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Oral history interview with Dianne Blell, 2012 June 21-28

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Dianne Blell on 2012 June 21-28. The interview took place at Blell's home in New York, NY, and was conducted by James McElhinney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Dianne Blell reviewed the transcript in 2019 and made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been heavily edited. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JAMES MCELHINNEY: OK, Chelsea, can you hear me?

CHELSEA: I can hear you.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: OK.

DIANNE BLELL: Are you allergic? Is he going to drive you crazy?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No. We'll be fine. Good.

DIANNE BLELL: There's not much I can do about it. [They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So we're rolling. This is James McElhinney speaking with Dianne Blell at her studio in Manhattan on Thursday, June the 21st, 2012. Good afternoon.

DIANNE BLELL: Hello. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Now, maybe we should start with a little about you, just sort of where you grew up. You're from San Diego?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I'm from just about all of California from San Francisco on down. I was born in LA. My father was in the Army when I was born, and I was raised in Chicago, Illinois, and then we moved back to California when I was 13 and back to Chicago for a couple years again, back and forth. So the North Shore of Chicago and southern California. I was raised in La Jolla also.

I moved to LA on my own once I left after my sophomore year at the Convent of the Sacred Heart and their corresponding college, San Diego College for Women. I went up to Los Angeles and lived there for a couple years. Since I was a little kid I drew, and I loved art, and so I just buried myself in drawing and locked myself in my room and make art and everything.

While I was in La Jolla, I was going to these Catholic convent schools and everything, and I was always the artistic one in the class, and doing the billboards and the conjé specialties and the decorations and the lace doilies and the hearts and—[laughs]—the Blessed Virgin Mary statue drawings, and—[laughs]—it's a Catholic background.

I knew there was more to art than that, and I had studied art history while at the University of San Diego. I took a drawing class there, but it was still lives and statuary of a very kind of religious nature and everything like that.

So, I was being an artist and a somewhat adventuresome young lady. I went to the La Jolla Art Center, and I found refuge with artists that were teaching there from LA. People like John Altoon and Baldessari were around there and some local teachers.

I was first introduced to the modern art world in that sense. Before that I just thought everything was papal and the Medici. [Laughter.] I didn't think that. I wasn't really introduced to it hardcore. I saw my first Sol LeWitt, Larry Bells, George Segals, Rauschenbergs, all this kinds of stuff—[inaudible]—and guys from LA were coming down there a lot. There was a real nitty-gritty that introduced me to the hardcore art world.

I left there and went up to LA for a couple years. I needed to work. My parents were divorcing, and so the family was falling apart, and it was just unfeasible for me to stay home and everything. So off I went, and I got a job at Ford Motor Company public relations after a quick secretarial course. On my first vacation I was introduced to a couple, a girl who had just come from traveling around the world, and she was skiing all the time, and I was a

jock pretty much most of my life too. I couldn't believe it. She worked for Pan American Airlines, and I thought, well, I hadn't seen the world yet. I always knew the eventuality of my becoming an artist. I knew it since I was a little girl. I was restless and insecure, needed to support myself, and knew that there was more information that I needed. I needed to put one foot in front of the other, and I couldn't buckle my unbridled energy down.

I sent off an application to Pan American Airlines—[laughs]—in red ink and just the worst application on the face of the earth. [Laughs.] And they called me—[laughs]—and they said, by the looks of your application, you're not very neat—[laughs]—and why aren't you a model or something like that? I said, well, first of all, I'm not tall enough, and I'm not really interested in that.

So they hired me, and so off I went into the airlines. I really gained a degree in sophistication. While I was traveling—[laughs] I was going to the Orient, I was going to the Far East, I was going to Tokyo, Hong Kong, Australia, the South Pacific, London—it was really quite wonderful. And Vietnam a lot. The Vietnam War was rampant, and we were in the thick of it then, and Pan American had a contract with the government to pick up soldiers for their rest and recreation. So we were going to a lot of places like Singapore too, and Vietnam and taking the soldiers to their various locations, Hawaii and South Pacific and Australia, Hong Kong and the Philippines, we went to the Philippines a lot.

I started looking at art in all these various different places. I have two pieces. The first two art pieces I bought, those statues in the Philippines, are Igorot. They're aboriginal. I got some aboriginal things from Australia, and—always an eye for that.

Then I really was—wasn't enough for me. It was wonderful and everything, but I wasn't intellectually—I got to about 26, and I was kind of frustrated and nervous about settling down. I was skiing and traveling, and traveling and skiing and tennis, and I thought how do I see myself when I'm 30? It's time to buckle down, and I can't push it off anymore.

I was afraid of the art world. I didn't know how I would support myself. I would go in and out of it. I knew a lot of interesting people. I would go to a lot of shows and things. I just bit the bullet and went back to school. I was based in San Francisco and went to the San Francisco Art Institute and did my B.F.A. and M.F.A. at the same time. I told them, I said, listen, I'm too old to be an undergraduate, and I've got this, I've got that, and I'd like to do them at the same time. They allowed me to do it if I could measure up the first year, which I did. So in 1973, I got my M.F.A. in fine arts from the San Francisco Art Institute, and I was [a] little bit older student than a lot of them, except those that were there on the GI Bill. There were some interesting people there.

So I became friends with a lot of the faculty and visiting artists, and I was asked to put them up a lot, because I had a really nice little cottage, and it was very artistic, and I had arty things around. So I was really introduced right away into a kind of a very meaty—[laughs]—milieu.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where did you live in the Bay Area?

DIANNE BLELL: When I was going to the San Francisco Art Institute, I was right below Telegraph Hill. Right down by Lombard and yes, right below the hill. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The much—

DIANNE BLELL: Marina, sort of the beginning of the marina, yes. It wasn't down the marina. [laughs]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Everybody—

DIANNE BLELL: I can't remember what that area was called now, but it was Lombard. I forget what the bottom street was, but it was—the San Francisco Art Institute was right up on that hill above. I could walk there all the way. I had a little bitty Honda, two-cylinder Honda. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just a little housekeeping here, did you complete a bachelor's anywhere else?

DIANNE BLELL: No, no, I didn't. I didn't quite get my A.A., Associate of Arts, at the San Francisco Art—I mean, at the San Diego College for Women.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

DIANNE BLELL: I just went two years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So just out of curiosity, what was your earliest awareness of being in the presence of a work of art as a kid or as a young—

DIANNE BLELL: My mother took me to the— Chicago, the Art Institute, and I visited the Art Institute. And—

[laughs]—I remember sewing on some towels, making some stitchery and stuff. I remember the Art Institute of Chicago, and I remember it was immense to me. I was just this little girl. I would say basically my first exposure was very Catholic Art. And it really—were reproductions of church art, which haunts me to this day.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So mostly art of the Renaissance of a religious nature?

