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Oral history interview with Peter and Riva Dechar, 1967 September 6

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Peter and Riva Dechar in New York City on September 6, 1967. The interview 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: So this is—it's on, as far as I can see. [They laugh.] We'll put it there. So Riva, how does your work relate to minimal art?

RIVA DECHAR: Well, we were talking specifically about [Robert] Morris. I don't know if I'm, kind of, misinterpreting his intention or not, but the way I see, the way I relate to Morris's—the fact that I also deny the object inasmuch as, by painting shadows over the objects, or the cubes, specifically, the illusion that's created by the painted shadow on the cube distorts the cube itself. You no longer see a cube. You have an image of a cube. You know it's a cube, and it's a clear, kind of, idea about a form. A cube is, kind of, a symbol. You, um, have an idea already in your head of what it looks like. But by the shadows playing over the cube, so casting different shadows and values, they no longer appear to be cubes, if—if we really—you know, the planes are broken up.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So there's a kind of ambivalence. You see it as a cube in a way, but its materiality is somewhat denied. Is that part—is that part of it? It's cancelled out or—to some extent by the fact that the shadow is doing something a little unusual in terms of vision?

RIVA DECHAR: No, the shadow does exactly what it—it's supposed to do. [00:02:02] It plays over the object.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's a painted shadow—

RIVA DECHAR: And it's a painted—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —as well as a real shadow. There are several—

RIVA DECHAR: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —painted shadows, [laughs]—

RIVA DECHAR: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —as well as real shadows.

RIVA DECHAR: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I didn't want to distort your meaning, and you can set your own right [ph]. I must have—I got you off on the wrong track there.

RIVA DECHAR: No, that's precisely it. The—the—you come to the—that's why I started off using cubes. Now I'm using more specifically architectural forms. It's just getting more complicated. But you have—you come to it with the idea already, an image of a cube in your mind. You relate immediately to the cube, and if you look closely, you realize that what you see are fragments of color, fragments of light, rather than actually a cube. And you, kind of, begin to question the material aspect of what you see. Is it really a solid? Is it really a cube? The same way as what you perceive every day in architecture is really play of light and shadow. You don't really perceive the material of the building, but the way the light and shadow play on the building.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But does this relate, perhaps, in a deeper way, to a sense of our total experience as being—well, as an—creating an attitude of questioning of what we ordinarily accept as stable and—

RIVA DECHAR: Right, precisely.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —you know, finite and so on.

RIVA DECHAR: Well, that's what, you know, we had been talking about in terms of Morris, which I thought was valid and the most pertinent aspect for me. [00:04:07] And—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, to recapitulate that, as—that the valuable thing in Morris's work, for you, then, was its—well, you say it in your own words, then. I don't want to—

RIVA DECHAR: Denying—denying the object in the art, denying the reality of the object. I remember, I guess, the exhibition that Morris had in Green Gallery. And Al Held said that he walked in and said to Bellamy, "When are you going to hang—when are you going to put up the exhibition?" And it was, you know, a total success, because—

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] Yes, I had to see—

RIVA DECHAR: —held hadn't really even realized that everything was in there, that it was, kind of, totally absorbed in the room. And, you know, he had no sense of anything going on at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I walked into Castelli and was going to take notes on something that Leo was telling me, and I put my pad down on top of this piece of—[they laugh] this work of art and started scribbling. And I didn't have the slightest idea that I—I was doing this to a work of art. It just looked like a packing box sitting in the middle of the floor.

RIVA DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, but as a matter of fact, you must admit that where—that his way of denying, uh, the reality of the object is just to make the object, let's say, so prosaic that you barely see it, whereas your way of denying the object is, first of all, to invoke the presence of the—of a—of a certain kind of object, and then, in a sense, to—you do a very delicate kind of juggling act with the senses, by which you referred in a number of different ways of things that might have—what changing weight, or position in terms of how they cast a shadow. [00:06:02]

RIVA DECHAR: Right. Well, I guess have a number of different interests with—you know, they all vie for attention, and, you know, with the same amount of intensity. You know, for instance, I'm interested in this aspect of them being architectural and being fragments of architecture, and being fragments of many worlds of architecture piled on top of one another, like lost cities.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I think that was fascinating, in terms of what you were doing with the—some of the forms that you'd made to look like rusticated stone fronts, as if they were part—well, not necessarily front, but parts of buildings that were rusticated masonry.

