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Oral history interview with Peter Dechar,
1969 January 14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Peter Dechar on January 14, 1969. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: Um, I guess it's on. This is Dorothy Seckler resuming an interview with Peter Dechar in New York on January 14, 1969. I think that the first thing that I wanted to ask you is really, to some extent, well, we've just been looking at photographs of the pears that you've completed, I believe, since our last interview. And in those, uh, we were talking about a number of canvases in which the pears always seemed to loom above the viewer, and I remember a specific one. It's probably the one that the Museum of Modern Art bought, in which, you said, if we were to get past those two pears, there would be another two, and another two, and so on. There was this, sort of, quality that—you know, that this unchanging stuff would always be there confronting us and looming above us, to some extent. Whereas one of the things that—that did strike me about the exhibition was that in a number of cases, we were now above the pears. [Laughs.] We had gotten up over the pear, and were looking from a freer perspective, in which we were, you know, more in space, more, uh—less enclosed, less impeded. And I wondered if that represented any change in your—in your feeling about your own relationship to the world, or about the world in a larger sense?

PETER DECHAR: Well, the—the paintings that were looming above were definitely from an earlier stage. You know, with the later paintings, I did open up the space. [00:02:00] I don't know if that relates to the way I look at the world or not.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, your life has been going along. I realize that, you know, on the deepest level, one never can characterize it, but at least on the superficial level, I should think you'd experienced certain greater freedom, perhaps, in recent years. So [laughs] I don't know how it would affect you or not. Probably it's a little beside the point.

PETER DECHAR: It disturbs me to talk about the paintings in that way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You'd rather not think about it.

PETER DECHAR: Because, um, the pears don't—the paintings don't relate to my life directly, I mean, in that one-to-one kind of way. And that's really pulling something that doesn't exist. The world of my paintings is so different from the world outside. They're absolutely separate and distinct. And I think that's the reason I stopped painting now. I want to feel that world out there, and I absolutely can't do both. So when you imply that the earlier paintings hinted at a world that was too big for me, and overwhelming for me, and that perhaps, you know, when I'm looking down at the world I see it in a brighter, clearer way, it's not really true.

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's no direct relationship?

PETER DECHAR: The—the world—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You feel there's no—no relationship.

PETER DECHAR: No. The world of the painting is always a fantasy world. But I felt, recently, that it's more real than the world outside for me, and to such an extent that I real—I really can't even travel freely in the world outside. Perhaps the only relationship is that, um, I've accepted the world of the paintings more, and somehow feel that I can, you know, look down on them or under—from below, or from any point of view. [00:04:12] But right now, I—it doesn't feel right. And so I want to leave the world of the painting behind and see the world, the real world. And then maybe get closer, bring the two together somehow, for my own sake. But there was just too much of a split for me. I didn't feel comfortable. And the more I worked, the more I painted, the more difficult it was for me to deal with the world outside in a simple, direct way. I found that I couldn't be spontaneous with the world outside, that I was always wrapped up in the world of the painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So the way you think of the painting has nothing to do with your own personalness, or legend, let's say, of what's going on in your own life. Would it be affected by, essentially, the—over the myth of

society in any way?

PETER DECHAR: Well, I—yeah—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I know it isn't related to progress. I don't mean that.

PETER DECHAR: I always thought of it that way. I always thought of the paintings as a kind of record of my—I don't know what—my me, [laughs] of how I change, and how I feel. But I've realized recently that it's not a record of me all the time. It's only a record of me while I paint. In other words, whenever I paint, that's a special me, and that special me changes, you know, along with the paintings. [00:06:00] And I'm—there's certainly an interchange there. I mean, I feel locked in the space of the painting. But it isn't direct [inaudible] of me and how I change, and how I grow. I mean, it's only how I grow with the paintings. And that's disturbing me. You know, I do want to get away from that. I would like to.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What disturbs you specifically there?

PETER DECHAR: That there is such a breach between the world of my art and the world of me outside.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I would like to bring the two together more.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In that respect, there's some difference between your attitude toward painting and that of, let's say, the surrealists, as we think about it.

PETER DECHAR: Well, if you mean—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, in general, I would say, do you think of yourself as motivated in the same way as a surrealist artist?

PETER DECHAR: No, I think what—what you mean is that the surrealists—we think of the surrealists as living the life of their paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

PETER DECHAR: No, I—

DOROTHY SECKLER: With—with less of a division.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. I absolutely don't do that. I mean, my life outside is so completely different from the life of my paintings. And I don't want to make the life—my life outside closer to the life of my paintings. I want to bring the two closer together, but I don't want to alter my life outside. That's, kind of, natural, and that has to flow, and that has to be whatever it becomes. Whereas I think the surrealists made a very conscious effort to, kind of, alter the outside life and bring it closer to a dream world, which was also the world of their paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And having just been writing about Max Ernst, I had him a bit on my mind. [00:08:04] And he said at one point—it was actually in relationship to his coming back from the second—from the First World War, that he was then a young man in search of the myths of his time. And I think there's been a great deal of talk among scholars and artists recently about the danger to, let's say, our society at the present time, because there are so few myths in which we believe, that society is in danger of being fractured because of this lack of something, some shared myth to bring us together.

PETER DECHAR: You know, well, I feel—I personally want to, or tend to, or have been rejecting all of the myths of society, and I think probably most of the younger generation is doing the same thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But then you have—uh, or are you aware of having another myth to put in its place?

PETER DECHAR: Myth? No. I wish I did. You know, I really—

DOROTHY SECKLER: But perhaps you have, whether you know it or not. Well, for instance, one thing that occurred to me. The 19th and turn of the [20th] century attitude of even artists, very often, was very much influenced by a, sort of, logical positivism. In science, the—uh, the feeling that there was progress, and that, you know, things were measurable, and so on, which has broken down very rapidly in the last decades, so that even science seems no longer to be altogether a world of cause and effect, and to relate to other ways of operating, which I won't go into. [00:10:05] But in a way, you might say that your paintings imply a world in which cause and effect does not operate directly, uh, in the sense that they—the shadows are cast on empty space, and so on.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, I don't see cause and effect in the paintings. But again, that's very contrary to reality.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Into your real world.

PETER DECHAR: Into my real world.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I see the real world as absolutely cause and effect.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You do?