DIANNE BLELL: Medici, papal, yes, church—or medieval icons.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So your mom was deeply Catholic, or was it your father?

DIANNE BLELL: She wanted us to be. She was supposed to be. She was actually married out of the Church because my dad had been married before. But she was determined that we go to church every Sunday, and she sent me to convent schools, and it was a wonderful thing, because the Les Mesdames de la Sacré Coeur, where I was educated,—it's like a female Jesuit education, and it was an order of nuns that was originally started by a woman in the religious. Strictly for the education of upper-class girls, not that I was such an upper-class, but I mean that's what it was way many years before. They were basically learning stitchery and things like that. They weren't really learning the classics. This was supposed to be an education in the classics.

So we were steeped in literature. When we were freshmen, we were reading *Beowulf* and *Pilgrim's Progress* and the *Ancient Mariner*. By the time I got to their college, it was just a repeat. We had French from freshman year, Latin from freshman year every year. Of course, I wish I knew it all better and wish I paid attention, but—[laughs]—you can't help but glean when you're steeped in it and you're in boarding school.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What did your dad do in the Army? What was his job?

DIANNE BLELL: I really don't know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was he an officer, an enlisted man?

DIANNE BLELL: I don't think he was just an enlisted man, but he had some—I really don't know. I never thought to ask.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The year that you came along was the year that the—

DIANNE BLELL: 1943.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: '45 was the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The middle of the war, right?.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, yes. I was a war baby.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he was in active service?

DIANNE BLELL: He didn't go overseas. He was in Arizona, I know, for a while, as I always heard. My father now lives in the South, in Alabama, and his memory—I can't—it's only when I thought to ask him all these things that it was already a little bit too late. I have pictures of him in uniform, very handsome, very dashing, and my mother in different places. It's the first time anybody's ever asked me that, and I've never thought to ask him what he was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's interesting to sort of ponder the origins of artists, because as we know, a lot of artists, we come to learn, have sometimes extremely humble origins and sometimes extremely privileged origins.

DIANNE BLELL: Mine was middle-of-the-road. My father was a hard worker, lot of energy. My mother was extremely beautiful, and she was very high-tone. She had a high level of aspiration, and she was somewhat materialistic, too, in that '50s sort of ad., the perfect existence, this is the perfect life, very Ozzie[and] Harriet sort of thing. So she wanted all those trappings.

She didn't aspire to the great greediness of the high riches, but she wanted her share of the pretty clothes and the pretty house. She had extraordinary taste and was very advanced. My mother was innately artistic, but she never did anything artistic. She did it with her clothing and with her decor you know. It was a sort of middle-class to upper-middle-class background in the 'burbs. It started out just like New Yorkers will; they'll live in Brooklyn in a blue-collar neighborhood, and they bought my aunt's house, which was in a blue-collar area of Chicago where all my neighbors' fathers were policemen, gas station owners, firemen, and my dad was an executive in a department store. They used to refer to us as "the rich Blells." Well, we were far from rich but I had a lot of

clothes, because I'm a retail brat. My father basically worked his way up in the retail department store world as an executive.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Which store?

DIANNE BLELL: In Chicago it was Mandel Brothers, and then he went on to places like Walker Scott's, Bon Marché and things like that. I was the boss' daughter—[laughs]—and he was a buyer and a general merchandiser. Contrarily, and funnily enough, it was basically for men's and boys' wear. Still, they were all friends, and they would trade. I was, like, Marcos, Imelda Marcos, when I was 10. [Laughs.] I had probably 50 pairs of what we called Mackie shoes. They were little shoes with straps and—[laughs]—different colors. The "Mackie" came from black patent leather. My sister couldn't say "black patent leather," so they were called Mackies, so everything was called Mackie shoes, so we had every variety of Mackie shoes and sandals you could possibly imagine and dresses with lilies and apples and things on them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So your mom was an ideal homemaker and a lady of style—

DIANNE BLELL: Right out of the ads.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —style and refinement. The women—

DIANNE BLELL: Out of house and—out of "House Beautiful."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, "House Beautiful."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, you know, the person in the the ad for holiday—

DIANNE BLELL: But she was different.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —was the one showing you the perfectly laid table with the turkey at the end of it.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, yes. She liked the trappings. We didn't sit with linen napkins and things like that. My mother's family were all farmers. They were Czechoslovakian, French, [and it has been storied] Indian. The French-Canadians cross-married with Indian [according to family legend]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: An enormous amount of them did, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Enormous. So I'm, possibly, two parts Indian going back on my grandmother and mother's side, on my grandfather and grandmother's side.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A lot of the Plains Indians—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, this was from Wisconsin and Minnesota and—yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. That's the the Lakota and the Ojibwe or Chippewa or—

DIANNE BLELL: Chippewa, Ojibwe, yeah, exactly, and I'm supposedly Menominee too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Menominee? Yes, so—yes, all of those nations up there were very much—

DIANNE BLELL: And La Crosse, where they did the fur trapping and the logging.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, that's where my mother was from. The farm, called Century Acres, it's still in the family. It's one of the oldest-owned single-family farms around that area. It was a model farm—they had certain farms that were considered model farms, and it had some sort of citation as a model farm. They still have it.

And it it was primogeniture, so my grandmother left the farm, married my grandfather, and they basically were factory workers. My grandmother basically was a dressmaker first, and then the Depression hit. She went to work in a factory. The war, Depression, and my grandfather did too in that area. They both came from farms, but they ended up working in factories during the whole war, the Depression and all that sort of stuff, and it was the jobs that they could get, they got.

I remember going back in childhood to La Crosse, Wisconsin. I love La Crosse, Wisconsin. I love my grandmother. I can't even talk about her now without bursting into tears, and she's been dead since I was 30, and I just—ah.

My grandmother and her sister were Czechoslovakian. I'm telling you, there never were more decent people that I ever met in my entire life. They never judged you, they never forced you to do anything. They would now be called enablers. [Laughs.] Isn't that terrible? They were deeply religious and deeply holy, but never put it on you, and never preached at you, and never forced any kind of morality on you, ever. It just was private. That's what they did. They lived by example. They were humble.