RIVA DECHAR: Right, fragments.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Fragments of it.

RIVA DECHAR: And then, kind of, ambiguous fragments, just cubes that may or may not relate to architecture, have the scale, perhaps, of the rusticated cubes, but are ambiguous in terms of their material or—or their specific use. Kind of just having a meaning in terms of their placement in the sculpture, and using many different kinds of elements.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The pattern element is, as far as I understand, creating that ambiguity, too, I think. The—for instance, the one that I am looking at here with the, uh, the effect of a wooden floor, which is on a—a surface which parallels the floor and then goes up into the block, and is also carried on into a—the object, which is obviously not floor, so that what is floor and what is not floor is object, and what is not object, merged together in a rather fascinating way. And the same will be true of the new ones, in which you will use tile, patterns of tile—

RIVA DECHAR: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —on both the object and on—on the hard line of the surfaces. [00:08:06] I wanted to put that in the record, because, of course, we've been talking about it and looking [laughs] at these things during the evening, but I—I think it, uh, it begins to take on another, uh—you know, it begins to relate now to your overall concept in a new way as you, Riva—it was interesting. The Morris—the argument about [laughs] Robert Morris, sort of, brought it back to what this really is about. How does it—you would not be interested, I would take it, then—it would not have the same implication if you were to really make these forms into something large enough to be architecture, or if they functioned as architecture. I mean, the important thing is that they have a reference, but are not actually—

RIVA DECHAR: Well, I could envision them as being architectural scale, inasmuch as I envision them as being, as

I said before—I empathize very much with buildings that are being torn down, and you're seeing various layers of architecture, one on top of another, and, kind of, you know, one section that's a bathroom, another that was painted blue and you assume was a living room or whatever. And I imagine if they were much larger, let's say, full room-size—I don't picture them as being full building-size, certainly, you know, not architecture in that sense.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They'd still be large sculptures, of course.

RIVA DECHAR: Yeah, they would still be large sculptures.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They wouldn't be regular [ph]—

RIVA DECHAR: No, I don't have—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —buildings. [Laughs.] No.

RIVA DECHAR: No, they wouldn't be buildings, to be sure. I—I do think, though, that I would be interested in making them much more environmental or relating to the space, let's say. [00:10:07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It should be fascinating to walk in among those shadows, the painted ones and the real ones, and really stand in the middle of these ambiguities, [laughs]—

RIVA DECHAR: Yeah, I'd like very much to—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —rather than just to look at them.

RIVA DECHAR: —do that. This is, kind of, um, an outgrowth of the environment that I had done. And I'd be interested in doing another one. It's just not possible to build one in my studio. It's, kind of, not practical in any way. And the other thing is, relating very specifically to the space, well, it would relate to my studio space, to be sure, but, you know, if it ever were moved out, I doubt if it would have very much validity. So I'm making self-contained sculptures, sculpture that relates only to itself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And what they have in common—let's see if we could—that, well, they seem to have a kind of base in most cases, and relate to that—now I'm going to get myself mixed up, because I'm not looking at them. [Laughs.]

RIVA DECHAR: Well, they do have a base.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But what's the least common denominator of—of most of the things that you've done in the last year. You start—let's take it—I think in a sequence would be a little more clear. You started off with white—with white cubes, uh, in your earliest one.

RIVA DECHAR: They were black and white—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Black and white.

RIVA DECHAR: —that cast gray shadows.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, right.

RIVA DECHAR: And they were on checkerboard surfaces that related to the scale of the cube, so that I imagined—or I projected that they were—that the checkerboard surface was made up of all of the same sized cubes, and that what played above and below the base, or the checkerboard surface, kind of, played with the scale of the board. [00:12:12] Do you understand? In other words, I saw them as, kind of, modular architectural plays.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RIVA DECHAR: And, um, the checkerboard and the objects or the cubes that stood on top of them played with the base, cast shadows on the base and on the objects that were bu—on the ground.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I—I'm, kind of, interested in how—how you arrived at this—let's take this early one. This but—you don't make drawings, obviously.

RIVA DECHAR: Mm-mm [negative].

DOROTHY SECKLER: You manipulate shapes. You make them yourself, and then you move them around, and, I suppose, possibilities were—well, I mean, what would be the thing that would decide you on one rather than another series of relationships?

