could also be good. And I admitted to myself they were very moving.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You saw them in a gallery?

JUNE LEAF: No, she brought me his book, *The Americans* [1959]. I thought he lived in Europe. I didn't know anything about him. And I met him at that party, and that's—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you remember who gave that party?

JUNE LEAF: Sidney Tillim. It was for his wife, who had a children's theater. And his daughter, Andrea, was brought by Mary [Frank, Robert's wife] to see if she wanted to be in that children's theater, and Mary invited me and Joel. And that's where I met Robert and Andrea, 1966.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you broke up with Joel, you and Robert were—got together.

JUNE LEAF: Eventually, yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And at some point you started living together.

JUNE LEAF: Yes.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where was that in New York?

JUNE LEAF: The first place—oh, I had a studio on Broome Street—Broome and West Broadway. But then he went and got a studio on Bowery—184 Bowery. And I moved out of Broome, and we went and lived together. And we lived there for a year, and then we moved to Canada.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Had he been going to Canada before he met you?

JUNE LEAF: No, no.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did the two of you, then, decide to go to that particular—

JUNE LEAF: He decided.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did he decide to go to that particular place?

JUNE LEAF: He didn't want to be in New York anymore—couldn't take it. He said—he was very strong about that. And I was very sad about that, because here I was, really—it was—I mean, I had every reason to stay in New York, really.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Sure.

JUNE LEAF: But I certainly would never choose to stay in New York and not be with him. I mean, there was no question in my mind. I was sad about the fact that I couldn't have both. But I remember one day, I came home to Bowery, feeling kind of good, and he said, I'm sending you to Nova Scotia to look for a place for the summer.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Now, why so far? Why didn't he just—

JUNE LEAF: Well, he had heard about Nova Scotia. I didn't know anything about it. He'd heard it was very beautiful.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I mean, it could have been Massachusetts or Maine or—

JUNE LEAF: No, no, he'd heard—and he was right. It was not tainted by Americanisms, you know. It was just a foreign country and it was untainted, is the only way you can explain it. It is. It's desolate. Nobody lives there. The weather is tough. And so I went up there in March of '69; I think it was by myself. Or was it '68?

JUDITH RICHARDS: You moved there in '70, so probably '69.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah. So I went just to find a summer place, and I was bowled over by how different it was from anything I'd ever known. I didn't really like—I thought it would be a terribly hard place to live. Because March—you come at the end of March and you really see what it's like, you know. And I thought the people were wonderful. That is probably what helped me—well, I know that helped me. Have you seen the book that Steidl published [*Record 1974/75*, 2010]?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

JUNE LEAF: Okay, that tells you about—how did you happen to see it? The gallery there?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

JUNE LEAF: It's good, isn't it? I mean, to—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Wonderful. It gives a real flavor of the place and of how you work there.

JUNE LEAF: Well, that's good, because this book can tell you everything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, I know, but this is you speaking.

JUNE LEAF: I'm not going to—I can't repeat it. I mean, it's just that the book is a journal. I

never thought I'd publish it. It was just to help me get through, you know, to my goals.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you started living there for half the year, or even longer?

JUNE LEAF: No, we went there—let's see. I went there in March. I located many places I thought we could rent. He—then we went up together in July, and of course, I could see he didn't know anything about it, because it was summer and he thought it was like Provincetown [MA]. I thought he was completely misguided, but I knew that he'd never know until he went there in the winter. And he liked it, but you know, he didn't really see it. And I'm sorry, I broke my train of thought.

So I showed him the places that I had discovered, and then we looked at them. And either he didn't like them, or the people didn't like us. They thought we were hippies. I knew you couldn't—you should never walk in their kitchen without your shoes, and he did that. And that screwed up most of the visits. But that was it. He didn't know he was—he's very correct, but somehow, he'd been to Provincetown, and he didn't realize these were very conservative, Scottish people, you know.

So then we found a house that was due to his sharp eyes, and he fell in love with the house. And we raised some money—it didn't cost that much—we bought it that October. And then I said to him, I will not be a summer resident, because I had had an experience in East Hampton that summer before, and I was so embarrassed by us artists, and I felt so ashamed of how the artists behaved towards the local people. I just thought, I never want to be a summer artist resident—they hate us. And I said to him, "I won't be a summer resident." So we immigrated.

And he was nice. I remember, I said, "I won't be a summer resident." He said, "Okay." And that began my great adventure—my greatest adventure. Because, remember, I'm a city girl, and for me, there was nothing uglier than a spruce tree, especially being Jewish and verboten, you know, Christmas trees. No beautiful maples or oaks or—none of the trees I loved—just boring, boring spruce trees.

But the only thing that saved me was I loved the people, and they liked me, too, you know, and that carried me through everything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You still spend time in the city.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, well, we have to come back; it's too hard for—we're getting old. It's too hard to live there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But all through the years, did you spend some months on a regular basis in New York?

JUNE LEAF: No, no, we lived there—in the '70s, we lived there all year. We lived there. And then we came back, due to family illnesses, and really have only been—we've been sharing our time there. But I'm really happy there, really happy there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Early in the years, how did your work change because you were there? You started making mechanical puppets and—

JUNE LEAF: Well, that was the good part. No, it was terribly hard for me, because I—there was nothing to paint! And I thought, like, for me anyway, I really didn't care that there was an ocean there, or all that grandeur—now, I see how wrong I was—but I mean, I was a city girl. I liked—to this day, I'd rather go to an empty lot or a park than go on a trip to a beautiful landscape—to this day! I grew up playing in alleys and empty lots, you know.