They were dutiful, and my grandmother did volunteer work up to the day she died. She was a volunteer four, five, six organizations. I'd go visit her and she was always so busy. It's like what's the point of coming to visit you? You're so busy volunteering for everybody I never get to see you. [Laughs.]

So that was the story there. My mother left that and went to the big city, which was Chicago, worked in the department store. It's like out of a movie. It's like typical movie, like with Donald O'Connor or something. She met the young buyer trainee, and she was at the cosmetic counter or jewelry counter or something, and then they got together, and here I am.

My father had a shotgun wedding when he was in high school that he was no longer married to, so my mother couldn't get married in the Church, so that was very offensive to my grandfather, who was very, very not like my grandmother, gentle. He was a critical man, very tall, and had opinions, and he read a great deal. He was informed. He [would look at the] newspapers and everything. Even though he was a factory worker and all that sort of thing, he was very informed.

Then what happened was there was something called the Rubber Mills in La Crosse, where everybody worked, and they closed down. It was one of those factory towns. So my grandfather became the custodian of the local school, of La Crosse, the high school. My grandmother left dressmaking, because she had to get a job, because she couldn't make money dressmaking, and she worked for the rest of her life in Auto-Lite, basically on an assembly line. I have pictures of her on the assembly line, and she's always had her necklace, her pearls and her lovely dress. She looked like she was going to church.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, some people have standards. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: It was just so beautiful. My grandfather came from a side of the family which is French, Dousseau [ph], and they had what is referred to and what my family told me I had was called the "Dousseau [ph] streak," and it was a very creative, high-toned kind of eccentric streak. My mother had it and my grandfather had it, some of my grandfather's sisters had it—well, they all had it.

I had an aunt named Aunt Lottie and she was like something out of Bloomsbury. She wore incredible jodhpurs, mounted policemen's hats and she'd be photographed on Model Ts and she had a pipe and she never wore a bra and she always was in costume and posing in Victorian dresses. She was unbelievably theatrical and wonderful-looking.

And my mother came from that kind of thing. It was very different. My sister takes after the Czechoslovakian, more loving, humble, more people-friendly side of things. We looked very different. We don't look like we even know each other.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's through the Dusseau that you have the Native American blood?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Mmm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The descendants of Kur, DuBois and the Voiajur going down—or up the Fox River and—

DIANNE BLELL: Boy, you know a lot about—I want you to do my heritage.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I lived for a couple of years in Wisconsin, and we were very interested in the history of exploration. The portage there between the head of the Fox River and the—

DIANNE BLELL: There's something called "French Island", which is near LaCrosse—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —where I think some of our

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well—

DIANNE BLELL: —involved in that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The Fox River, you go down through the—

DIANNE BLELL: Was it LaCrosse French Island?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, that's up north of this. This is the route from Green Bay to Nina to Oshkosh up the Fox River to the Wisconsin River and down the Wisconsin River—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, we were near the Mississippi River.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Yes, the Prairie du Chien, which is—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, my farm—the family farm's in Prairie du Chien.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that—this is—this was—

DIANNE BLELL: Prairie du Chien. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Du Chien. That was the—

DIANNE BLELL: They call it Prairie du Chien. [Pronounces "Ducheen"]

MR. ML: Prairie du Chien—

DIANNE BLELL: Prairie du Chien—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —across the river from—

DIANNE BLELL: And Galesville.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —McGregor, Iowa. So—but this was a superhighway. For years, it was the fur trade and this was—

DIANNE BLELL: The fur trade. Fur trappers.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —where this was the link between the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico was Wisconsin. A lot of people don't know that.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, they say that my great-grandfather, great-great grandfather was a fur trapper, and he married a Norwegian lady, my grandmother, who was Johnson, Deena Johnson. And they managed an inn or something like that. And they got married and then he was Dusseau. [They had 9 or 10 children, and must have started a farm because all the Dusseaus, my great aunts and uncles, also grew up on farms and farming. I have pictures of all my Czech aunts and Dusseau uncles in overalls with pitchforks!]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you should go on a *Prairie Home Companion*.

DIANNE BLELL: Really?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's all that part of the country, isn't it?

DIANNE BLELL: I would really like to find more. I bet we're online. I saw tribes of LaCrosse and they said in history that some of the people that wrote about it, some of the documents from that era just referred to them as the Indians; they didn't even have enough respect to even refer to them by their tribe.

And so, it was bits and pieces to find out about the Ojibwe and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you've got the Muncie, Stockbridge, Menominee. You've got Ojibwe or Ashinabenabe [sic; Anishinabe] and—which I'm sure I'm mispronouncing. You have Sac and Fox; you've got Lakota; you've got all these—you've got—

DIANNE BLELL: I heard of Sac and Fox.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Winnebago—

DIANNE BLELL: Winnebago—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and—no, I think—

DIANNE BLELL: What was the—you said Ojibwe and the other one? I always get them mixed up.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Anishinabe—I can't—I can't say it.

DIANNE BLELL: Ojibwe?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, Ojibwe or Chippewa.

DIANNE BLELL: Chippewa.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: I always get them mixed up. When I say one, I can't remember the other—Ojibwe and Chippewa.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, they're this—they're the same. It's just a different way of francophying—Francophile—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, is it really?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —francophoning it or Anglicizing it.

DIANNE BLELL: And one of those besides Menominee. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. So—but, yes, Winnebagos are very—

DIANNE BLELL: I'd like to find out which specifically because it was another one of those things where I just know the name. I found a death certificate registered online and I didn't see the date [Pinecliff Cemetary, Galesville Wisconsin, Trempealeau County 1811-1864]. Her name was Terri Dusso. When she died, she was the Indian lady, I was told. I did learn somewhere that you never say—the word "squaw" is supposed to be really derogatory.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Very, very insulting.

DIANNE BLELL: Very insulting. I didn't know that that was an insulting word.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But many of the Plains nations, peoples, have French surnames because of the fur trapping industry.

DIANNE BLELL: Right. Oh, Mmm-hmm [affirmation].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's actually the—if you go to—if—after—I mean, this is an off-interview, probably, conversation, but—

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I can share some contacts in Wisconsin. They're very, very interested in the whole history of the region. They have a lot of information.

DIANNE BLELL: I would love that, because I was thinking of taking a drive up there and really going into the records all around LaCrosse and seeing how far back I can go.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's quite—there's—

DIANNE BLELL: Her name is Terri Dusso.[The family spelling was previously altered from Dusseau. Dusso and Dusseau are variations in the family.] I heard about her for years. Some people called her Crazy Terri; I remember the family had a little nickname for her, Crazy Terri. Isn't that terrible?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure it's a term of endearment.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] I hope so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So returning to your teen years in California, you discovered an aptitude for drawing.