RIVA DECHAR: It has only to do with moving it around. In other words, you're right, I don't make any drawings, or very few drawings. I have a vague idea in my mind, and I begin to build the parts for it, and then I place them. And I place them in relation to one another in, kind of, a precarious way. Uh, in a way that I described as somewhat manneristic, inasmuch as the cubes are never quite settled. They looked as though—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. They're not stable.

RIVA DECHAR: They're not stable. [00:14:00] They looked as though someone had just brushed against it, and they, kind of, have moved accidentally. There's something disquieting or uneasy, or I feel—

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

RIVA DECHAR: —that's, you know, not quite pleasing, or not quite right. You know, something makes you a little edgy about where they are. You kind—kind—want to move them to make them a little more steady. You don't like the idea of it falling off the base.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RIVA DECHAR: And I move them around until I have them at that point. I—I feel that they're insecure. And, uh—

DOROTHY SECKLER: The idea of the shadows, of the way the—the painted shadows, the shadows that are painted on the grid or on the base, and so on, that enhances, of course, the feeling of this insecure—this insecure relationship, or this slightly ambiguous relationship.

RIVA DECHAR: Well, I don't know if it enhances it. It—it's another element. As I said, you know, like, there are a number of things that interest me. The shadow may fall off the base, you know, in some of them, and, kind of, fall onto the edge. Um, it's not possible, or I haven't worked out a way, that they can permanently fall onto the floor.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RIVA DECHAR: That would be quite nice. Except in that one, where I made a fake floor. And that's not quite satisfactory, you know. I would have to match identically the floor that it was to sit on perm—permanently, in order—

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was fascinating, when knowing which—in the sense that you incorporated your own shadow as well as shadows that might logically be cast by one—one form or another. You incorporated your own shadow. That's the only one in which you have the organic shadow, isn't it? [00:16:02] I—maybe I missed something else.

RIVA DECHAR: Yeah, that's the only one, right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I thought that was the only one, so—

RIVA DECHAR: The form isn't, I guess, immediately perceptible. Just the fact that it's not geometric—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

RIVA DECHAR: —makes it, kind of, curious, and you search out what it might be.

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

RIVA DECHAR: And then if you end up in the right spot, you realize that—that it's—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —there you are. [Laughs.]

RIVA DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Let's play this back.

[Audio Break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Riva, we—in talking about the forms that you're working now—with now, which are, in many ways, architectural forms, I suspect they're related to some of the interests that you began to pursue when you were studying at Yale, where I recall you were involved with an—an—an architectural project. Uh, what would you say was, um—had been a—any particular significance or—for your—the work you're doing now, uh, in the—in your preparation at Yale? Teachers you had, or activities, and so on.

RIVA DECHAR: Well, I think it has a direct relevance to what I'm doing now. Specifically, I worked on an environment in the art and architecture building, and worked directly in it. I think you saw photographs of that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I did.

RIVA DECHAR: And—

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was quite an extensive constellation of forms. It moved along walls, and through walls in some cases, and—

RIVA DECHAR: Right, right. And basically, I guess, that was the first time I had had any experience working directly with architecture and, kind of, relating forms to architecture. And the forms grew directly out of what I perceived, uh, was the—was Rudolph's intention. [00:18:03] And—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Rudolph?

RIVA DECHAR: Paul Rudolph.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Paul Rudolph.

RIVA DECHAR: Right. And, um, what I responded to in the area that I was working in. And I had, of course, some preconceived ideas of what I wanted to do with the space, but then the forms, kind of, evolved from what was happening in the space. And—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, then, Ru—Rudolph was your, uh—the teacher that you were working most closely with, or what?

RIVA DECHAR: No, I wasn't working with Rudolph at all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, you weren't?

RIVA DECHAR: Rudolph designed the building.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

RIVA DECHAR: And, uh, as a project, I did an environment in the building. They allowed, you know, a number of students—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

RIVA DECHAR: —to work directly in the building and put up constructions, or paintings, or whatever they wanted to do. And I had no contact with Rudolph whatsoever.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I see.