PETER DECHAR: It's very logical to me. Everything happens for a particular reason.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, give me an example. [Laughs.] I don't find very much.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. Uh, well, it's a very disturbing reason, but a building goes up for a particular set of circumstances. It has to do with corporate monies, you know, and that it's good for this corporation to build, uh, a large skyscraper. It's all very logical in a certain kind of way, yet that logic is so pointless, and empty of any kind of real—of human meaning, you know. It's all—there's a, kind of, monetary meaning, I suppose. It'll make the corporation bigger. It'll—it'll—uh, that's progress. The corporation will progress.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And meanwhile, in many cases, natural resources will be spoiled, rivers polluted, air polluted. [Laughs.]

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, this is all very logical.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Ecological balance is upset.

PETER DECHAR: And then a new corporation will emerge, which takes care of the pollution problems. They'll make purifying machines. It's all so possible. Science is overwhelmingly possible. There are no limits. [00:12:00] Yet there's somehow nothing human about it. Uh, you know, I hate to say it, but, you know, I have the sense that the human being is very machine-like. That's been said before. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't say it. So that's pretty deeply present in your impulse to paint, as a motivation, a, kind of, wish to express another aspect, which is more humanized.

PETER DECHAR: Well, the way I'm looking at it now is, I've been running away from it, because I despised it. But at this point, you know, after not having painted for about two months, I feel that there's something radically wrong with avoiding that reality, the reality of money, of progress. Somehow, I want to be able to see it, and to accept it as my time, and to—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Why must seeing it accept—mean accepting it? I mean, isn't it natural in many young people?

PETER DECHAR: Not necessarily embrace it as ultimately good—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: —but simply accept it as what is, in fact, happening in my time, and I am born in my time, and I have to live in my time, and I don't want to hide from my time. I don't want to—the alternative of the time or space of the painting is not a real alternative. Somehow a political alternative is an alternative which deals with the real world. The world of the painting is a fantasy world. It's much richer to me. [00:14:00] But it's too difficult for me to live in Manhattan, to be hit over the head constantly with the reality of the, well, the world we know, and then come back to the fantasy world. It's—I sense it's like taking a trip on acid and then coming down. I never have taken a trip, but that's what it feels like to me. There's too much of a breach.

DOROTHY SECKLER: As you were saying last time, the world in your painting is a world that is completely separate from the world of imagining progress, and completely separate, certainly, from the technological world. It's a world—for instance, if someone came down from Mars and saw the painting, they would not know, necessarily, I suppose, that it was a 20th-century artist. Oh, I—well, really, that's a little misleading, too, because certain aspects of form would not have developed earlier. But what I'm really getting at is that you have excluded the, uh, the technological world, and—as well as the financial world, in order to create a, kind of, ideal world in a painting. It seems ideal certainly in terms of shape, very often, in perfection of a classical kind of beauty. Does it ever seem to you that you would feel a greater satisfaction if you could deal with that world and at the same time, control it? Bring it into your fantasy and deal with it?

PETER DECHAR: The world outside?

DOROTHY SECKLER: The technological, scientific, materialistic world. Is there a possible dialogue between a pear and a computer? [Laughs.]

PETER DECHAR: I'm not quite sure I know what you mean. [00:16:01] But I've somehow resolved that in another way. I suppose you know, I'm very fascinated with machinery.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. That's one of the reasons why I, sort of, wondered how you escape technology as an artist, sometimes.

PETER DECHAR: It has nothing to do with art. Machinery, to me, is, again, very rich in its complexity, and I spend—I'm sure I spend much, much more time involved in some kind of machinery than with painting. Yet there's not connection. To me, painting is extremely human and personal—exists purely in my head, and I suspect in others, in the viewers' heads or in other artists' heads. The machine—there's no place for machinery in that world.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, are you speaking simply of painting now, or—

PETER DECHAR: I'm—yeah, I'm speaking really of my world of art, which is painting. I'm usually annoyed when I see some kind of machine presented in a museum or gallery, because to me, a well-made car is so much more beautiful, and it's also functional. It's very complex, and anyone that understands the complexity of a car can't help but to appreciate it.

[Audio Break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a problem that plagues me, really, every day, [laughs] I think. I am absolutely split down the middle on it. I—my only personal feelings are exactly those that you describe. And I don't have, of course, the background of—I've never even been able to make a can opener work very well, [laughs] to tell you the truth, so it's a different background completely. [00:18:06] But I would like, if possible, to eliminate machinery from my life in every possible way, and yet, of course, I'm deeply indebted to a machine, for instance, this moment. If I wouldn't be here—

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —and recording, if I didn't have a machine. And I don't ever feel quite, uh, that it's safe for me to say that machinery should not enter the world of the artist. I don't see very much machinery that has entered the world of the artist that is moving to me, just in terms of my own sensibility, but that doesn't necessarily prove anything, since I'm nature-oriented from childhood and so on, anyway. But if we would take another art form, just to see a possibility, I—I was thinking of the film *2001*. Have you seen it?

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course, here we have a—I don't know whether you think it's an artistic film or just an entertaining film. I found it rather impressive in some ways. But there you have—

PETER DECHAR: Impressive?

DOROTHY SECKLER: No. Well, somewhat—one of the immediate effects on me was that when I came out, I wanted to go quickly and get a cup of coffee, and hold something very real in my hand, [laughs] like a cup of coffee.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Although because the immensity of space was more frightening and awesome, I experienced it more on that film than I did in watching the actual astronauts near the moon, which only shows, I suppose, that I'm not as much aware of reality as I am of fantasy. But, uh, I do feel that—oh, well, there, the point I was going to make is, of course, Kubrick was able to bring in the idea of the computer or the robot, into a fantasy. I thought it was a—he didn't resolve it, perhaps, but at least it was a moving—the personality of the computer became a moving factor in the emotion of the whole thing. [00:20:08]

PETER DECHAR: I don't see machinery that way. I love to touch machinery. I love to take it apart, improve it, or repair it, or play with it, or whatever, but I have to touch it. I get absolutely no pleasure in looking at a complex piece of machinery. It doesn't seem to exist in my head. It's too real. It's hard, cold metal, or, uh, even a complex of wires. They're very real to me. They're there. And the world of my paintings is so un-there. You know, it—I just barely get to it in the paintings. Somehow, what's in my head is vaguely represented in the painting, or transposed somehow. I have to keep them very separate. I don't think I'll ever bring the world of machinery into

my painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You can't conceive of a—using a machine as a metaphor for the human condition in any way?