So what did I do? Oh, yeah, Robert Nickles's wife was a biologist. I went and visited my mother, visited her. She gave me a book on microbiology. And I thought, wow, that's a good idea. So I bought two microscopes—a real microscope with high power and, what do you call it, a dissecting microscope—maybe only 30 times [magnification]. And I started to look at microorganisms, and then I was happy. Because I could see it was just like the cities, so that's—I made a whole series on that, on microbiology. That was a great breakthrough for me.

And then I also had to do a lot of physical work. We built my studio. We almost reconstructed the house. I had to learn enough about cars to, when I'm stuck, not to panic. And then I—and

I love to work with tools. I'm very interested—always have been interested in mechanical things, like most children. And I jump to tell you, because I want to move fast, but when Robert got a job at Davis and we drove together—

JUDITH RICHARDS: UC-Davis.

JUNE LEAF: And we got married in 1975, and then I drove back—oh, and when I was there—while I was going there, I was receiving an invitation from the—what are they called? The feminist organization, you know—I mean, I was a little out of sync with them, as you can imagine. So I understand it very well now, but I wasn't attracted to their movement. I was rather put off. But I—anyway, I went back. I took a course in automobiles while Robert was teaching in Davis, just to—I was only there for three weeks.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mechanics—automobile mechanics?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, just to understand. And while I was doing that, I was getting these invitations to be in a woman's—they said, "Righting the wrongs." I remember, that was the one phrase I remember. "We want to right the wrongs that were done to women." And you know, now, I understand, but at the time, I didn't understand. So I wrote them and said, "Oh, I'm so sorry. It's too late to be in your exhibit because the letters came late." And then they wrote me back and said, "We're waiting for you." And so I was caught.

And so all of a sudden, I thought, why don't they—all the women should get together and they should make a monument to women, and they should make it so big that when people come from outer space, they'll see it. And I thought, and, you know, I know some guys that would help them, you know. And I got very excited about this. So I was going to write to them about it. And then I said to myself, well, if you're so smart, why don't you make some of these drawings? Turning point number two.

So I sat down and made about 100 drawings, and then I had a show at Terry Dintenfass [Inc., New York City], and I showed these drawings. And this woman from Lippincott saw the drawings, and she invited me to make a monument at the Lippincott factory. And I remember, when I walked into that factory and I saw that factory—

[Phone rings.]

—I'm not going to answer—

—which looked just like my drawings—all these guys running around trying to make—because I decided that, well, all you have to do is just make a monument and use all the powerful things there are, like a locomotive or a fountain or a dam or, you know. I mean, just take the biggest things there are.

And I made drawings about that—everything with the shape of a woman. And so they were very excited—and I remember when I walked into the factory—remember, I've got a real cat-eating smile on my face all this time, you know. I walked into the factory, and I thought to myself, well, that just might have been the smartest thought I ever had in my life, when I said, if you're so smart, why don't you do it? And that was a very big turning point for me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is this the piece called *The Head* [1981]?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah. Well, as it turned—it was supposed to be a man and a woman walking—gigantic—but they got so tired of me at the factory. Because all I wanted to do was incorporate everything around me. And all the workmen got very excited, and they would bring in the things they made that were robotic. Because I was, you know, working in a territory that curious kids are, you know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: That was 1978, I believe, that you were in that factory.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, that's right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what happened to the piece?

JUNE LEAF: It was—well, finally, I had to shrink it down to just the head, because they practically kicked me out of the factory because I was disrupting everything in the factory. I understood it, and besides, I could never have made the visionary thing I had—that's in the catalogue—that drawing. I sent the letter to Don Lippincott [ph]—what I wanted to do—a

man and a woman walking together.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Who would have paid for this giant?

JUNE LEAF: They, they! That's what I'm trying to say. They paid! All they did was cut off—when they sold it, they got paid. They took a chance on me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Where is it, now?

JUNE LEAF: A lawyer has it in Chicago. I never met him.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How big is the head?

JUNE LEAF: If she would be all the way up, she'd be 10 feet tall. It's mechanical. It breathes. You can pump air from it. It's fine. Anyway, that—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And how was that a turning point?

JUNE LEAF: No, the turning point was that—the turning point was not to be angry about—not say, I've been screwed by society, which, of course, we have been. But that's the nature of women to ask for that, you know. I mean, we wouldn't be mothers if we didn't get screwed, you know, so—by our children, by our—everybody. You know, that's the nature of us, you know. So all of a sudden—they're right to complain about it, but you have to change your whole approach to life.

And so I was all by myself, so I had to just say, well, if you're so smart—you know, instead of calling up all my women friends, which I didn't have, I had to just take it upon myself to not be discouraged.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you left Davis after that period was done, you went back to—

JUNE LEAF: I went back home, and I was alone, and I worked—oh, right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So he stayed there, teaching—

JUNE LEAF: And what I did was, after I made all these drawings, I thought, they're too big. So that's when I said, okay, anything that can work on the finger—I'll use my thumb, and I'll make triggers—anything that I can do with a trigger could be done with a big gear. So that's when I started to make those small sculptures, which was very logical—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Mechanical—

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, because in other words, movement—anything that I could move with a—simply push—could be done with a wheel or a crank or a pump or, you know. So I just had my thumb and my finger. And that was wonderful. So I just made these tiny, little things. Let me see, I don't know—did they come to me after that? Yeah, that's right. I showed those with the drawings at Terry Dintenfass gallery. And they saw them. That's right. But you know, it's interesting. Anyway, go on.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do the mechanical figures relate to the two-dimensional work—the paintings and the drawings? They're separate, but they're together, because there are collages where you have tin pieces on paintings.