RIVA DECHAR: I liked his building very much. I like him as an architect—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

RIVA DECHAR: —very much. And I think that the building is, certainly not functional, but a very interesting, kind of, manneristic building. And I worked in a very dark, dungeon-like space. And, uh, it was, I guess, a hallway, passageway, uh, that people, kind of, passed through to get outside of the building. And, uh—but it had very interesting things happening in it. There were windows on either side that—one which looked onto another window, one which looked onto a little gravel courtyard. And it was just a very interesting experience. [00:20:05]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you get headed into the general area of architectural constructions in the first place? Had you been interested in that before you went to Yale?

RIVA DECHAR: No, not specifically architectural constructions. I had been doing sculpture and relief things before that, and as I said, really, my interest, or the forms in that environment, grew out of what was happening specifically in the existing space. But, um, I wouldn't say there was any direct influence from what I had been doing previously. I had been interested in three-dimensional forms.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RIVA DECHAR: That's why I chose to do three-dimensional forms in the space rather than use paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had you been a painter in—uh, in your student days, or—I mean, first of all—yeah.

RIVA DECHAR: Yeah. Well, I started at Yale as a painter in the painting department.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah?

RIVA DECHAR: And I graduated from the painting department, but ended up doing sculpture. And—although no one could quite reconcile the idea of my doing sculpture. [Laughs.] Uh, they seemed to ignore it, you know, for their convenience, and I said okay. It was too complicated, I guess, to make any change at that point, so they accepted what I was doing as, um, an extension of form. Well, if painters move form around a canvas, then they can move forms around rooms, too. I really think it's, kind of, silly, in a way, to differentiate. You know, so much painting impinges on sculpture, and sculpture impinges upon painting. [00:22:00]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Certainly today it does. Does it—is there a—any general implication, do you think, in the i—in the fact that these barriers are breaking down, and, you know, we have shaped canvases, and colored constructions, and so on. Is that—does that have any philosophical premise particularly? I mean, of course, it seems to come very naturally to your generation in any case.

RIVA DECHAR: Well, I really don't know if I can talk about it, because I haven't been, you know, thinking about it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you identify now, uh, to some extent, certainly, as we were talking earlier, with the outlook of some of the artists that we call minimal, or people more or less related to—well, people like Robert Morris. Had—is this a general identification that has been with you for a long time, and—

RIVA DECHAR: No, I would say I don't really relate to them. I relate to the aspect of them being architecture.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RIVA DECHAR: I relate to, uh, kind of, the clarity of form. And, uh, perhaps the classical-ness of form. I don't relate very often emotionally to them, because very often, there's very little to relate to. [00:24:00] I don't think it has anything to do, generally, with the movement, or specifically with the movement. No, I just think there are very few good artists. And, uh—

DOROTHY SECKLER: There's a, kind of, feeling that, um, for the classical and for the—oh, for the hard edge, and for the clar—forms which have a great deal of clarity, which seems, to some extent, in your generation, to be a general reaction against the extreme [inaudible] about abstract expressionism. You know, it's, sort of, like, cutting through the—[laughs] you know, the—the welter of what—of—of forms that were very turbulent, and subjective, and so on.

RIVA DECHAR: Well, as I said before, the r—reason I chose to use cubes or very simple forms was specifically because of the complexity of the idea. And I, kind of, worked slowly into the idea. I wasn't certain of what I was going to do, and I felt that a very simple form, one that was immediately perceivable, was the easiest to begin with. Now, as you see, they're getting more complex. Hmm, I wouldn't say that's how I relate to, uh, the minimal artists, by simplified forms. I just used them because they were expedient.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, they—we had, I believe, touched on certain attitudes of, uh, minimal artists, which, you know, had a, kind of—well, they were saying that, to some extent, they'd taken a pol—a polemical position, a position of stating an extreme—stating an extreme, well, position, which had the effect of, perhaps, causing us to question, to—to, sort of, be brought up short and question our assumptions about any form, to have a fresher awareness about it. [00:26:31] And—which see—not always—that attitude always seems to me to be somewhat related to a kind of existentialism. I don't know whether I'm right about that or not. Perhaps I'd better not pursue it [laughs] unless is suggests something to you, because I would just be imposing my own ideas. Well, I—I—

[Audio Break.]