PETER DECHAR: I can't. The machine is too real, and complete, self-enclosed. Any piece of machinery, any piece of metal, is just there. It's not metaphorical to me at all, ever. A machine is what it is. It does the job that it's supposed to do. And even when it doesn't. I remember in the Whitney light show, there was a piece of five vertical light bars, which also made sounds. [00:22:00] Do you recall that piece?

DOROTHY SECKLER: No.

PETER DECHAR: I was very impressed with it. It did—it was—I—it seemed to have a random pattern of both light and sound. There was no reason for its being there. I mean, it had no function as a machine. It just made funny patterns. I liked that. I don't know. I mean, I don't care if it's art or not. I liked it, just as a thing, and I didn't really have a desire to touch it. I was curious to see what was inside it. So that was, kind of, different for me than other machinery.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did it look at all like a machine? I missed that show, so I don't recall it.

PETER DECHAR: It was just—I think it consisted of five panels, about six inches wide, six inches deep, and about 10 feet high, with lights that shined from behind it. Kind of, the wall glowed a bit around each one of these. And there were very strong sounds, which had random patterns.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I don't know what it did to me. I have no idea.

DOROTHY SECKLER: With machines, of course, now we have the idea of, you know, machines with feedback, and with—which can art—to some extent on their own. Would that change your feeling about them?

PETER DECHAR: I think perhaps, yeah. Somehow I did play with electronic music before I decided to paint, and I was fascinated with feedback. In fact, you know, as far as the electronic music was concerned, that's all I did. Everything I did was feedback. So it was, uh, a, kind of, continuous thing. [00:24:00] And I really couldn't control what happened directly. I didn't want to. Most of what happened, happened by itself, and I could just add to it or alter it slightly, but I couldn't make it do what I wanted it to do. That appealed to me. Somehow again, it affected me with some kind of return.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It had an emotional quality in the—somewhat akin to what you have in—in painting, perhaps.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. But, uh, some of that was too arbitrary for me. The painting is much more specifically what's going on in my head.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Peter, you were saying a few minutes back that the space is the important thing, and I've always assumed that it was. And yet, in one painting that I saw recently at the gallery, it seemed to me the pear had become, in that one—it was probably an exceptional one. It was a pear with a stem with a very rosy side to it.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And it was more like a real solid pear, and the space did not affect me very much. I just—I don't suppose it represents a trend in view of the other paintings you've showed me today.

PETER DECHAR: It doesn't represent a trend, no. It was specifically the desire to make a pear that was very real and hard, and cold, like a piece of machinery, perhaps. My pears are always, not well-defined. They're just, kind of, there, and I'm not concerned about how they look. I'm more concerned about the space around them. In that one painting, I wanted to see what would happen if I made a specific pear, one pear.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:26:00] Well, I thought it was quite a fine painting. I just thought it was so exceptional in—you know, in terms of your other work. In terms of the space that you're involved with most recently, has there been any change in the way you thought about it? I notice that you've developed a remarkable accomplishment in being able to give a feeling that within one swath of shadow, there might be, you know, 30 miles [laughs] across a table, or whatever, or across just space. It doesn't seem to be anything specific in this case. And I think that sense of vastness is very satisfying. But is there anything else that in—in play with the space that has developed very recently?

PETER DECHAR: Well, uh, the paintings that I did after the show last January included a much more complex space. And I was very happy with the paintings. Since I've stopped painting, I don't know what will happen. I don't know if I'll more or less continue in that way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How were they more complex?

PETER DECHAR: Generally the canvas was divided into two or three or more areas with distinctly different spatial qualities. Different situations in one painting, that were very isolated, yet, in some ways, connected visually, as they were one painting. They weren't triptychs.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you speak of several divisions, is that generally vertically or horizontally?

PETER DECHAR: Not specifically either. I guess generally, the divisions were vertical. [00:28:002] They were more or less vertical bands, but they did overlap and work into each other. Somehow, uh, right now, I haven't been thinking about it, but it seems too easy, now, to do it that way, somehow. I would prefer to have one pear, and one shadow, and one plane, and maybe one field, and make just those elements very complex, rather than mix up a bunch of colors and a bunch of spaces.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, you have succeeded in doing that, uh, in some that we've just been looking at. But from your point of view, the complexity within the simplicity was not yet as much as you had hoped for.

PETER DECHAR: I wanted more richness.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I wanted, um, I guess, a more seductive world.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A more what?

PETER DECHAR: Seductive world, a more—a world that really would grip me. And it seemed, well, if I make it more complicated, there'll be more there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. As I remember, you were telling me in the summertime that when you were using the architectonic elements, that you didn't think you would keep them, but that they would introduce an element of complexity.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. Well, that—that's why I used them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: And now, I—they're not really architectural anymore. They're hard and linear.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Linear?

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DOROTHY SECKLER: —that you were saying it was not linear but—

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, they were planes broken along a straight edge. Um, fragments, fragments of planes. But not structures, really.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember in one of our int—early interviews, you were—you shied away from considering formal reasons for doing anything, and spoke much more, at that point, of the importance of creating a certain kind of space. You said, for instance, if you wanted to make something important, that instead of using, let's say, a spot of red, you might create a space that was a, kind of a cave-like space, where the—sort of, the space that's under a tree, or, like, a resting place, which would have a much greater attraction than a bright color. That sense of creating—and I think a number of your earlier paintings did have a more marked quality, sometimes, of that, you know, resting place space. Does that still seem a factor?

PETER DECHAR: Absolutely, yeah. I'm completely unconcerned with formal aspects, probably more so than ever. The—I was looking at a friend's painting recently, paintings, and I was shocked to see the amount of richness that—that was in the those paintings, just as pure painting, as pure—I don't know if you would call it formal or formality, but it was just painting. There was—there was nothing out of his head in there, nothing emotional, just the line, which was very emotional. [00:02:06] Uh, I have no tendency towards that. I don't use line as line. I really make pictures, somehow. I could almost call them illustrations, yet I don't, because the world—the painting is a very complete thing. It's a world of its own. It's not a picture of another world. It's not—I'm not

quite sure of the relationship between the world of the painting and the world in my head. I don't know if it's an illustration of what exists in my head before. I think not, because whatever does exist in my head seems to crystallize along with the painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You don't start with a preconceived idea of the quality that the space will assume.

PETER DECHAR: Well, before, as I'm starting to draw, the idea is becoming pretty clear, certainly before the painting is started. I have a very good idea of what it will look like. And then it's only a matter of changing color. I think I rarely, if ever, change line.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really?