JUNE LEAF: No, it's very simple. I just have to make things move, that's all. Or I just want you to feel that they can move. So by making mechanical things, it encourages my drawings, because if I don't make mechanical things, my drawings don't move—so when they stop moving in my—I say, time to make one that moves. It's like I animate them. I make them move, breathe, you know, get up, talk back to me, you know. That's what I want.

JUDITH RICHARDS: At some point, you started including a sewing machine into the work—into the mechanics.

JUNE LEAF: As a child, a sewing machine was the only thing I ever wanted in my whole life. Now, who knows why that's so—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did your mother use one?

JUNE LEAF: No. Well, first of all, I think it—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Was it empowering?

JUNE LEAF: I don't know. I think it must have something to do with my ancestry. It must. Every time I touch things, I say, maybe she was—he was a tailor, or maybe they were jewelers. I feel my fingers have eyes. I don't see anything until I touch them. And then all of a sudden, my fingers see—they see.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So have you accumulated lots of sewing machines?

JUNE LEAF: I have quite a few—only the treadle ones, yes. Did you see the one in the—it moves! You know, you can—did I do it while you were there?

JUDITH RICHARDS: No.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, the figure, which is in *The Last Supper*, I wanted him to move, so I decide to make—

JUDITH RICHARDS: We're talking about, just for the record, the piece in your current show. What's it called?

JUNE LEAF: Well, the treadle, I just call it, *Figure on a Treadle* [1990], but it comes from my obsession with *The Last Supper*.

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the show right now.

[Audio Break.]

You made a wonderful painting in '89, '90—we're moving along—called *City Fish*, and I wanted to ask you about it, because it's a—there's a lot of pieces to that painting—why you called it *City Fish*. Was it about being in the city versus in Nova Scotia?

JUNE LEAF: No, it's a good question. Well, there, that's one thing. But, no, it's really a portrait of Robert.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Had you painted him as a fish before?

JUNE LEAF: As a scavenger, yeah. I see him as silent. He finds diamonds at the bottom of the sea, you know. And if you look at that, you'll see that there are maybe five little portholes on the belly of the fish. And actually, that comes from his streetcar. If you look, you'll see these people looking out the window.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah. What about the letters on the fish?

JUNE LEAF: Well, that was—well, I was going to put the portholes up there, but that was the wrong place for them, so I moved them at the bottom. But you can't scratch out things in a painting that's coming so fast, you know, so I left it. But actually, there's a film called *Fire in the East* [: *A Portrait of Robert Frank*, 1986] about Robert, where they interview me. Because I was working on that painting, and Robert asked me to be in the documentary. And I said, oh, phooey, I don't want to be, because I won't be able to finish the painting, which was true.

So even while they're interviewing me, I'm painting—I have a sketch of it. And I hold up his—I say, it's from Robert. I mean, I like the idea of—you know, I mean, his work is so holy, to photographers, that I like that I can say, it's not holy. I can steal my husband's photograph and paint right over it if I want to, and so can you. And that's why we have a good relationship. I'm not holy; he's not holy.

JUDITH RICHARDS: There's also a wonderful range of approaches to painting in that painting—I mean, in all your work. There's thick and there's thin, and there's washes and there's solid paint. And you were saying that you did this quickly.

JUNE LEAF: No, what happened was, there's those wonderful, rare moments when you've been working all day and suddenly—it takes many hours, like warming up—suddenly, you have a vision of—you say, this is the moment to make the painting. I think it's going to be there waiting for me if I just go fast. And I went, and I started it on a sheet of brown paper,

actually.

And I glued it on the canvas, and I started the painting. And then the energy goes, and then Robert called me and asked me to come down. And I thought, oh, shit, it's gone. But I'm not going to touch it. So I put it away. And one day, a year later, I was in my studio, and it came back. And I ran down here, I grabbed it, I put it upstairs, and I finished it. Is that answering your question?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes, yes. That's part of the question.

JUNE LEAF: It had to come—it came right out, like a big explosion. I wish I did more of the paintings like that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You've used Robert in a number of paintings, sometimes obviously and sometimes not. Does he—it's all from memory. You're not asking him to sit there while you draw him?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I made a very nice portrait of him that's in his book, *New York to Nova Scotia* [1986]. It's a really good portrait. I did that in about 20 minutes. That's a—that's in his catalogue, *New York to Nova Scotia*. No, he doesn't have time to sit, but that day, I asked him, please to do it. And he did it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Let me ask you a couple of questions about two artists living together. Do you talk about each other's work?

JUNE LEAF: Not—no. He used to always come—he used to walk through my studio every day, three times a day.

JUDITH RICHARDS: On purpose to see what you were doing?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, he likes—

JUDITH RICHARDS: To keep you company? To—

JUNE LEAF: No, no, he—you can interpret it any way you want. I just know that's what he did. He got something from my energy. He always says that. We're very different. He's brooding, and when he's ready to do something, he does it. Like, the difference between us goes like this: when I finish, I say, it's no good, and when he finishes, he says, it's done. He—it's done. It's right. And I very rarely feel that it's right. But I work all the time, and he only works when he's ready.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you have a feeling you don't know when it's done, your work?

JUNE LEAF: No, I always know when it's done.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You just don't know if it's good?