RIVA DECHAR: —fun. What I'm doing always looks like fun. Peter, what he's doing, always looks like fun to me. And so whenever I come into the studio, I think, boy, wouldn't that be marvelous, just throwing up paint like that? No problems. And Peter thinks, boy, wouldn't that be marvelous, building those things? It's so much more interesting than just throwing up paint like that. You know, it's so much more complex, and you can get in there and work with those hammers and nails, and—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're both, of course, also very much concerned with a kind of ambiguity in—in your works. In your case, the—well, we've already talked about the various elements that entered into it, and the—the feeling of that shape which might not be quite secure, and the shadows adding their own element of—a, kind of, visual complication. [00:28:13] And in Peter's work, the, uh—well, there is a similar—sometimes a feeling of the pear occupying a—or throwing a shadow on empty air, or being in a position where you're not quite sure you could really define it, that position or the space it occupies. So that you could say that, perhaps, at least, that

both of you are involved to some extent with ambiguities of impression. I don't know whether that would be the central meaning. It seemed, when we were talking about your—the things that you were doing in 1965, Peter, that you were very much interested in—in that—in that, uh—in creating a, kind of, space which had—well, I don't know. Perhaps I don't know how to describe it. But has it changed in any—you were saying just before that you—it would be, sort of, irrelevant to change from painting pears to any other theme, because, um, what really is—what really interests you is not the fact that it's a pear, but the fact that it—you know, what it does with space, and—and with—with light, or with light and shadow, and so on. [00:30:07] Has that changed specifically in the last two years in any way?

PETER DECHAR: The pears haven't changed. I guess it's clear that the pears are largely metaphorical for—are metaphors for all material, all physical things, even people, and everything that exists on Earth, or anything.

RIVA DECHAR: And the natural.

PETER DECHAR: No, not even anything natural. Almost anything tangible, anything physical. At different times, more specifically human elements or central elements. At other times, more specifically hard things, buildings, or whatever. And that's a reality where—the reality of physical things is the one I know best, but somehow there's another reality that seems almost more important. So it's always there. It's always in the back of—of my mind, or always pressing on—on the earthly reality. And I guess, in a way, it's a spiritual reality, or it's a—it's the—it's the part of the world that I will never know and can never know, um, but I can feel. It's—it's the part that remains of everything I know that I—that I can't touch, that I can't explain. [00:32:05]

[Audio Break.]

PETER DECHAR: —and do know, and live with, and experience, and try to strengthen, and try to control. And the other reality, which is always, kind of, bothersome, behind it, underneath it, eroding, sometimes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would that be a reality—

PETER DECHAR: This—one—one might ask how I know there is such a reality.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

PETER DECHAR: I guess I only know it's there absolutely because I'm not comfortable in the other reality, in everyday living, in everyday looking and touching and existing. I mean, there's just not enough there. What I know about my world doesn't explain my world, because there's got to be something else. Or maybe—maybe there is nothing else. Maybe it's the long and the short of it. [00:34:00]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, there's—there's two ways of thinking about the otherness. One would be—and the more limited one, in terms of—of specific kinds of, uh, experience, the kind of thing that goes into, let's say, a mood, or a mood of uneasiness, or of anguish, or whatever, however understated. But the other kind of—of reference was one of, like, this is the total state of being, you know? This is the way it is in—in some larger sense. Would there be any way that you are conscious of one or the other being more dominant in—in the way the—the image takes form as you're working with it?

PETER DECHAR: In terms of the painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

PETER DECHAR: In terms of a painting, right now, to the last few paintings especially, quite consciously, I've been trying to include both, if you wish, realities. But the one intangible reality, metaphysical explanation of my world, is the one that doesn't include progress, doesn't acknowledge progress or that says progress is just the material of history, but doesn't really make any difference. [00:36:03] We're here whether we like it or not, and we only make progressive movements to—I guess because we're able to. You know, but it doesn't really lead anywhere. It doesn't advance our position in any way. But there's something very beautiful about both realities seen at one time. There's something very hideous about ignoring one once one has experienced both. Because, uh, then, well, it becomes obvious that the—that you're only seeing half of what's available. I mean, to say that, well, it's painful to think about the unknown. It's painful to ponder all the possibilities of the future, and therefore I live in the present, and I'll just—I won't think about what I'm doing, also. I'll just act. I'll do—I'll—I'll live impulsively. It's not possible, I think, once you've realized that—I guess that it—that it doesn't really matter, except as an event. This—well, I guess I—I really can't touch it with words. [00:38:03] I really—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I think you—you—you're making sense to me. It doesn't—you know, it isn't going to add up to anything that improves life and gives, you know, progresses towards solutions. But it's still the extra dimension of some kind of meaning. It has to be dealt with, even if it doesn't have this solution, finding, progressive—