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you draw the pear in line on the canvas?

PETER DECHAR: Oh, yeah. I make—I mean, my—the process is a matter of shutting out everything for a day or two. I generally lie on my back on a couch and withdraw completely from everything real. And I go to the drawing board, and draw awhile, and then I can't really get anywhere, so I lie down again. [00:04:04] There's this thing going on for quite a while. And finally the—something happens on the paper, and that's it. Then I finish the drawing, which is very crude.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is something on a small sheet of paper with pencil, or—

PETER DECHAR: A small sheet of paper, yeah, with—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —crayon, or what?

PETER DECHAR: —with a hard pencil, single line, no shading. And then I put it, by and large, on the canvas as accurately as I can. Again, just about rarely, if ever, change. And I fill in the spaces. The pear goes in—

DOROTHY SECKLER: But still no tone. It's in line at this point.

PETER DECHAR: Line. The pear goes in first, which is very simple, and, uh, somehow that belongs there first. And that's like me. I'm there. I put myself in first. And then I fill in the space around it. And that—those colors are most important, because of the spaces. Generally a flat area, sometimes a hint at modeling around the shadow.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How—how—you—did you know from the time you were making the little line drawing on the paper how much of the pear would be shadowed, for instance?

PETER DECHAR: Oh, that's—I never concern myself with that. That's automatic. I mean, it's—what the pear finally looks like is, uh, as known to me as that I'm going to pick up some tubes of paint. It's just automatic. It's basic. I go—after the drawing is finished on the canvas, I squeeze out some paint, I mix my medium with it, and fill it in. I put it there. If I could have them pre-painted, I think I would. I'm not concerned with it. Although, the pears do vary somewhat, according to the kind of light or the kind of color. [00:06:04] It's still so basic. It occurs to me. It's like me and the clothes I put on that day. You know? Generally I wear dungarees, but once in a while, I'll put on something different.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, the shadows that—on the pears are really not at all the same, it seems to me. Here's one where the shadows occur on two different sides of the pears, which is an odd thing to think of.

PETER DECHAR: Well, that—I think that's a free painting. That was a special painting. That was—that's something else. I don't know—those are—when somehow it—what I'm doing disturbs me, I force myself to do something else, or else some—some strange idea occurs to me, and I do something different. I don't know that that's really significant. It's—uh, again relating it to the way I dress, it's like one day I put on a suit. You know, I very rarely do. I put on a good suit and a slightly different shirt.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Well, once you've drawn in the pear in outline and put on some paint, and then worked in the space around it, would you ever come back, then, and change the shadows on the pear, change the color of the pear?

PETER DECHAR: The modeling of the pear?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Modeling of it and the color of it in relation to the shadow play?

PETER DECHAR: Generally not. Generally, the whole painting changes before the pear. In almost all cases, the pear—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You would change the space?

PETER DECHAR: —has one coat of paint, and the rest of the painting has two, or three, or five, or ten, or more. But the pear generally is the way it begins.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You would adjust everything else to the pear.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You never would think, for instance, of a certain kind of, you know, space, and of just a pear as being in it, and therefore working with the space first, and—as an enveloping factor? [00:08:12]

PETER DECHAR: No, no. No, absolutely not. No, the space is all important. The pear goes there first.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [They laugh.] It seems like a contradiction. If the space is all important, it should go first, [laughs] it seems, you know?

PETER DECHAR: I don't know what it's going to be. Uh, that's the thing that I work on. I mean, that's really what's in my head.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's the adventure, in other words.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. Yeah, I would love to have someone that I could call when I'm ready to paint, and say, "Just put a pear on there." I would tell them what shape, and approximately how the shadows go, and approximately what color. I really feel as if, um, the pear is as much a part of—as preconceived as the fact that I use canvas and oil paint. You know, it's just there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You're still not in any—not inclined at all to pursue any other kind of object instead of a pear, or you're still a mono? [Laughs.]

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. No, I've thought about that quite a bit, but it seems to me that it's absolutely pointless to change the object, that—to stop painting a pear and paint something else. Whatever I want to do, somehow I can do with the pear, and also somehow, if the pear wasn't there, it wouldn't be me that was painting it. [00:10:00] It's that—I have no particular fondness to the pear. I mean, it was an accident that I started painting pears. But I've been doing it for a while, and it's a rather varied fruit shape. It's not really very limiting, I don't think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, it isn't. I believe you told me once that you started painting the pears when you were in Germany, and I found that I did not have that on tape for some reason or other. And I don't—you must have told me afterwards.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, well, I did, yeah. The first pear painting, I did do in Germany.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How old were you then, Peter?

PETER DECHAR: Uh, 21.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And what—I forgot what you were doing in Germany. [Laughs.] I'm sorry.

PETER DECHAR: Well, I was living there for almost a year with friends. Someone got a job there and rented a house, and asked myself and some other people if they wanted to go along. So it sounded like a good thing, and we all went. And we lived there for a while. I—

DOROTHY SECKLER: And what part of the country?

PETER DECHAR: In Cologne.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were really in Max Ernst country.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Very gothic.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you remember what happened, the first pear you painted? What was the stimulus for it?

PETER DECHAR: Well, yeah. It was the space around it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [They laugh.] You were really looking at a pear in that case.

PETER DECHAR: Oh, no. I didn't paint a picture of a pear. I don't think I used a model. Um, I—what fascinated me with that painting, and the reason, I think, I continued doing it, was that, that was the first large, somewhat realistic painting I had done. [00:12:05] Oh, no, that's not true. I had done something before—I had done large figure paintings. But somehow, uh, the pear, a very simple thing, being somewhat real, gave me a great deal of freedom with what I could do with the space around it, and I liked that. It made it very easy for me to explore the kind of space that I've been looking at ever since.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you remember what the space was like in the first one?

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. It was—that painting was all gray. There was no indication of a plane. There were three pears, but shadows that merged and became, more or less, one shadow, and a field of gray. No horizon line, nothing. No horizon line where there should have been one.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did that feel like a very liberating thing, getting rid of the horizon?

PETER DECHAR: No. As—I hadn't been painting realistically. I had been, at that time—God, I was doing everything from slashing canvas, to abstract expressionist paintings, to—I did one very small still life as realistically as I could. It was like a bad Chardin. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But with pears?

PETER DECHAR: That one was with apples.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Not that it would make so much difference. Had you been painting from a model very much at that point?