DIANNE BLELL: I just did. It was automatic.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You just did. Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. I loved doing it; it was my refuge. I would lock myself in my room since I was a kid and just draw. I would draw every comic strip. I drew all the Katy Keenes. I have a Katy Keene drawing my sister sent me, where -you were aware of Katy Keene? [Laughs.] Anyway, she was always in these dresses and things.

She was in a dress with roses all over it and bustles and things in her hair. She looks like Scarlett O'Hara and

she's holding a basket. And it has two left thumbs. [Laughs.] I drew the hands incorrectly. And [I remember trying to draw] her profile and I drew it again and again until the pencil went through the paper trying to correct and get the profile right.

And I would do all the "How to Draw," "Draw Me" things. It was just something—but something I remember. I want to share something with my kindergarten year. I was in kindergarten and it was a big room and all the tables were lined up around the edges, and it was time to draw. Of course this is what we loved.

And I was standing there and we had to draw a cat. Well, I've loved cats all my life. [Laughs.] And the little boy next to me was drawing a cat and I was drawing a cat and so here's the head and here's the oval body and she's kind of telling us how to draw the cat, you know. So I'm putting my legs on and the little boy next to me is drawing the legs on the cat, and he's continuing to draw more and more and more legs until there were like 10 legs. And I thought, well, that's cool. I was thinking it's sort of like a running cat.

So the teacher comes over and goes, tsk, tsk, tsk, a cat only has four legs. And she erases the legs. I remember knowing—I didn't know the word "politically incorrect", but I knew it was wrong, that she shouldn't have taken that eraser and erased the legs on the cat. I thought, "this is outrageous". I was very outspoken as a child.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I can't imagine. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know why. But it would just come out. So it was this kind of way of seeing things. I had that, whatever it is. I guess maybe it's artistic. It's a different line of expressing a thought or seeing in between things or seeing what somebody really means or what it doesn't mean or something like that.

I didn't know to be censored. My mother was very strict. We were not sassy kids. We were not the kind of kids you see going out to dinner now, where they're yelling right up and down the aisle in the delis. No. We always went out to dinner, we sat like proper little girls. I don't know where I got that. I might have gotten it from my funny Aunt Lottie—[laughs]. Because I loved her, and she was very different. There was a different—I liked different. I loved different all my life.

So the teacher comes over and does this, and then she goes in and she draws the four legs. And I thought this was just outrageous and really improper. He just sort of was smiling. He had glasses and he had spiky, thin hair all sticking up and everything. He'd look at me sort of like this and he looks at her and he looked out and he looked at me again. And she walked away and he just starting drawing even more legs again.

Then she came back and she did the same thing a second time. No, no, no, I told you. And he went like this and I went like this and then she went away and he drew in the legs again. That kid, I'll tell you, I wished I could have whatever he had my whole life.

I remember one other little boy in my second grade. My mother taught us to read when we were 4 or 5; I could read early. We knew the alphabet. It was in the second grade, and we had to go and say the—maybe it was the first; I can't remember. We had to learn the alphabet to G—A-B-C-D-E-F-G—and come back the next day and say A-B-C-D-E-F-G.

Well, I already knew the alphabet, so I didn't have any homework to do. I was second in line where the seats were. She started from the right first seat and then my turn and there was a little boy behind me. So I got up and just said A-B-C-D-E-F-G because that's all, you know, the girl in front of me said. The little boy got up behind me and was A-B-C-D-E-F-G—H! And I was frosted. I thought, why didn't you go, H-I-J-K-L-M-N-O-P-Q-R-S-T-U-V-W-X-Y-Z? [Laughs.] But it just riledme. I'll never get it out of my mind. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Kids say the darndest things. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: But do you remember specific things like that? You must.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sure.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I'd love to know what you—[laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sure.

DIANNE BLELL: But it kind of made me think I should be a little pushy. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it can't hurt to ask for what you want. So what was the first time you found yourself enthralled by a work of art and being curious about one particular artist or—

DIANNE BLELL: The first—well if you want to get to that, I was curious about so many things.

I loved art history, and I loved my art history teacher in college. I think that's the first time I really had the wherewithal to really comprehend rather than the most naïve, saccharine, religious kind of way. I don't really remember going to museums very much. She took us to the Art Institute a couple of times.

It was just basically the most common things that I would draw, like comic books and portraits of people, my friends. Then, I remember—this is modern art. The art history was in my sophomore year in college, and this teacher, she wore a fabulous hat. She was like something out of those hats that you see on a Cranach woman only she was big. She wasn't that sort of skinny with the big-old shoes. But she was wonderful.

She came with smocks, and she favored me, she liked me. I think it was—probably a Botticelli. I was very naïve and simplistic in a complicated way. But then I remember in a class loving this Botticelli, all the Botticellis, *Primavera* specifically, and the faces on them.

Then the teacher said—oh, and I love Picasso. I love Picasso. I thought he was really amazing. I just love them all. I used to copy. I'm getting a little all over the map. I remember copying a photograph of a statue that was by, oh, let me see. It was of the Virgin Mary and it was by—it was a stone-chiseled statue—oh, what was his name? He was—it's funny, it's fallen out of my head. He carved in very striated long—he did that Mary Magdelene with the long hair covering her all up in this tentacles and strands and strands and strands.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh—

DIANNE BLELL: I know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're not talking about Canova?

DIANNE BLELL: No, no, no. I came to Canova—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, no. Earlier.

DIANNE BLELL: —later on. He was much cooler. His stuff was very lapidary, polished and marbles. No, this was—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm just trying to think—well, anyway—

DIANNE BLELL: Anyway, it was a Virgin Mary—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Italian? German?

DIANNE BLELL: Italian or German.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Desiderio? No? Not Desiderio Settignano? I'm trying to think: Michelangelo, Donatello—

DIANNE BLELL: Donatello.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

DIANNE BLELL: Donatello did very—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —chiseled, long and was very sinewy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He did the *David* that's this androgynous David, too.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, then, maybe it's not—did Donatello do that *David*? I thought Michelangelo did that *David*. The *David* in Florence?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, the hunky *David* was done by—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Buonarroti. Donatello did the sort of very boyish—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —very pretty with a—with a hat—

DIANNE BLELL: —with the—with the d'asch mon.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Exactly.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, the first one. And that's the copy of which is in Florence.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Stepping on the head, yes. Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, yes. That's Donatello?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm.