JUNE LEAF: Or whether I'm done. Yeah, I know when it's not done. I know when it's not going to get done, you know, if I don't let it alone. I know when it's never going to be done. And I know when it's done. And those—when they're done quick, like the *City Fish*, a couple times, I saw—that's a big thing with a painter, to let something alone. You know, that's a critical thing. That's probably the most—that's the biggest sign of maturity in an artist, is how to handle that. For instance, in this last show, it didn't—I mean, we have—it's harder for us, now, physically, and so forth.

So I kept waiting for that moment when I was going to lighten up and make a really good drawing or a good painting that would be fresh. And about a month ago, I did make—I started on a canvas, but I couldn't get it done. I just couldn't finish it. But every time somebody came into the studio, they would say to me—and even in this show, it's white; it's unfinished—and everybody would say, "That's my favorite painting." So I thought, I'm 80 years old, and if I haven't learned by now when to leave something alone and have the courage to show it, I haven't learned anything.

[END CD 3.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing June Leaf in New York City on May 17, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, disc four.

A couple more questions about—

JUNE LEAF: So I just wanted to add that I did something I've never done before. I let it go into the exhibit. And I knew that it wasn't finished. And I'm very happy I did that, because at least it's vibrant. It's vibrant. It doesn't satisfy me, but it's vibrant.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think you'll work on it again?

JUNE LEAF: I think I would have ruined it if I had worked on it. And I think it's okay to let it go.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you're not going to work on it. You're just going to say it's done.

JUNE LEAF: No. If it comes back, maybe one day I'll work on it. If someone wants it, let them have it. And that's a very important lesson for me, because I work too hard. I'm too serious.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You were talking about working methods. You used to work in oil, but I think that you became allergic.

JUNE LEAF: I am allergic to the solvent. I can't work with it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So can you describe the combination of materials you now use?

JUNE LEAF: Well, drawing, I don't know. I use acrylic paint, but I don't think it looks like it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, it doesn't.

JUNE LEAF: So I just, in the last show, I even drew in pencil on some of them. I don't know. I just love the pencil.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are you working on more than one painting at a time—many paintings, drawings?

JUNE LEAF: Now, I'm not working at all.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But before. [Laughs.]

JUNE LEAF: I work on many things at the same time. And I hide them from people. And then when they—and nobody ever knows where they are. And when I send them to the gallery, Thorp [Edward Thorp Gallery], and everybody says, where were these pictures? And I thought to myself about that. I thought, that's true. I know exactly where they are and at what stage they're in. And I know when to pick them up and work on them. Nobody can ever see them except me. So I think the last five days, I pulled out the ones that I knew—I was either going to get them or not, but I was ready to work on to them. Okay?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you like having earlier finished works in the studio while you're working on new work, or do you prefer not to have that?

JUNE LEAF: No, no early ones. They're out. Only ones related to the theme.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How do you approach titling the pieces? Does that come afterward?

JUNE LEAF: No, they call me up at the gallery when the show is up, and I title them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you have no—you're not spending any time thinking about the title while you're making them, or right when they're done?

JUNE LEAF: No.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's just a, kind of, a bookkeeping chore?

JUNE LEAF: No, I don't know. The picture tells me at the end its title, that's all. I don't know. Then suddenly I say, oh, yeah, that's what it is.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are there ever times when you feel kind of frozen? Ideas aren't coming. And if that happens, how do you work through that time?

JUNE LEAF: I simply say, they're dead. They're dead for a day or two, and they're telling me

to go out and live, live.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And when you come back?

JUNE LEAF: When I come back, they say, thanks very much.

JUDITH RICHARDS: We needed the break.

JUNE LEAF: You needed a break. And they talk back to me, tell me where to go.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you used sketchbooks and journals during your work?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I did, but I haven't lately. I've tried to hold back on that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why?

JUNE LEAF: Because I feel that my job is to make paintings and not to ruminate, that I should conclude things. And if I draw, this time it would have dissipated—

JUDITH RICHARDS: —the freshness of it. It would all go into the sketchbook instead of—

JUNE LEAF: —the focus. Yeah, well, I would have been too satisfied. And that would have just—that would have stopped everything. Yeah, so I hold back.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Going back to Robert coming into the studio, so do you talk to each other about your work while you're doing it?

JUNE LEAF: No. Well, sometimes—we have a lot of respect for each other's honesty, and if I'm really stuck, I know that if I talk to him, he'll unstick me. I mean, I think he feels the same. But we don't—we have a lot of confidence in each other. And besides, our life together is not about our work; it's about our life together.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you share some of the, more or less, same interests, in terms of other artists' work? The same or very different likes and dislikes?

JUNE LEAF: We always seem to like the same things, the same writers. We always seem to, yeah, we like—we seem to like the same kinds of things.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You mentioned Joan Jonas, who's a film—have you been friends with her for a while?

JUNE LEAF: Uh, since I'm in Cape Breton [Nova Scotia].

JUDITH RICHARDS: You met there, rather than in the city?

JUNE LEAF: Actually, we did meet there.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Are there other artists up there who you see, who are important?

JUNE LEAF: No. I know that they're there, but we don't like to see each other.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And when you're in the city?

JUNE LEAF: We don't like to see each other. Joan is my friend. I love Joan.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you talk about each other's work?

JUNE LEAF: We have a good time together. I could work with her. I love to be with Joan. She's the only one, probably. We're very compatible that way. I've made very nice portraits of her, drawings, yes. I almost could have worked with her. She wanted me to make—you know, she likes also theater and props and stuff.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yes.