PETER DECHAR: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You said you had done large figures.

PETER DECHAR: I had done figure paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: From imagination?

PETER DECHAR: I don't—I only—from imagination. But I never enjoyed painting from a model. But that was quite a while before.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you enjoy painting it from imagination? [00:14:00]

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, oh, yeah, yeah. Somehow, I couldn't stand the idea of rendering. I did it once, as I said, that apple painting. I thoroughly enjoyed that one small painting, but I couldn't bear the idea of doing another one. It was so much work, and it somehow didn't get to what I wanted to do. It was, uh—somehow, the pleasure I got out of that, I could get out of working with machinery, getting back to that. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting, mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: It was somehow—it was very close. I mean, then—those apples were very real to me, and somehow, I was dealing with the fact that I could touch them and pick them up, and that light hit them and reflected or refracted in a particular kind of way. It was very precise and logical.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Whereas the activity of painting the pears in the way you do is more intuitive in—

PETER DECHAR: It's completely intuitive and very fog-like. I mean, I don't know where it comes from. It's just [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you describe your state, as the surrealists do, as, sort of, semi-trancelike?

PETER DECHAR: I suppose so. I never thought of it as that. But inasmuch as I really am unaware of what's going on around me—I mean, no, I guess I wouldn't. I wouldn't say it's trancelike. I'm conscious of everything in the room. I'm conscious of anyone that walks by or of all noises. Um, but I'm not at all concerned with the world outside. [00:16:03] I'm only concerned with the world that I feel and can touch at that moment.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You assume, then, I take it, that the—whatever does develop on the, uh, pencil drawing and on the canvas is from a—the level of an unconscious—it comes from the unconscious rather than from a conscious—

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, definitely. It definitely does.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —area.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What—in what way would you say your work is different in procedure, motivation, and so on, from that of the surrealists? Well, you've already touched on one way.

PETER DECHAR: I never really have paid too much attention to the surrealists, or, for that matter, any painter [laughs] or group of painters. But the one thing that strikes me is they seem, the way I think of them, as being, kind of, conscious, and plodding, and deliberate about their—

DOROTHY SECKLER: They'll never forgive you for that.

PETER DECHAR: [They laugh.] They made very—I think of them as having made very conscious attempts to get to a certain point. For example, the practice of writing down dreams, of teaching themselves to, uh, recall dreams, to wake themselves up frequently during the night, to capture a dream somehow. It seems very unnatural to me, and for that reason, very unappealing. I mean, I don't do anything to direct my mind. Whatever happens, happens.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It seems, I suppose, pseudoscientific, that, I suppose. [00:18:02] We have to remember, though, that Freud's doctrines had just recently come into currency.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. That certainly had a lot of impact on them, sure.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you are not particularly involved with psychology, I would assume. I don't remember your ever talking very much about it, in any case.

PETER DECHAR: I don't know. I mean, I don't know. Not in a conscious way. I mean, I don't, uh—if the paint—well, I don't know how to answer that question. Most certainly the feelings I have when I paint creep out of my unconscious somehow, I suppose because I do lie down and, kind of, shut out as much as I can, and ideas grow from wherever. But that, it's not for a reason. I mean, I—it feels right to do it. Or at times, I'm even compelled to do that, to shut out the world and, like, let this other world happen. And as I said before, it's much richer for me than the world outside.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Someone recently—probably someone in the area of pop art or technological art—said nowadays we don't have to bother with our unconscious because the real world is exci—so exciting and strange that it's more fantastic than anything [laughs] that would come up from our unconscious. I assume this is something that is—doesn't seem to apply. [00:20:00]

PETER DECHAR: Well, I think the only reason I see the outside world as strange is because of the way people deal with it. As I said, as far as machinery is concerned, I love machinery, and—but only when I can touch it. I'm really not so impressed with, uh, moon rockets, [laughs] because I've never seen one. It seems, kind of, marvelous to me that they can make such a huge, powerful machine, but I'd prefer to deal with a car, because I can get close to it, and can touch it. But yet, the moon effort seems very logical, and, uh, in a way, boring.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Well, that's somewhat my feeling, too, in terms of the actual moon. I mean, I—I could get interested in the fantasy of *2001* more than I could it the—in what was going on looking down at the [laughs] actual moon.

PETER DECHAR: Well, what—when—it—as I see it, it had to happen, and more will happen as we, uh, you know, make bigger machines, they'll do better things, or newer things, or whatever. It's got to happen. It's very logical. Uh, and I don't know. I suppose in a way, we don't even really control that. It just happens. As a new genius comes along, he comes up with a new kind of machine, and he never really questions whether or not he wants it. He'll go ahead and do it, and it comes out of his tinkering. Somehow, the richness in my paintings that appeals to me is that I can change it at any moment, you know. [00:22:00] I can reverse it, or make it go somewhere else or do something else. The world outside, for me, is just given. It's there. It'll always be there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So the thing in the painting is a, kind of, enactment in which you are in control. You are—you are the—you are god in your painting. You are creating it—

PETER DECHAR: Yep.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —and changing it, and altering it. Whereas even an astronaut is only a small peg in—

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. Yeah, I think—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —an enormous organizational compound.

PETER DECHAR: —that's what I find so disturbing to that end, and so unexciting about that world. I suppose no one really has the freedom of choice in that world. It's so big and varied that it becomes one big machine.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you suppose that the artists who are working with technological things, like those that have been used in modern art right now, that some of them have this feeling of taking things from that world and, uh, being just as magically in charge of them in their fantasy, in the art object—well, I mean, in a way that they could not be if they—if the machine were being used on a practical level? I mean, after all, I'm just asking you to [laughs] talk about something that's outside your own realm there, but I just thought—it just occurred to me.

PETER DECHAR: I—well, yeah. It's difficult for me to answer, because I never really concern myself with that. You know, as I said before, I love machines that I can touch, you know. And because I can touch them, and they're very real, and very, very beautiful. [00:24:03] Uh, whatever exists in the world outside that I can't touch doesn't interest me very much.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, there's one machine, up there at [inaudible] which I haven't actually been in contact with, but I think you put a stethoscope on your chest—

PETER DECHAR: Oh, yeah, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —and it's heartbeat dust, huh? And it causes the dust to jump up and all sorts of—

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But that wouldn't be enough contact to be interesting. That would be like a—

PETER DECHAR: Not at all. No, not at all. No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The idea of audience participation and that sort of thing does not, uh, seem appealing or evocative?