PETER DECHAR: Well, I guess in a way, I almost see living as a fantasy, as living out or acting out a story. And that the truth of living is beyond our—our actions, and beyond everything physical. And that whatever we do here is, well, first of all, uh, in a, kind of, old-fashioned way, an illusion. But more specifically, or less generalized, it's, uh—I see it as a story, and as a contrived story, you rearrange the way you live as we would rearrange a story. We don't like so much activity. We want a little bit of rest and maybe sensuality in this part of the story, and so we do that. But, uh, I guess, in a way, we very often forget that it's a story, or I do. Very often, I come to believe that it isn't a story, that what I'm doing is the only thing I can know, but I do know something else. [00:40:03] I know the aspect of my life which is fantasy, story, illusion. And that's something I wasn't conscious of two years ago, but it seems to appear in the paintings almost as if it came out subliminally, because there were—there were hints at the, kind of, mysterious endless space, which gave refuge and, kind of, form to that—pointed out the absurdity of close attention to—or—or a fixed point of view with the material world.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The story element fascinates me, in the particular sense in which you're using the story. And could we—could we talk for—specifically, let's talk about that painting on the wall behind you. Uh, would there be a way of just, um, perhaps, even coming through the same thought that we just were—you were just dealing with, as—but in that specific context. Can you see—[laughs] I was wondering if anything would occur to you as the way the story meaning developed or, you know, could anything, sort of, re—if you were aware of it?

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. The—very often, the pears are arranged in a—quite consciously, sometimes less consciously, in a way which is enclosing and frightening. [00:42:08] At other times, in a way which is expansive and happy, and floating or dancing. But—but the pears are arranged in a way that creates an emotional experience, or tends to evoke an emotional experience. And in this—in this painting, there are two pears, which almost, um, stand above us. We're almost standing below them. And what we see in front of us, we see two more pears, which, if we walk forward, will do the same thing, will stand above us, and will maybe even hover above us.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They loom, very—

PETER DECHAR: They loom. But that's—that's something we bring to the situation, I think. And that's not, uh, what really exists. What really exists is four pears, in the case of that painting. And, uh, I—well, I think the—the situation, the pressure that—that is evoked by the configuration, just by the arrangement of the pears, uh, is very—the experience is very much like living, like the—the kind of things we allow ourselves to step into or to feel. But there—there's something beyond that. There are—above, there's a, kind of, endless blue. [00:44:00]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I see it. It now appears in a number of your paintings. Sometimes it's more cheerful. In this one, it's very mysterious.

PETER DECHAR: Well, I—yeah, I, kind of, leave that open, or in my mind, I leave it open. I don't say absolutely that I want it to be the place where you would run to, but I do want it very definitely to be another space, another kind of space, a space completely free of—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Symbolically, it's an escape hatch?

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, in a way, but then, too, it may be very frightening. It's a different space. But if you bring anything to it, I guess, it becomes very obvious that it's not because of the natural world. It's not because of the physical world. Then it's purely imaginary. It doesn't—the blue usually doesn't relate to the rest of the painting spatially. It's a different kind of space, a different kind of light. And, um, I guess it allows you to run towards it or away from it, to fear it, but, uh, I don't think the pears do. I think the pears, kind of, evoke a very special thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Where—is it an—an infinity sort of thing?

PETER DECHAR: It's, kind of, to me, a—

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible.] [Laughs.]

PETER DECHAR: No, no. To me, it's, kind of, nothing, from nothingness, emptiness. I guess a void, more—more than infinity, more than, uh, vastness. [00:46:03] I don't know. Maybe there is no difference, really, between infinity and—and emptiness. But I—I see a distinction. [Laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Uh, well, you know, there's the idea of the infinity, I mean, of the Eastern religions, which is, sort of, nirvana and, you know, unity with the all. [Laughs.] And then there's just all that empty space. [Laughs.] And there's the—

PETER DECHAR: Well, I—I guess—yeah. I guess infinity, kind of, means, or implies, or has a connotation of something going on forever. Well, it's very difficult—well, it's very difficult to imagine any kind of infinity, but I see a difference between some—

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PETER DECHAR: I see a difference between something going on forever and nothing, emptiness, a void.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is it something that, some days you feel it's infinity, and sometimes it's emptiness, or is it your attitude—is there a more uniform attitude?