JUNE LEAF: But no, no. She's a real video artist. I'm not. She's good.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah. When you're in your studio, do you like it to be silent, or do you have music all the time?

JUNE LEAF: I play the radio all the time, unless I'm—I always have the radio going. I like Spanish noise, music. I like jazz. But when I really concentrate, I turn the radio off. I can't have any sound.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you have certain routines that have—I mean, in terms of when you come into the studio and when you leave?

JUNE LEAF: It doesn't make any difference.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Night, day, morning?

JUNE LEAF: I never work at night. Morning is the best time. But if I don't work in the morning and I work in the afternoon, that's like working in the morning. But no, when it comes to the end of—it ends just abruptly. The energy is gone. And I go home and take care of my life.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you work with—do you prefer to work with natural light, or do you like to have a constant, artificial—

JUNE LEAF: It doesn't make any difference. I can work in the dark. It doesn't make any difference.

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs] So you're not making a painting imagining what it's going to look like in the gallery?

JUNE LEAF: No, I'm not. It seems to look just the way I thought it would, even if I work in the dark.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you always relied on galleries to maintain an archive and the records of your work, or do you keep that for yourself?

JUNE LEAF: I'm very bad at archives. It's a miracle that I have any. But I've been lucky. I don't know what's recorded. I just saw at my show this wonderful woman—I'm not going to say her name. She was a congresswoman. And she bought a piece of mine in 1972. I was always so pleased about that, and I always wondered what happened to that piece. And then I saw her, and she told me she still had it. And I was very happy. That's very nice. I am very lucky. Things show up; people tell me they have them. But I'm very bad. I work on bad materials, and I don't—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, so I was going to ask you about the archival qualities.

JUNE LEAF: I was bad. I don't like to work on expensive paper. But maybe now I will.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Is it that you just feel freer with paper that didn't cost much?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, I just—because I need to do lots of drawings, and if—I seem to work better. I like to work on typing paper. I like blocks of typing paper. I have a lot of drawings of that size, instead of sketchbooks. I have a lot of those.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you think of them as private, or that you would exhibit if you were asked to?

JUNE LEAF: I've exhibited some of them. I put them back. Yeah, I haven't been making drawings lately. I like to write letters. I draw in letters; that's where I draw best, is in a letter, for sure. Those are my best drawings.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why do you think that is?

JUNE LEAF: Because I'm talking to someone I like. It just flows very freely. It's the best place for me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Hopefully, they're keeping all those letters.

JUNE LEAF: People have told me they keep them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs] You were talking about reading and that you and Robert enjoy reading similar things. All through your life, have there been books that have been influential? Is what you read important, in terms of the development of your ideas for your

work?

JUNE LEAF: Probably, but I don't think I could remember it today. Yes, reading is delicious.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Your works tell stories. Is that a part of how you choose what you read, that the authors are telling stories?

JUNE LEAF: You know, I'll tell you the truth. I learned something a couple days ago. A friend of mine, who saves all my drawings, started to describe to me how she felt about my letters and my drawings. And I was very shocked. And she showed me the books she makes, she said are completely influenced by what she learned from my drawings and my letters. And she said to me, "Oh, I get these letters from you, and I see these figures jumping all around." And I never thought of that. And then I've been thinking about that for a couple of days, now. And I thought, when did that begin?

And it's true that when I draw in a letter, I'm aware that they're jumping—everything's jumping around. I'm saving my soul. That's all I know. No matter what happens to me, if I could have a pencil and a good friend to write to—even if I don't send the letter—all of a sudden, it pours out of the pencil, whatever is. And I have been saved many nights by those drawings. And I usually send them to people. So when she said that, I thought, they jump around? And I loved that expression. I thought I must have figured something out in my life that I could do that. And then I saw her books she made, that are influenced by me. And hers are really jumping around and, I thought, much more than the way I see mine.

Do you think this would be a good time to end the interview?

[Audio Break.]

My attitude towards art galleries and the art scene is that when I was about 20, maybe even earlier—yes, earlier—I simply realized that the art world was a terrible hothouse to grow up in. But I could manage. That's my answer about galleries.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Why did you stop showing at Frumkin?

JUNE LEAF: Because he was so mean, and Robert didn't like him. Nobody could tolerate more of Allan Frumkin. But he was a wonderful influence on me. [Laughs.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did you end up meeting Ed Thorp and starting to show there?

JUNE LEAF: When I left to go to Canada, I didn't have a gallery, because I had dropped Frumkin. So in 1972, I had to go back to New York for two weeks to look for a gallery. And the attitude of Robert and I was, go, look. If you can't find one, at least you tried. So I came with a suitcase full of paintings. It was all on paper.

And I started on the first day of September, and I started at 86th Street. And I worked my way down. Most galleries weren't open. Some said they knew about me. They'd see me later. That wouldn't work. I walked into Terry Dintenfass, and she looked at me, she said, "Oh, my God, I love your work. I'll give you a show." Okay? That's how I got back into the gallery business. And she gave me a show within one month, miracle of all miracles.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Wow.