PETER DECHAR: No. No, that bothers me, too. The one thing that really seems to fascinate me in all cases is, um, the ability to choose, free choice. And with the stethoscope, one doesn't choose. One puts the damn stethoscope to his chest, and it goes bloop, bloop, bloop.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's an interesting point. Well, of course, some Freudian would come along and say that whatever you're doing in response to your unconscious is not really freedom of choice, either. That you're on—that the unconscious works on pretty iron rails. I mean, it has a limited number of impulses. [Laughs.]

PETER DECHAR: Well, that's very true. I mean, but that, too, is the earliest stage of one particular painting. Each time I go to the drawing board, I'm negating my powerlessness, because I can deal with that thing in a very real way at that moment, or I can choose to not, and let—give my unconscious a test whether it has free rein once again, and see if something else comes out that appeals to me. [00:26:05] Or seems more real.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm sure you're aware that a great many people see in your pears a form that stands in for an erotic one, basically female. And I remember your once saying that this didn't particularly—it wasn't important. It may be there, but that wasn't what you were after. Was there—

PETER DECHAR: No. Well, I'm sure it's there. I'm sure, also, that it's as male as female. That certainly is not why I do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, you mean female, in the sense that I said it was a—a more or less a—it isn't—is not necessarily female. I see what you mean. The pear—pear is not female. [Laughs.]

PETER DECHAR: No. It's no more female to me than male. No. I—what appeals to me is that it's stuff, as I think I've said before. And also that it's—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You said it was stuff going on forever in our last interview. And what struck me as odd is that really, it's the space that goes on forever, that the stuff doesn't. [Laughs.] But I think I know what you mean.

PETER DECHAR: Well, I think—I generally don't question whether or not those are all the pears that exist in the universe, in anyone painting. Somehow, you know, there are probably others somewhere around. [Laughs.] No, pears are very real to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's a form, of course, which lends itself to being, sort of, ambiguously between male and female. [00:28:00] I suppose the reason for thinking of it as more female is—it's, sort of, as if you might imagine—you know the Venus at Rohenstorf [ph]. If you could, sort of, smooth her out, would she be, sort of, a pear? [They laugh.] But that's probably pushing too hard in one direction.

PETER DECHAR: Well, I sup—I mean, what I said really applies now, but certainly at one time, certainly the female aspects bo—it bothered me, and I stopped using them. And everyone at the beginning talked about the female aspects of the painting, talked of the paintings as buttocks, and breasts, and whatever. For a while, I pursued that, to see what would happen. And then, you know, I stopped completely.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, how could you, though? I mean, how could you stop? You mean you stopped emphasizing that aspect of a form?

PETER DECHAR: I stopped focusing on it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Because the minute it became conscious, it wouldn't work in any case, would it? I mean, if you were deliberate about it.

PETER DECHAR: Well, I don't know. I guess at that point, they, kind of, exploited those qualities of the pear, and, you know, I got to see how sexy I could make a pear, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: But that wasn't really it. And really, you know, what's always interested me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would a Dechar pear ever, uh, develop—

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PETER DECHAR: Magritte treats the human condition as an incredible irony, and I guess I really don't. I take it much more seriously than he does, and I really, uh, can't bring myself to make jokes about the human condition.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a good point, Peter.

PETER DECHAR: I think, you know, he's always very witty about it. I like a lot of his paintings very much. They're very meaningful to me. But I don't know that I'm convinced that they came from him. They're almost like clever puns.

DOROTHY SECKLER: His paintings are like clever puns?

PETER DECHAR: His paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. If you had never seen a painting by Magritte, do you feel that your paint—your forms would have taken the same direction, the same—that you would paint in the same way?

PETER DECHAR: I think probably. I think what would have happened was, if I had never seen Magritte, I would have eliminated a number of paintings, like this one where the two paintings touch. Uh, it—any of the paintings I've done which are, more or less, puns. Somehow Magritte's paintings seem a little bit easier. He seems to see a—some kind of ironic situation, and he—and he paints a picture of it. I'm not convinced, in most cases, that he really felt that sense, the strange sense which the picture implies. [00:02:05]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you explain that? Why do you feel he may not have felt it?

PETER DECHAR: I'm just not convinced of it. I don't feel it. It seems more like a—um, like a quick insight or a quick, um, perception. Not really an insight, just a way of looking at it, and he chuckled to himself, you know, and he painted it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you give me one example of any that you recall?

PETER DECHAR: Hmm, well, the apple in the room. It's so different from—when he paints that huge apple, it's so different from the way I see my pears. Very simple. Very funny. I like the painting. It's not my favorite. I think my favorite painting of his is the—or the paintings with the cubes in the sky. The chunks, the cubes of sky twisted. But again, it seems like the idea occurred to him, and he did it. I don't know. That's all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You don't find his sadness and sense of alienation in them?

PETER DECHAR: It's as if he were talking about alienation, and talking about loneliness, rather than feeling it. I

think he was very sensitive to it. [00:04:00] I think he felt it. But, he, kind of, turned it into an ironic joke, where he was able to almost laugh off the anxiety of the situations that he paints. That's not particularly true of the very early paintings, the ones with—the symbols, the flaming tubes and so on. But I think the later ones, the fish man and the painting of, I think, two or three men—the painting is all gray, and the men are of stone.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Somehow, those paintings make it very easy, uh, to deal with these senses of loneliness, or whatever more specifically the painting deals with. I know when I look at the paintings, I have a sense of relief, like it's okay, it's only a joke, that that sense of loneliness is, you know, well, it really is funny. And then that's not what I do. I mean, I seem to get more, much more involved in it, and I want to feel it longer and more intensely than that. I don't want to somehow turn it into, uh, something else.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In his paintings of, let's say, the tuba and the torso and so on over the sea, what would your feeling about that be, that you felt?

PETER DECHAR: I—yeah. I have a feeling that, at that point, he was—they were much more frightening for him than the objects or symbols in the later paintings. [00:06:08] I don't think he was able to really deal with them in a witty way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's fascinating.

[Audio Break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't want particularly to ask any more about Magritte. Uh, if you had to name one artist that you do feel close to—it doesn't have to be anyone living, but recent, let's say—could you name anyone?

PETER DECHAR: Mm, no.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In terms of a feeling, rather than a technique, perhaps?

PETER DECHAR: No, I—I really can't.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Giacometti, for instance.