PETER DECHAR: The question with regard to the painting or generally?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, generally.

PETER DECHAR: No. Generally, I—I see two different things. I mean, I see them as different things, different attitudes. You know, well, I can think about one and then the other. In the painting, no, in the painting I do the same thing. Sometimes I have in mind stuff going on forever. At other times, I had in mind nothing, emptiness, as opposed to stuff. As a more specific example, a painting I did have—well, very often I use planes or surfaces which appear to, and sometimes do, stretch to the vanishing point, which implies stretching to infinity, which, again, seems to say stuff goes on forever, which, kind of, evokes a feeling of this world, as it the only world that I know. And I walk around Manhattan, and I haven't been anywhere but Manhattan for many months. And I feel, deep down—I mean, I just never think of anything but Manhattan. [00:02:00] Manhattan is the world that I know. That's the extent of my—of the earth, of my world. And in a way, that's as close as I can come to infinity, unless I stop suddenly and say, "There's something else." You know, I forgot, just for a moment I forgot that there's something besides Manhattan. There's stars, even, in the sky, you know. And that Manhattan is only a little place on the earth. But I forget that. And I—I find myself some—once in a while, walking around Manhattan, forgetting completely that there's something else. I guess the experience is a very strange one, and that causes me to paint the picture about that experience, so I think about the experience. I think about what it was like, and I have a vague image of what a painting might—should look like to evoke that kind of sensation, and I set about doing it. That's something I do now quite consciously, but didn't do two years ago.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really?

PETER DECHAR: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. No, two years ago, it was a different thing. Two years ago, I was painting Manhattan, or Provincetown, or wherever I happened to be. And, uh, I don't think it ever once occurred to me, in a, kind of, rational way, an analytical way, that I was looking at where I was, but as the ultimate place, rather than as a segment of the universe, as part of the universe. [00:04:02] You know, it's, kind of, a startling realization [laughs] to realize that—that we live in a—in a very limited universe, that in most—most of the time, you're not—I mean, I'm not aware of the universe. But, uh, at that time, or at those times, I think I am aware of—of emptiness. The universe, kind of, implies infinity, not emptiness. So I'm kind of—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Not meaninglessness.

PETER DECHAR: I don't know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is that—is that in—to some extent, the—the threat of most enormous spaces in the universe, to all of us?

PETER DECHAR: I don't think, uh, the universe actually imposes a threat to one. Hmm. Yeah, it's—yeah, it doesn't impose a threat to my world, but the emptiness does, lack of substance, absence of—absence of substance. [00:06:00] Uh, I guess, uh, I don't know. This, obviously, is very, very unclear in my mind, because I—I'm—I'm saying two different things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, we—very few of us have neat formulas for the universe, [they laugh] or—or for the things that we're struggling with, in terms of ultimate meanings. But, uh, I'm afraid I'm—that we're—for the purposes of the tape, it may be not quite fair to some historian who's playing this tape back a couple hundred years from now, not to clarify a little more the—uh, what you were saying before about Manhattan. You said, "I was painting Manhattan, and—or in Provincetown, I was painting Provincetown." And of course, you don't mean you're painting what—you know, the streets and automobiles, but the climate of things in—or the, uh—

PETER DECHAR: I—I was—I was painting my experience, or my—my emotional experience of each of these places.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So that a pear, uh, a pear in Manhattan and a pear in Provincetown would relate to your experience in these two places with some variation?

PETER DECHAR: Well, on the one hand, the pear is, again, just a metaphor for any—anything tangible—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —any—anything tangible, yes—

PETER DECHAR: —and physical, physical.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I'm assuming that.