DIANNE BLELL: That's not Donatello. I still think he was much smoother, unless he had two styles.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, we can find out which artist it was—

DIANNE BLELL: I think it is Donatello [referencing his *Mary Magdalene*].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Might be.

DIANNE BLELL: Anyway, there was a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and I was in high school. It was all every little wrinkle in the veil, every little crevice. I drew it in charcoal. I'd never had any charcoal lessons or anything. A nun sent it into the Catholic World, the newspaper.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm [affirmative].

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know if you're Catholic. I mean, I was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not yet.

DIANNE BLELL: Anyway, it was called the New World. Catholic World. There was an artist contest, and I won a prize. I was wondering what happened to my drawing, what happened to my drawing. And the teacher didn't tell me, the nun didn't tell me. This was actually a nun that was very different from all the other nuns. She was very proactive and very fierce and she scared the hell out of me.

I was a sophomore, and she sent this in and I got a citation. I had my picture in—The New World, it was called The New World. I had my picture in The New World—[laughs]—I got a check for something like $10. I wish I had a picture of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's the thought that counts. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: Somewhere, that picture is either in my boxes or in my sister's boxes. I was impressed with it. I drew every little crevice, every little dark, every shade, everything, .

Then I remember the time when I was really struck by contemporary work was when I was 18, and I saw the Sol—I didn't even know Sol LeWitt from Sol LeWitt. But I remember in this, believe it or not, very sun-filled room at then it was called the LaJolla Art Center. It's now the University Art Museum in California on Prospect and LaJolla.

It still has that room, but on that wall, it's overlooking the cove, LaJolla Cove. Big glass windows like this. And right here is this drawing on the wall with these lines, these pastel lines. I didn't know until years later it was Sol LeWitt. I had forgotten that it was Sol but I thought it was just amazing. And Larry Bell—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm.

DIANNE BLELL: —it was a box there. Then also, I remember seeing a shoe nailed down to like a totem situation from, what's his name from LA? He did all these kind of assemblages.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Kienholz?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, Kienholz. It was a Kienholz. And I was working on the crew—I was a volunteer student and I was taking drawing lessons and all kinds of things. I was being introduced to this contemporary art because I had a surfer boyfriend who went there, and I thought, well, I want to take some drawing lessons.

So I was frustrated a little bit by having to draw Blessed Virgin Marys all the time and grapes and various things like that and draperies. It was boring me. Not only that, the teacher in my school, I didn't like her very much, she was la-di-da, and she was skinny and she wore these sheaths and I just thought, ugh. [Laughs.] She was just so—it was something very middle class about her, and she gave me a C. I was better than everybody else in the class and she gave them As. I just couldn't believe it.

And here, this was my most important course, so I was really just discouraged. So I went to the La Jolla Art

Center and I became very involved and I just immersed myself in the life there and the classes and the teachers and the parties and the students. Then I had my major—I had a romance with John Altoon. Give me a break. I was 19 now. So can you imagine that? [They laugh.] I mean, that was—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long did that—

DIANNE BLELL: —the first he-man I ever knew.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Yes]. How long did that last?

DIANNE BLELL: He had a melodic voice—off and on for three years. I went up to LA I wasn't quite mature enough to handle the character because he was going in and out of sanity, and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh.

DIANNE BLELL: Also, he was LA, and I was on my way growing up and I had places to go and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you were a kid basically.

DIANNE BLELL: I had no jealousy or sense of possession then.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: I didn't have any rules then. It was just when he was in town, "hi, John!". I just couldn't figure it out,I remember—I went to see Reggie [Hager, a friend, during one of his classes]—I'm telling you some very personal things here, is that all right?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sure.

DIANNE BLELL: Reggie was taking his class. And John Altoon was the teacher. He was telling me all about this imposing man that was—whatever. I remember I had on this green dress—I had a favorite dress—and it was culottes. It had little white butterflies all over it.

It had a white band here, and a white band here and white band here, and a white band, and on and on. I was little and it was really a great little dress. [Laughs.] I wore it every single day. I just waited until it was clean I'd put back on again. That was my dress—my uniform. I've always dressed in uniforms ever since then and that's probably why I went into the airlines. [Laughs.] But anyway, I realized the pragmatism of uniforms, and so I've gotten like 25 of these.

Anyway, so—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It makes shopping easy.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, no, my evening dress shopping is not formulaic. I never throw anything out and I choose works of art in clothing. Works of art maybe—but we'll come full circle then because that played a major role in my work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes I'm starting to see patterns and light motifs and themes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. This is why some of this is interesting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, this is why sometimes with these interviews I like to ask questions about the individual artist that might not seem immediately relevant to someone who's—

DIANNE BLELL: Now I can see why it takes two four-hour periods. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's not going to take that long. It's more like 6 hours total. But the thing is that to establish a rapport, and also to sort of give the interviewee a chance to re-examine some of—

DIANNE BLELL: Well I don't really have any secrets. It's all interesting to me. I see the thread because some of it. I actually was terrified of the art world because my mother was critical of me and I remember she was very, very—this is something I have never told anyone. I think I've only told maybe one other person in my, maybe two people.

But when I was in the eighth grade. My mother was distinctive. She dressed unusually—beautifully, but unusually, not like everybody else in the world. She was glamorous. She had an edge. She would paint not the walls turquoise but the ceiling turquoise and the walls white. She had Thai furniture in a rumpus room multicolored patio stones, odd—circles mixed in squares. She was creative in those ways.

Anyway, I drew somehow—I don't know, in life, in church—you saw nudity. You saw Adams and Eves and things like that. And you just took them for granted. So I decided I—I had this burgeoning sexuality. I was 13—12, 13. So I drew all these Adams and Eves in the Garden of Eden and everything. And my mother found them in a folder and tore them all up and threw them all over my bedroom because she thought I was being immoral.

I never said anything about it. I can't remember whether she threw a fit—because she was quite histrionic. She had an image and if things broke from that image she got frightening because, to tell the truth, my mother was a very wild woman. She danced and she broke out from the farm. And she went to the big city. And she met my dashing father.

My father was very dashing. He was just about—he was like James Dean. He was one of the most handsome men I've ever laid eyes on in my life. And it's not just because he's my dad. Believe me, I've got my complaints with my dad. [Laughs.] You know, he's been married—he's had three families. [Laughs.] So I'm just saying that it was kind of interesting, that, because they both were these kind of exquisite-looking creatures when they got dressed up and all that sort of thing.