PETER DECHAR: No, not at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Not at all?

PETER DECHAR: Not at all. No. I mean, I like him very much. I don't feel close to him. And I suppose I have a great resistance to feeling close to anyone, because for me, it's absolutely my own thing. It's my own world. I'm not interested in art, or the relationship of my stuff to the art world, or any other art. My stuff is my stuff, and art is something else again, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: Um, that's—it's stuff I go look at. I go to movies. I go to art shows. But I'm not an artist like—or I am an artist like other painters are artists, but my paintings are not related to anything else. They're related only to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you ever be interested in making a motion picture? [00:08:02]

PETER DECHAR: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I wanted to do that very, very much. And in fact, I got enough money to set myself up, and I never had enough money to really get the film and do everything. So I guess I wasn't that interested. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How long ago was that?

PETER DECHAR: That was just about the time I was going to Germany. I was more interested in film when I left New York. And I probably would have made a movie there. I mean, that's when I was really onto it. But I had no money at all. I couldn't buy film in Germany. I could afford the cheapest paint, and I could afford the cheapest canvas, so I did that. But I really was much more interested in making a movie then.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you still be, at some point?

PETER DECHAR: I don't know. I mean, right now, the—my paintings, this world, I don't know if it seems enough for me, but I'm very deeply involved in it, and I don't really want to think about other things too much.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Are you affected by the work of filmmakers at all?

PETER DECHAR: Oh, yeah. I like movies very much, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In a number of recent, uh, movies, fantasy plays an extremely important part, to such an extent that, whereas in old-fashioned movies there might be fantasy, but there was also a sense of, like, you know, you return to the real world. There is a real world which is separate from it. And recent films, like *2001* or *The Magus*, for instance, fantasy goes into fantasy, into fantasy, into fantasy. [Laughs.] It's almost as if there is no real—there is no sense of returning to a real [ph]. [00:10:00]

PETER DECHAR: No. The kind of film that I'm more interested in is, like, *8 1/2*. That's probably my favorite film. I—if I did work with film, it would be in that line, or in that way, somehow.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that had a very strong allegorical fantastic element.

PETER DECHAR: I think it's the only way you can do it with film. You know, I would prefer to avoid any kind of direct metaphor. But somehow, you're limited. You can't create the forms that you're photographing. You know, you have to start with stuff, with things that are available. And I—so far as I can see now, that would be the only way I could do anything that relates to what I'm doing now, would be to use metaphor, allegory. I feel, in many ways, film would be a much better way for me to, uh, get into this, the world I'm involved in now. I could get more deeply involved. Yet it is more difficult, because I have to start with objects, and then, somehow, relate them allegorically to what I want. It seems like a very tedious, difficult chore. Yet, um, in some way, the rewards seem greater.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you thought much about what the response of people is to your paintings? I realize, of course, that every artist has to do what he does out of his own sensibility, and you can't really stop and think of what people are going—what are people going to say, or will this be understood, or anything of the sort. But to any extent that you've come across response, does it, uh, bother you, or affect you in any way? [00:12:04] Or even interest you?

PETER DECHAR: Generally, I don't concern myself with it, because I'm really only interested in—in the world in my head and in my—somewhere between my head and the painting. But if, while I'm painting, or if the painting is not quite finished, someone says, the pear looks a little flat, or that color disturbs me, I may change it. I mean, it just—it doesn't bother me that much.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I really was thinking of something else more—perhaps closer to that idea we were discussing before of finding the social niche of your time. In other words, as the total result of your having existed in this world and produced these paintings, what might their meaning be to the world, in addition to what it means to you? We see what it—you know, to some extent, you've made clear what it means to you.

PETER DECHAR: Well, I think you're asking me whether or not I direct my painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I know you don't direct it to the—to [laughs] society, to, you know, but what you have to be concerned with—

PETER DECHAR: Or if I make some kind of attempt to make it more lucid, uh, or clearer to—to the viewer.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I wouldn't even suspect that you would do that, Peter. I just thought that—that perhaps in this thing of digging around in, what is the world really today? How does one really experience it? How can one project what is experienced? That is, you know, your deepest obligation, I suppose, if you're trying to communicate anything, is to really search in that area. [00:14:02]

PETER DECHAR: Well, I don't think too much about the way others perceive the world, because, I guess, I realize I'll never know that. So I try to—I examine the way I perceive the world, and assume that, in many ways, other people—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —are going to do the same thing.

PETER DECHAR: —perceive it in a similar way. And somehow, there will be a connection. I mean, people will be able to get close to what I feel, because, you know, they're really not all that different.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that's a very good answer. I just want to ask you a, sort of, dumb question related to this. Peter, in a recent interview last winter, when we were talking about the—uh, what might happen in your experience to motivate or change the character of a painting, uh, you gave an example of things happening in real life. Particularly, you gave the example of Provincetown, which we both are familiar with, the fact that a first—you know, a first experience there of the water and various places might bring on a mood of gaiety, and exploration, excitement. And the pears that you would paint in the light of that experience might be pears that

would have a quality of buoyancy, let's say. Whereas in a different mood, let's say end of the season, being fed up and restless with a place like Provincetown, pears might take on a more ominous or heavier aspect.

[00:16:00] I gather this has changed in terms of the relationship between living experience and what would appear in a painting today.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. I've really separated the two worlds. And as I said, that's the reason I've stopped painting for a while. The two worlds were so separate that I found it difficult to go from one to the other. I don't know if now I doubt if I'll go back to that earlier way, where, uh, the painting reflects my mood, or what happened to me in the outside world. I think I would prefer a more permanent relationship, a more permanent tie. That seems like almost accidental and very momentary. I would want something more durable now, I think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A sensibility of the quality of life that was less varied by what—whether it was a good week or a happy week, or a depressing week.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But something that went on being your sensibility—

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —all the time, or pretty much. At this period in your life, no one can say, oh—

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. Well, I really—I'm not quite sure now. I'm not sure what's going to happen. I do know that in the last few months, my painting, or my feelings about painting, were very different from what they were just a year ago, as I realize only now from, you know, what you remind me I said a year ago. [00:18:00]

DOROTHY SECKLER: In the last paintings that you did before you stopped painting, we haven't actually discussed on the tape the fact that you have stopped painting for a while. I think we did talk about it other—when we were not recording. But in those last ones that you did before, would you say that you were approaching that way of working, that the pears in that case did not directly reflect any specific kind of life experience?