JUNE LEAF: And then I—I don't know, I wasn't an easy person to be in a gallery. How I got to Thorp was a blessing. I simply looked at his gallery—oh, yes, and Robert's son, I wanted to motivate him. He was very negative in his outlook on life. And we walked into the Thorp Gallery, and I said to him—his son—I said, if I can get into this gallery, will you promise to behave? And he gave me a little smile as if to say, you'll never get into this gallery. And so I worked and I did. That's how I got in, and I've very happy with Mr. Thorp ever since.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What were your expectations? Did you want the gallery to just show your work and sell it, or did you want them to promote you and get you in shows? What were your expectations?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I suppose if I was an aggressive artist, the latter would be what I was interested in. I simply only thought in terms of, it's a beautiful gallery. He's a nice gentleman. And he will help me make beautiful shows. Whether I sold them—remember, at the age of 19, I said, "It's a terrible hothouse to survive in." Where on earth would I start

worrying about whether I was going to sell? I was just happy that the gallery believed in me.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Did it matter to you that he had other artists—he represented other artists whose work you admired?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I didn't dislike them. Let's put it that way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It was a gallery devoted to painting, or is.

JUNE LEAF: Well, I think Eric Fischl was in this gallery. I liked Eric's work. After that, they were tolerable. I mean, all of us are tolerable.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you—

JUNE LEAF: I do, yes, I think I do like his gallery very, very much. I like him.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Have you been interested in meeting the collectors who buy your work? Does that matter to you?

JUNE LEAF: I think I always disappoint them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: [Laughs] In what way?

JUNE LEAF: I don't know. I mean, I just—one of them came to my opening. He always buys my work. He's so nice, and he's so helpful. And unfortunately, I always say silly things. I say to him, "Oh, I wish I could make another painting as good as the one you bought." I don't think that's the right thing to say to a collector. But I feel that way, so I don't—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You feel awkward?

JUNE LEAF: No, I just think, oh, I know he has that painting. That's one of my favorites. I wish I could make more paintings like that. I always tell him the same thing, and he looks blankly at me. So far, he's always bought another one, but I expect that I'll probably end up disillusioning him. I don't know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Maybe he likes—

JUNE LEAF: I'm not very good with collectors.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, maybe he likes you the way you are, exactly.

JUNE LEAF: Well, it certainly must throw him.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you have a concern about the kinds of exhibitions that your work is placed into—the themes, the context that it's placed into? Do you care about that? If someone's doing a show about landscape, or figure—

JUNE LEAF: It doesn't happen to me. Thorp is very sensitive about that.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So he would prevent the work from being put in the wrong—

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, he's very good about it. He's very protective of me. He's very supportive, very nice.

JUDITH RICHARDS: When you've had writers write about your work, is there anything that they, sort of, usually get wrong that you want to correct, for the record here?

JUNE LEAF: Well, you know, I think I'm the kind of person that—when I read something about myself, unless somebody says she's—there was one writer that said, "Oh, I was very disappointed when I saw her work because everybody in Chicago practically faints when they hear her name." Okay, now he—that was pretty bad. That was the worst one I ever read, only bad one. I have very good reviews.

But I think I also have a strange attitude, which is when I'm finished with a show and I feel that it met my standards, I tend not to really think that anybody's writing anything bad about me. Even if they are, I don't really read it. I did reread one at the opening, from the *New Yorker*. And I read it—I remember reading it, and I thought, that's nice, but then I read it this time and I thought, that's really stupid. It's nice, but it's—in other words, I don't really

read them. I just decide, my critique is when I'm finished. I don't really care. I'm trying to think if anybody said anything else. No. I guess I care what my husband thinks. If he thinks I did a good job, that probably means something to me. Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Does Ed [Thorp] talk about the work in that way?

JUNE LEAF: Well, he's very supportive. He's very supportive. Robert hasn't seen the show, really, and he told me—but he might forget—he told me he's going to go look at it. I hope he looks at it. I can't count on it. That would make me sad, that he doesn't have the energy to look. I hope he looks at it.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Of course, he could sit and look at the photographs, but he's—

JUNE LEAF: No. He just, he's—he has other things on his mind, and I'm sympathetic.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Just to talk about one painting in the current show—it's a skeleton, a large painting, that reminded me, in the way it was painted, of City Fish, in the sense that there was this wonderful range of painterly qualities, of thick and thin.

JUNE LEAF: The first one?

JUDITH RICHARDS: The big skeleton, as you walk into the gallery.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, on the right, yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And of course, it's one of many times that you've used the skeleton figure in various ways.

JUNE LEAF: Lately.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Lately, lately. I mean, other than the obvious, thinking about mortality, what has—

JUNE LEAF: I don't know what the obvious is. What is the obvious? It's not about mortality.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Well, what is it about?

JUNE LEAF: It's about how beautiful the body's put together, what a miracle. That's all. It's fantastic. So that's a good place to show it—the muscles and skin, I mean, that hides it, but it's all about the miracle of the mechanics of the body.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I forgot to ask you when you and Robert found this space. We're on Bleecker Street. When did you move here?

JUNE LEAF: We had a storeroom here. When we left, we just had a storeroom.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So when you emigrated—

JUNE LEAF: We left New York. We left.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You owned this building?

JUNE LEAF: No, no. We rented it. It was a flophouse. We only paid \$48.

JUDITH RICHARDS: For one floor?

JUNE LEAF: No, one room. It had no bathroom, no toilet. Just one toilet for the building. So we would come periodically to—and we'd crash there. And then the owner—we met him one day, and he was so shocked to see a woman here, because it was a flophouse. And he got interested in us, and Robert is very smart, I guess, practical. And he said, "If you ever want to sell it, we'll buy it."

And we didn't have any money. I thought he must be—and then two people from California said they'd buy it with us, and then the three of us owned it. And then they couldn't take the neighborhood, and we bought them out. And we got some money. And there I was with a key—a key to a house in New York City.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Wow.

JUNE LEAF: Remember, I grew up in an apartment building, so I never knew anyone that had a house. So to own two houses was a miracle to me. I must have done something right.