And yet I knew it was all materialistic and physical. I knew there was a level of impressiveness to it, but it bothered me that there should be more substance to certain things. I always thought about things very deeply and examined them or turned them upside down or looked under the rock.

So anyway, my mother—[laughs] so there was the Adam and Eve thing. That may touch on something to do with art and expression. There was that Virgin Mary thing, which was diametrically opposed. [Laughs.] The Virgin Mary was later. The Adam and Eve thing was first—Garden of Eden. Oh, and I remember how I drew the people.

I didn't know anything about anatomy of course. I remember all their shoulders were round like this. They all went down like this and their arms were hanging at their side like apes. [Laughs.] And there's Adam and there was Eve. And they were—[laughs]—nude. But they had these shoulders it was sort of like Giacometti's style. I should try and draw like that now. I wish I had a sample of it. I guess I threw them out because I was supposed to or something like that. I don't know what I did with them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So when was the first time you actually worked from a nude model?

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know if I can really remember. It might have been at the La Jolla Art Center. In fact, it was at the La Jolla Art Center. It was at the La Jolla Art Center. I didn't find it very shocking. I was always very advanced. I knew about it even though I hadn't been exposed to it. I wanted to expose myself to things. I was aware of other things—that there were other things out there other than my small exposure.

I loved Sacred Heart. I wasn't trying to rebel against the church because Sacred Heart—the church I didn't like, at the time, because of my mother's quandary. And I thought, well, now my father's leaving my mother and now she can be accepted as a Catholic. Where's that at? What's the church—[inaudible].

You mean, I was illegitimate all these years and how I'm legitimate because I'm illegitimate? [Laughs.] I was never illegitimate, but I mean, in the church's eyes that now she's divorced—does that make me legitimate because she was excommunicated for marrying a—you know.

So I was very confused about what I should believe in. But I loved the nuns. The nuns did not preach anything at you. They did not discipline you. But I was brought up in grade school with terrible, elaborate, vivid lectures on sex. And I remember the nuns—and the Mercy nuns they were. They were frightening. They were histrionic. And it was, oh, dogmatic and—but not the Sacred Heart nuns.

They were all doctors and Ph.D.'s and intellectuals. And they were broad minded. And this is another thing that was very early. And this is one of the most striking influences, and it comes back to my work—the retail background of my father, the sexuality and the pursuit of love and human yearning, the human condition, the superficial aspect of fashion—but it has to do with desire and how to integrate that.

Then the first class my freshman year, Mother McMonagle, the mother general of the school. We were obligated to take catechism. I remember the illustrations in the catechism were the states of grace and the venial sin and the mortal sin. And they were illustrated by milk bottles. And there was a milk bottle of pure white milk. And there was a milk bottle looked like Guernsey cow, and that was a venial sin. And there was a bottle of black milk and that was a mortal sin. [Laughs.]

Then there were these fountains that were spouting all these virtues and things. [Laughs.] Wonderful things and streams of all these sort of wonderful—and then there were the vices, which were these black streams and they were going into these things. They could be diverted. And I just remember just these illustrations.

Then there was a class suddenly in mythology. And here I thought, well, this is funny. I wonder why they're

teaching us mythology. It's pagan. Everything that we're taught as a vice is elevated to the point of heroic accomplishment in mythology—jealousy, rage, war, pettiness—[laughs]—infidelity—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Lust, passion—all these—

DIANNE BLELL: Lust! Nothing but lust! And I thought this is—so my entire life, all my work to this day is based in myth and religion and desire at the crest between the two. And retail—for instance, when I had my first show in New York, my show at Stefanotti Gallery—because of my retail background I decided I have to use all this girly fashion stuff that I've been raised in.

I realized that I learned about art through reproduction and mythology textbooks—well, you're asking me when I was exposed to art and the reason I'm having a problem isolating it is because basically I was exposed to so much and that was through reproduction not really directly that I can remember, except in the schools where they had statuary. In Sacred Heart schools they had extraordinary paintings and things like that, but not really—well.

Anyway, so I thought by reproduction it's very interesting. It has a lot to do with magazines. It has to do with how you learn everything. It's reproduced. I thought, well, all this fashion advertising is reproduction. And its basic modus operandi is to create desire for the product in the woman so that she must covet this piece of clothing therefore to becomes desirable herself to someone else—to fulfill the basic state of human yearning and fulfillment of the ideal.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's interesting because before we came here, Chelsea [James's assistant] and I were talking about taste and how taste has been sold to the population as realm of personal preference, but in fact the origins are in antiquity with despots and rulers imposing sumptuary laws and standards on every class. So if you were an aristocratic member of the warrior class, capable of raising an army to challenge the king, these sumptuary edits could keep you so impoverished by having to maintain this lavish lifestyle that you couldn't possibly afford to rebel.

DIANNE BLELL: I wonder if they thought of that. Did they think of that specifically?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Absolutely. I think that—

DIANNE BLELL: They thought we got to keep all the money—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it sort of occupied—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, it's subjugating the masses with style. I mean, I guess that's an instinct. It's like worker bees, uh-huh.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —occupying people with rituals and lifestyle is a form of ritual. And fashion, what kind of cloth you're allowed to wear, what kind of jewelry, you're—

DIANNE BLELL: Mmm-hmm. Oh, what about indigo? [Laughs.] I just—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, or Roman purple or however you want to look at it.

DIANNE BLELL: Uh-huh. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That in a way, fashion and style and taste are all the modern manifestations of ancient sumptuary edicts that were designed to control the population. And so that—

DIANNE BLELL: I never thought it quite that way. That's very interesting, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that we express a preference for one thing or another.

DIANNE BLELL: So my mother's taste was breaking out of her farm backgrounds into another level.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Probably. It's not about individual identity, it's about group identity that—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, no, she wanted to be recognized as—yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that your—right, that your taste is—

DIANNE BLELL: And of course, when my father, as he climbed the ladder in retail, we moved to the suburbs of Wilmette and when I was 12 we went to the local Catholic school. And then went up to the convent school.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, at what point—

DIANNE BLELL: I went to Catholic convent boarding schools in two places—Lake Forest close to Chicago and El Cajon, near San Diego, back and forth. They're all over the world, these schools.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The acreage around the house, is there a pool, is there a one-car garage, two-car garage, do you hire a person to mow the lawn, do you do it yourself? I mean, all of these things are aspects of lifestyle. But the whole idea that taste is—as a preference is a preference to identify with the class to which you belong or to which you aspire to belong. And that's all behind advertising in America.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I have a ton of research when I do that series called *Charmed Heads and Urban Cupids*, I don't know if you looked at that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Uh-huh. Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Also, the previously one, did you see *Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary*—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I was about to—