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. No, they most certainly didn't. They were not—they didn't reflect temporary states of mind. They seemed to reflect a much deeper sense, a much longer-lasting sense. And I like that better.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And, uh, since we haven't discussed this on the tape before, at the moment, you're simply not painting for a while, with the hope that that deeper sense will become clarified, or could you ex—I don't want to put words in your mouth.

PETER DECHAR: No, I—well—the specific reason for stopping was to get closer to the world outside. And I really felt I was drawing away from it much too radically.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you explain what you mean by drawing away from it? I think I know, but I—

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —would like to have you say it.

PETER DECHAR: I was spending—I mean, almost all of my life was spent in the world of the painting. I realize that sounds, kind of, funny, or it doesn't make too much sense, because the world of the painting is nothing. [00:20:01] It's not tangible.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mean that you were actually involved with painting, the work of painting, or—

PETER DECHAR: I guess my—I would say my state of mind was almost constantly in a dream world, where, uh, I was—where I didn't allow the outside world to affect it, to affect my state of mind. And somehow, I had the feeling, several months ago, or two months ago, that, um, this isn't what I wanted. I wanted to be very close to, if not the outside world, my friends, um, or humanity in general. And that the fact that I was so involved with the world of the painting just didn't give me that freedom to deal with other people spontaneously.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Has your feeling of—having done this now, and seeing friends, and so on, has this been very rewarding?

PETER DECHAR: It's been very, very difficult. I don't know if it's been rewarding. I do feel much closer to my friends now than I did before, and I'm very happy about that. I think my relationship with, uh, people, and my feelings about humanity have changed quite a bit in the last few months, and that was my intention.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you express that a little bit more, in what way they changed?

PETER DECHAR: Uh, in the past, I have never been concerned about any kind of kinship to humanity. [00:22:02] Whatever I wanted to do, I would do it on my own, by myself. And now, somehow, I feel that I don't want to do that. I want to be part of the rest of the world in some way. I don't know how. I don't want to isolate myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In a way that as—perhaps even as a child, you had been isolating yourself from people, from childhood, to some extent?

PETER DECHAR: I guess I did it to a degree, yeah. I wouldn't—not to any extreme degree. Certainly not as I have recently.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really? The isolation you're speaking of is—it belongs to a period of, what, the last five years?

PETER DECHAR: Well, really, the last year, uh, I would say, or it climaxed about three months ago, when I stopped painting. And I suddenly realized how far I had gotten away from the world and my friends. Although I don't know. I mean, I may have simply become more acutely aware of my isolation. I don't know if there was any change, but I certainly felt very far away.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's fascinating, Peter. Would you, uh—would your beginnings as a painter correspond in any way to a—any specific phase of your life, when you were, uh, feeling more, uh, isolated and off by yourself? [00:24:11]

PETER DECHAR: No. I don't think I ever really had a sense of isolation, because I've always been fascinated with doing things, with my hands, with my mind, and [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you were not exactly a conformist. You didn't just go along doing what people—

PETER DECHAR: No, I—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —thought you should be doing. You went off on your own. You did what you thought you should be doing.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, but I never felt that, and that bothered me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It never seemed particularly brave or defiant on your part.

PETER DECHAR: No, no. I did what I wanted, and I guess I assumed everyone else did, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [They laugh.] That's a nice thought, Peter.

PETER DECHAR: I suppose I just recently realized that, um, that was, kind of, different. They wanted to see what other people were doing, I suppose, or—I don't know. Maybe they—everyone does do what they want. But I wanted to find out what they do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Just as one report from the outside, they don't [laughs.] I mean, it's a lovely notion to have had.

PETER DECHAR: But certainly, I mean, painting was just another thing. I've done thousands of things that—you know, I just followed my impulse. There didn't seem to be anything strange about becoming a painter, about giving up everything else and doing that. I—at that point, I could do it or not do it. There was no intention to do it indefinitely. There were—there was no time set at all, no notion of endurance. [00:26:00] I just didn't think of it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You never thought of painting as a career.

PETER DECHAR: No. I never thought of anything as a career. I never thought of anything as lasting for any amount of time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very curious, in a way. Although I believe it's more typical of younger people than it was of my generation, certainly. We always planned ahead.

PETER DECHAR: But I—that's something that's changed, too. I mean, now I do think of myself as a painter, and whether or not I want to be a painter, whether or not this is what I want to do for the rest of my life, when all my life, I've done things just for a short period of time, and then did something else. And I'm curious as to why now I'm no longer switching, changing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You feel fairly sure at the moment that you're not—

PETER DECHAR: I'm not.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —that you wouldn't suddenly give up painting and go to machines, or—

PETER DECHAR: No, I don't think so. I've thought about it quite a bit. I've thought about all kinds of things I would like to do, and I don't do them. I mean, I—for the last five years or so, I've been painting pears. That's it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But looking ahead, do you still see yourself going on as a painter, and probably as a painter of pears?

PETER DECHAR: Probably, yeah. It seems like, uh, like a good way to get to know myself and other people, probably. The only other thing that I can see as somewhat of a substitute is movies, and we talked about that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Which would not be movies of pears, probably. [00:28:00]

PETER DECHAR: No. I did that once. I did make a movie of pears.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you?

PETER DECHAR: Yes. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really? When?

PETER DECHAR: In Germany.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was it—what was it like?

PETER DECHAR: It was very unsuccessful, because—and unsatisfying.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had you been painting them before you made the movie?

PETER DECHAR: I made the movie, I think, right after I made the first pear painting. But the one thing that really has over and over again, interested me in the painting is the ability to choose the background, the surrounding areas, the space, and I just couldn't do that with the camera. I could somehow fake it. I could make it almost look like a strange background, but then it was a strange background. It was contrived. It was a photograph of a set-up situation. So I didn't feel the freedom that I feel in the painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. There were no people in this film at all.

PETER DECHAR: No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was simply a film of objects.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But then I, sort of—speaking of the artist and being isolated from the world, there's something that's, kind of, I guess, even cliché attitude that's been developed in the 20th century, at least, that the artist withdraws from the world in order to, you know, become a part of it again. He withdraws and makes his own statement of, uh, feeling, and, you know, in that way, pays back society for having taken himself out of it in the first place. [Laughs.] [00:30:00]

PETER DECHAR: I feel that way now, yeah. I never felt that way before. I—the way I look at myself now is, I was a person who removed himself completely from society to feel himself, and now suddenly has—

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