JUDITH RICHARDS: And at what point did you create a studio here?

JUNE LEAF: Well, this used to be my studio down here.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Oh, in the basement.

JUNE LEAF: I used to paint down in that pit there. Then—

JUDITH RICHARDS: And what was it—

JUNE LEAF: Then Robert made a film—and by then he made a film up there, and then—

JUDITH RICHARDS: In the space you have a studio in now.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, and then I moved upstairs. No, it was very hard to work down there, but I did very good work, I think.

[Audio Break.]

JUDITH RICHARDS: I'm wondering about the whole theme of the current show, *The Last Supper* [Thorp Gallery, 2010].

JUNE LEAF: Well, we have upstairs a very magnificent engraving from da Vinci's *Last Supper*. I think it's probably very rare. Someone found it in a church in Nova Scotia and gave it to us. And I've looked at it for many years. And also, like every artist—there is no artist that is more perfect than da Vinci in terms of drawing and inventiveness. And living with that engraving, I have looked at it, and I became very—well, I mean, I love the rendering.

It's a most incredible rendering. It's a copy, but—and I just looked at it all the time, until I thought it would be the only picture I ever wanted to look at. And then I thought how, really, it's the only picture anybody ever wants to look at. It's the only picture anybody really knows about.

And I'd liked the hands, the dance of the hands across the table. And so I took it downstairs, and I decided I'm going to make something about *The Last Supper*. And what I did first, which may seem strange—it's not in the show—I made a big bull's-eye, a big target, like a bull's-eye, about four by four, white.

JUDITH RICHARDS: With rings?

JUNE LEAF: With rings. It's white, and it has just—it looks exact—a very nicely constructed bull's-eye. And I thought, *The Last Supper* is a bull's-eye. It's the bull's-eye. And then I took—after I did it—I enjoyed making it very much. I've never made anything like it. It looks very much like [Frank] Stella or something. It's very nice, you know? Very nicely painted. So then I took the circle of the bull's-eye, and I turned it into an ellipse. And I made that painting that's blue of *The Last Supper*, very quick. And I made the table—instead of rectangular, I made it as a round table. And I made that in one, maybe two, days.

And then I decided, I'm going to make the table, the ellipse. And then I began to put the figures around. And there were, in the beginning, 13. And little by little—in the one I worked on the longest, there's only nine. And then I got sick of it, and then I started to put some figures in the background. But I want to end this by saying that the day before they picked up my work, I removed every figure except a man and a woman at the table. You may not know they're a man and a woman, but they're very intimate and very close and very loving.

JUDITH RICHARDS: The one with the blond hair? The woman with the blond—

JUNE LEAF: No, I'm talking about the sculpture. Yes, but that's true. The man who reaches with his finger to her, and she, in a way, receives it, very seductively. I took all the figures out except the center, which—I like the skull. I have lots of skulls that I didn't even put in my show. And then I put the table, the chair. And I took out the other figure, and I put the figure on the treadle, the last day.

And then I thought—and then I knew what the show was about. In other words, it was really

just about me and Robert—about a man, a woman, two lovers, and maybe—not, I wouldn't say the fear of death, but in the center this skull that made sense to me. Not death. And that was the end.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you went from *The Last Supper*—

JUNE LEAF: —to the treadle. No, I went from *The Last Supper* to just—well, I just love to see people at tables. I mean, to this day, no matter how depressed I am, if I go to a restaurant, I just go crazy watching people eat. I just think it's the prettiest thing in the world, to watch them talk to each other, eating.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Do you ever bring a—do you ever draw in restaurants?

JUNE LEAF: I have made very good things of that. I used to, yes. I have a very good piece upstairs of people I drew in a restaurant. And then I made a sculpture of it. I like it very much. Somebody, even with a spoon, soup—very nice. Yeah, that's my favorite thing to do, to watch people.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's wonderful seeing artists in restaurants, drawing the scene. It would be. Do you still get to do that?

JUNE LEAF: No, I haven't—I told you, I don't draw lately. I'm just trying to make more—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Focus on—

JUNE LEAF: —substantial things.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah, use your energies that way.

I mentioned earlier that I wanted to ask you about the [solo] show at the Museum Tinguely in Basel [Switzerland] in 2004. It was a big show. There was a beautiful catalogue. And it was—correct me if I'm wrong—one of the few opportunities for people in Europe to see your work.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, I know.

JUDITH RICHARDS: How did that show happen, and how did you feel about it?

JUNE LEAF: Well, I went a lot of times to Switzerland, because Robert is Swiss. We have a lot of friends there. And there is a curator—he used to be a curator at the Kunsthaus [Zürich], Guido Magnaguagno. And he loves my work, and he's visited us in Canada. And he told me—I think somebody said to him, "Why don't you make a show of June Leaf?" He got assigned to the Tinguely Museum. And I don't know—

JUDITH RICHARDS: But he was at the Kunsthaus.

JUNE LEAF: He was, for many, many years. And then he lost that job and got the job as director of the Tinguely Museum. And he just likes my work a lot. And he did it. I mean, I didn't do anything. They made a beautiful catalogue. And it was just the right way to make a show, just the same way that sketchbook happened. It was the same thing. I really—it's the only sketchbook I sort of liked.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Which sketchbook are we talking about?