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] You know, Hans Haacke loves that piece.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I was about to ask you about that because I also thought about early work by Koons having to do with ads for liquor.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, he was young then—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, but he was—

DIANNE BLELL: He wasn't around when I did that piece. But Haacke was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, no, he was later. But he was using the language of advertising. He was appropriating it.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, yes. Well, Warhol—he's an offshoot of Warhol.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yes, he's out of the Warholian cannon.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. I love Jeff Koons.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But that series to me—it occurred to me that there was a connection with somebody like Cindy Sherman, a sort of—

DIANNE BLELL: She also is younger than I am.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She's younger, but the sort of personal—

DIANNE BLELL: She was doing the film stills in New York independently and quite quietly while I started my fashion pieces on the West coast. Then I came to New York and I had a show in New York in 1979. It was called *Charmed Heads and Urban Cupids*. And it was kind of a succés de scandale.

It was double page in the *Village Voice*, "How dare someone use fashion advertising?" I was criticized in the San Francisco Chronicle, "Just culled from the pages of Vogue Magazine with the credits and all." And you know, "And how dare she frame like paintings," like elaborate Metropolitan Museum frames. I had all the fashion credits along with them and everything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that was the thing. There was one image, I guess it's of you, in an ensemble with a text block—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —describing the outfit.

DIANNE BLELL: And there was the matrix program at the museum. I decided that fashion portraiture had overtaken basically the world of W magazine and photographed by fashion—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Avedon, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Like Avedon or Irving Penn or—the earlier one JAMES MCELHINNEY: Beaton?

DIANNE BLELL: Cecil Beaton.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Basically the painted portrait was gone. It was basically by these high-fashion dandies and various people with great portraits. So I thought, okay. I was asked to do a piece in the matrix. And they had a room where everybody did it. I thought, no, I'm going to change the location of my work and have it put in the contemporary collection—somewhere else other than the matrix room so that it can participate in the conversation with all the other permanent collection pieces.

So it was called *Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary Collection*. And it basically was all the trappings of a contemporary woman in that I did the text like it was, again, the shoe wraps the foot—[laughs]—and describing everything in monetary basis.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was there kind of a pun there in the use of the word collection because it was the collection of a designer or the collection of an art collector?

DIANNE BLELL: Both.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: It was personal designer but basically an art collection in a museum. *Portrait [of a Lady] for a Contemporary Collection* also would be a photographic fashion portrait, very well-made up, not a painted portrait by van Dyck or anything like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you were using yourself as the model for this.

DIANNE BLELL: I was initially.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there was—

DIANNE BLELL: I went through an entire fashion shoot and I had it all videotaped and they bought the video recording of the process.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, interesting. Couple years earlier, year before or two, you had done a show at Berggruen of the *Oasis*—

DIANNE BLELL: I think that was—oh, that's right. Yes, I did a lot of nude pieces.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just one big—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, it was actually very small.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, it was?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. I'll tell you why. Before I started putting my clothes on—[laughs]—my initial interest was in—this is going back to the sexuality and, actually, it was going back to my feeling, as a woman, not necessarily being a victim, but being the subject of voyeuristic observation by going to a lot of museums and seeing women nude in their portraits and their pictures and what's one of the—I'm sorry I have so much on my mind.

At the Brooklyn museum, she's laying back and you can see everything. And she's like an ocean. It's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Which piece are we talking about?

DIANNE BLELL: I'm just—the painter—he killed his wife or something. What is his name? I mean, he's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A contemporary artist?

DIANNE BLELL: No, he's a painter—no. Another century, I mean, like 19th century.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hmm. I' m trying to think who killed their wife.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, he was very good-looking. He was very controversial. I don't know why I'm having trouble with his name. [Courbet, mentioned later in the interview]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We can catch up in the next installment.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. But anyway, it had to do with desirability.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: And again, desirability. The woman is the object of desire. I was very concerned with the woman figure in a painting making the artwork an object of desire by virtue of the fact that the woman is an object of desire. Everything's playing on desire. Very curious about desire because it impels, compels everyone, everything, you know?

That's that play in advertising. It's just the desire to be desirable, to create desire in you to want to have the product —[laughs] —this whole thing initially started out with this issue of yearning and the object of desire.

Being a woman in the art world early was interesting and—not questionable, but—worth analysis to me, an inner analysis, because it really was kind of difficult being a girl at that point, when I sort of started out in there. There weren't that many of us, and we had to be tough. I know there are women that preceded me, but it was still a little dicey—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —in my era. It was still dicey. And there were women support groups and all these kind of encounter groups and things to support each other. And the women, still, are fewer, but not so much.

We weren't brought up to kind of—we were brought up to get married.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Well, that was the—

DIANNE BLELL: And it was scary to become an artist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was the paradigm of the previous generation.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—but—

DIANNE BLELL: I was brought up to get married. But I wasn't ready; I didn't want to get married.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But were you perhaps being defiant of your mother having torn up your drawings of Adam and Eve? Was that—was there some kind of—

DIANNE BLELL: No. Ever since I was little, I thought I'm never going to have a white wedding. I just never imagined the—that was never something I wanted—I've never pictured a wedding, ever. Ever! What color the bridesmaids dresses would be; I never ever!—never ever thought—I never designed it in my mind. I was busy drawing Katy Keene and all her outfits, but I didn't have any—"Oh, I'm going to have the perfect wedding." I was really curious about the world and what was going on out there.

And enter surfer boy. I was living in La Jolla, a very advanced place. Here I was, a little girl, and I was going from La Jolla—this is another thing about sexuality and the role it plays in, maybe, my path. I'm from Chicago and I'm from La Jolla; and La Jolla—I'm the only virgin in La Jolla—[laughs]—because I'm from Chicago, because Chicago's conservative. But in Chicago, I was a very passionate girl; I loved to make out. So I was considered really racy and a little bit loose, even though I was a virgin and I was very, very limited in my degrees of experimentation. Because I was a good girl, I was determined to stay a good girl, a virgin, until I got out of high school; I was determined. And my contemporary girlfriends—and the girls that were already—they were really not nice girls, and so I just didn't see myself in that. I was the racier version of the good girl.

So I go to La Jolla and it was like, "Oh, God, she's a prude." And I'd be in Chicago, "Oh, she's loose." So I never quite—I was always like "Where do I belong?" And then I had to leave home, like kids getting—you know, they kick themselves out of the nest. I wanted to get out there. And I'm 18 ½, I'm 19—"I'm going to the art center, man. I have a surfer boyfriend; he's taking a class from John Altoon."