PETER DECHAR: On the other hand, uh, I play a lot of games with the pears. [00:08:01] I mean, I have a—a lot of, kind of, fun metaphors. It allows me to—to play other games. I have other reasons for painting pears. But in each case, you know, the pears, well, do different things. I mean, in Provincetown, maybe the first day I go, I feel very, uh, free, and just, I'd be looking all around. I'd look out over the water for the first time, and then I'd run down the street and look at the wharf, and then I look at the A-House [Atlantic House], and I see all these things. And I don't stop and think, I just look. And, uh, it's a—it's a unique kind of experience. And I'll try to examine the experience, and, kind of, get close to it when I paint. At another time, Provincetown may be, kind of, overwhelming. I'm just sick of it. I want to get out of it. There are too many people. I just want to go to the country, or I want to go to my loft and be alone for a—a month or two months, or a year. And I'll paint something that has to do with that experience. The pears as physical things allow me to, uh, play the game of—of being frightened of things, or of being happy with things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: I can make sensual things, or bouncy things, or beautiful things, or whatever. Yeah, well, I—I do that with pears.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And your main—your instruments for doing that, would you like to discuss those in—in any more detail? [00:10:00] I think on our previous tape, we talked, as I said, to some extent, about placement in terms of, uh, this space to which—you know, there's—in which there's always one space to which you might retreat, and so on. That was part of—

PETER DECHAR: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —one of the things you were thinking about then. You've used light in many, uh, subtly varied ways in the last two years. It's changed, in some ways, toward a range of violets. Has that any specific association or implication for you, outside of the fact that, maybe, you're working with artificial light? [Laughs.]

PETER DECHAR: No, I—no, no. I think—[laughs] yeah, there are a couple of possible reasons. One is we have this [inaudible] bulb over here, which is, kind of, violet.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [They laugh.] Yeah.

PETER DECHAR: And another is, um, it came about, or it started to appear, I guess, about two years ago. Before, I was using blue, and I think it was, kind of, moving towards blue. Again, I've said before, perhaps subliminally I was moving towards that space. You know, maybe it was part of that. Now, I—when I use it, I use it mostly formally, to, kind of, uh—because of what the color does emotionally.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: You know, that's—perhaps just as a foil to heighten or depress other colors.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER DECHAR: But the purple has no significance to me as does the gray or the blue.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You didn't—haven't talked yet about the gray. [00:12:00] This particular gray is a—is a gray I haven't seen before, either, that very dense gray on the right—well, even also the one on the other side, the green-gray. These new, very loaded—I don't mean loaded. I mean deeply—

PETER DECHAR: Well, I think that they're very heavy grays.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, they are.

PETER DECHAR: And very substantial grays. You know, I think when I first started painting pears, that gray is a very neutral gray, but neutral in—in weight [ph] and a complete absence of color, or as much as possible. Um, and that was, like, I felt at the time that was nothing, but even that nothing had shadows. It's just, kind of, mmm, nothing. Nothing special, maybe. Or anything. Endlessness. That's—that's what I had in mind when I painted it. In this painting, I had more in mind concrete. I think I started using those grays when I came to Manhattan and started painting in Manhattan.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's very strange in this large painting. Does—does this one have a name that I might put into the record or in—[laughs].

PETER DECHAR: No. All—all of the paintings are—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —just pears?

PETER DECHAR: —titled *Pears*, or sometimes *Pear.*

DOROTHY SECKLER: *Pear.* No numbers. [Laughs.] How the—the pears that loom very large and cutting—blocking out, uh, large areas of the canvas are—somehow we imply that they are—or you are—have been able to imply that they are really like the other pears, green pears, and yet they are both gray pears, in fact. [00:14:14] [Laughs.] Which, uh, is quite a painterly accomplishment, I think. [Laughs.]

PETER DECHAR: I guess not everyone sees that. I'm glad you do, [they laugh] because that's what I had in mind.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I'm—I've become absolutely fascinated with that one, the more I've looked at it during the evening. I noticed you also had taken some photographs of pears, uh, on the wall. How—how do you come at that from—that's another [laughs] angle of pear-ness.

PETER DECHAR: That I did—that I did about three years ago. I wanted to see what pears looked like—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Something—

PETER DECHAR: —on a two-dimensional—in a two-dimensional way. Or, I guess I wanted to see what a photograph of a pear looks like. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it's pretty astonishing to see how the—how much the pears have that, kind of, a Dechar pear-ishness [laughs] about them, in spite of the fact that they were done with a lens and not the brush.

PETER DECHAR: Yeah. Well, I—I forced that to happen.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You forced that to happen?

PETER DECHAR: Yeah, with—with light.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The way you handled it, yeah.

PETER DECHAR: And the arrangement, and overlapping. But nothing special with the camera. It's just a regular camera with a normal lens.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, I'm—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]