JUNE LEAF: That one that Steidl just printed, the one called *Record 1974/75*. I found it one day in the studio, and I had just made things related to it—*Man and Woman in a Lifeboat* and stuff like that. And I looked at it, and I showed it to Robert. He said, "Oh, that's very good. You should show it to somebody. I bet they'd publish it." And I said, "No, no." And then—

JUDITH RICHARDS: You're saying that, like, you would usually say no. Is that what you mean?

JUNE LEAF: Yeah. I'd, yeah, "No."

JUDITH RICHARDS: Being shy or being insecure?

JUNE LEAF: No, first—well, I figured if it's—because when you live with someone like—such a legendary artist, like Robert, and I'm very sensitive to being on his coattails. You know, I

mean, he knows what a good artist I am, or how serious I am. And I know. And I don't really need to get to know somebody to get influence. Do you know what I mean? And so I just always stay away from it.

And as it turned out, [Gerhard] Steidl really was interested in my work, and when he saw the sketchbook, he grabbed it and said, "I'll print it just as is." And he took it. That was it. It was nice. He's very—that was a big surprise to me, because I can't—people always tell me I should make a book, but I don't make books. I make one-of-a-kind pieces that take me a long time. People who make books are people who make books, you know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: But you have—

JUNE LEAF: But I saw this sketchbook, and I thought, oh, yeah, there's a book. And I looked at it, and I thought, I like it. Because, you know, I didn't like it—you know, you don't like them when you make them, because you're struggling with them.

JUDITH RICHARDS: What was the reaction from European visitors and critics to the show in Basel in 2004?

JUNE LEAF: Well, you know, I have to—after all, it's in Switzerland. I have to face the fact that people are going to be negative, to the extent they'd say, "Oh, this is Robert Frank's wife." Okay?

JUDITH RICHARDS: You have that burden.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah, so you know, I'll tell you the truth. I don't pay too much attention. Enough people that really liked the work for itself responded. And I thought the show was very good. And I think the catalogue is very respectful. But I don't want to—I didn't say, "No, don't say I'm Robert Frank's wife," because that would be stupid.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah?

JUNE LEAF: Because we have a dynamic relationship. And actually, I have a big influence on him, and he has a big influence on me. But the world, such as it is, doesn't want to see things that way. I mean, I don't have much hope, or I don't think in terms of women—it should be equal. I think it's—what it is with women as creators, we have yet to understand what they're going to do. I mean, you have yet to understand what our destiny is. I think it's a very wonderful mystery, what's going to happen. It's not about, they're neglected. It's not about—it's about something, maybe, bigger than that. You know?

JUDITH RICHARDS: Like—any inkling?

JUNE LEAF: I don't know, like—like it was perfect this way. This was the way it had to be. You know? Like, it just had to be that way.

JUDITH RICHARDS: But it doesn't have to be that way in the future, you mean?

JUNE LEAF: No, I don't know what I mean.

JUDITH RICHARDS: It's evolving.

JUNE LEAF: I don't think we really know—I don't think we really know the meaning of what men and women have contributed. I think it will come out later, maybe, a very—more wonderful story. Not such a negative story.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So you haven't had experiences being a woman who is an artist in New York and feel neglected because of that?

JUNE LEAF: No, I've never—no, I simply remember saying—a friend asked me, "Well, why don't you live with the man? Don't you miss it?" And I said, "Look. I don't want to be in a relationship where I have to say to a man, you don't know how good I am," when I'm angry with him. One day I'll meet a man, and I'll be what I want to be, and he'll like me for what I want to be.

And that's exactly what happened. When Robert met me, he liked me for what I was, not what I told him I was, or told him what I wanted to be. I was that. And so we could put that behind us, you know? I don't say it's easy now. Now, I understand. You know, yes, it's—

JUDITH RICHARDS: Of course, you were more mature. You weren't 20, or—

JUNE LEAF: I was 30. We didn't live together until I was 39 years old.

JUDITH RICHARDS: Yeah. So you were—

JUNE LEAF: I had done what I wanted to do. I was very, oh, yeah, it would have been nice if we could have stayed in New York and I would be famous, famous like him, and all that. But I figured, well, I did what I wanted to do. I did it the way I wanted to do it. I'm with the man I wanted to be with, the one I was meant to be with. And that's the end. And I'm a lucky woman. I had everything.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I want to end by just asking you to talk about what you think you'll be doing in the future, what you're working on now. Do you have ideas that you are going to explore once you get back to the studio? And do you usually like to take a break when you get a show finished?

JUNE LEAF: I just am very proud of Robert and me, that we go off together and I don't have to work. And we can just be nice together. I think that's a really—a miracle, a big thing, to be nice together. That's a big achievement.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I know that—

JUNE LEAF: I feel I'm talking really stupidly for the last 10 minutes, but—

JUDITH RICHARDS: No, no, no. But I know you always talk about your urgent need to make things—you started out earlier—to make things.

JUNE LEAF: Yeah.

JUDITH RICHARDS: So there's that—and if I ask you what keeps driving you, it's a kind of an intuitive sense, a need to make things?

JUNE LEAF: No, this time, it's different now. I think I've made enough. I mean, if it comes back, it comes back. I don't know. It's different now.

JUDITH RICHARDS: You feel more patient?

JUNE LEAF: I can't look at the—in the beginning of these talks, I told you my epiphanies as a child. I told you how I said that I want to make things, all my life, with my hands. I feel I've lived that dream, you know? And now I'm with a man who needs other things, and I'm happy—I like him so much, you know? I think I'm at another stage. I don't think that making things with my hands is a priority now.

JUDITH RICHARDS: I understand. Good, thank you.

JUNE LEAF: You're welcome.

[END CD 4.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]