So I, knock on the door and door opens like this, and there's this man standing here, with eyes—talk about Indian; maybe it was the Indian in me, but I'm telling you, those black eyes—there is nothing more impressive than John Altoon, when you're meeting him and 19 years. It was a force. It was like—I mean, like Vulcan not being lame. It was just this mass. And he was a short, stocky guy with massive shoulders and a skinny waist, and he had a beautiful, deep melodic voice and he was articulate. And he goes, "Yes?" And he was—just had this mane, and then this hair and black mustache. He was so extraordinary-looking. And I'd never quite met anybody that looked like that.

And I was used to, you know, boys. The earth moved, you know? I didn't know why. And so I go, "Is Reggie here?" And he goes, "Yes, he's over there." And I walk by him, and he goes "Hmm."

So after that, that night, we all go to the El Sombrero Bar, which was the art bar in La Jolla where all the

teachers and artists—and there was no difference in age, and suddenly I was in a situation where there was no difference in age between 35-year-olds and 18-year-olds and 25-year-olds. And that's what the art world's like. When Roy Lichtenstein died and when Richard Bellamy died we were all friends, and I said, "What did you just say? How did they– How could they possibly be dying; they're too young!" And then there's the—oh God, that's right, the age difference, but even then, they still died too young. I don't think they hit 80, but I mean, when Robert Rosenblum died I couldn't stand it. I have his picture up there; he was one of my best friends. He was one of my gurus, too. And he loved my work, and he projected it and he used it in lectures of all the romantic things.

I mean, I actually got some of those pieces—talk about being struck by work—at different times in my life. Later, it was *Transformations from* [sic/*in*] *the Late Eighteenth Century [Art]* that blew me away.

Now, this gets me back to the first art that blew me away. And I saw the Sol LeWitt and Larry Bell and the Ed Kienholz and everything. And they were all doing these very [different things: modern minimal to organic constructions, et cetera, outside of Papal Catholic Art History, which I learned about in art history a San Diego College for Women, a Sacred Heart Catholic College]. John Altoon was doing them—he would vacillate between his figures and his loose, organic shapes, you know—and those things with tubes coming out of them, those big bulbous things and those ovarian-looking things. And Donald Dudley was doing that, and they were all doing this stuff down there, then. And they were very sensual and strange and organic, you know? And I remember those.

And I didn't really know about de Kooning and those people; I learned about those through Reggie [sp] the surfer, you know?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, really? [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, because these surfers were advanced, they were the early hippies. They knew about things.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the West Coast did have its own kind of self-sufficient art scenes—LA being distinct.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, yes. Well, LA—I've always thought LA was—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the Bay Area also having a distinct—

DIANNE BLELL: I love LA getting its due, now. I love that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. And so—

DIANNE BLELL: I knew all those guys. Ed Ruscha was the first person to collect my art. He bought *Oasis for a Gallery*—we got to get back to *Oasis for a Gallery* now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Exactly, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And we got to get back to the—another milestone. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was the genesis of that exhibition?

DIANNE BLELL: First I did the nude on Broadway. And that was a lot about, well, classicism—the classical nude; the woman as an object. And here, in San Francisco—and there's topless—and this is repulsive; I mean, just all this topless.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Carol Doda, right? You know—[laughs].

DIANNE BLELL: Carol Doda—and then we were saturated in that. And we used to go and watch her. She'd come up through a tube and she was out to here. And she would come up doing go-go, she comes out, and then all of a sudden there is—what's his name, with the hairdo and the monokini—and he was a friend of Altoon's, and he did the monokini and—and that fashion designer; I can't—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Gernreich.

DIANNE BLELL: Rudi Gernreich, yes. And that's what took the unisex part—[laughs]—everything—all that stuff by storm.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right.

DIANNE BLELL: And you know, so—and I was thinking, "God"—I was married—I married a man in San Francisco who—well, the Walker museum, that family—Sandy Walker, an architect. He was the racy member of his family; it was a very conservative family. And he married racy me. And I was his third wife—you know, just like my dad.

It was just amazing.

So anyway—so I was in society. I went from just this art girl, and single on the scene, and I I was back to art school; I quit the airlines. And I knew all the artists and everything like that. But I mean, there was an intermixture—like New York; it had its intermixture on a certain level—you know, the creative things, a lot of musicians there, as you know, the Rock and Roll scene there and everything; it was all mushed together.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, this would be the late—this would be the '70s now, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes—the '70s, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So then—so—

DIANNE BLELL: And then—and then there were the Cockettes—all this stuff was going on; it was—I don't know if you ever heard of the Cockettes. You ever hear—[laughs]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The Cockettes? No.

DIANNE BLELL: They were a gay transvestite group—look 'em up—they were an outrageous group, and they made—they made the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: Oh my God, they made—they did these shows. They were sort of like the Folies Bergère, only they were—they were really *folles*—[laughs]—and feathers and singing. I mean, it was wild. All hell was breaking loose. You know Mario Savio—and all—all that stuff had been taking place. There were riots—all that had been taking place in the late '60s. There was the Free Speech Movement, and then then it was the radicals and it was just a pretty extraordinary—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, San Francisco—

DIANNE BLELL: There was the The Haight—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, had this whole history for years—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Going back to, you know, the Yerba Buena days—

DIANNE BLELL: The Beats. The Beats.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and the Gold Rush, and—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, oh yes. Oh yes—yes, yes, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, the Beat—and, you know, the Beats and—yes.

DIANNE BLELL: I always felt that I don't think I could ever not live on the edge of a land mass, because I always think by virtue of their edginess, they're edgy, you know? I don't think you get a conservative community. Maybe you do up in some fishing places that are really—but I mean, you always get some artist that has a house there for some reason.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: You know, in like Maine and these places. So there's still—maybe they are more quietly, they just do their own thing, they don't bother each other—[laughs]—down east, and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, they're not—they're not, like, in the middle of the prairie, where you have—

DIANNE BLELL: No—[laughs]—they're not the silent majority. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —extremely—no—no, no. It's—

DIANNE BLELL: So I always felt like I needed to be able to be capable of a marine dive off of the edge of a landmass, so they get wet and come back, and we should—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: That's how I always pictured where I live. [Laughs.]

So anyway, the first year—I really want to get this past me, because it really struck me. I didn't even know about Rauschenberg, for some reason. Maybe I did, and I'd forgotten. But I was 21; I was in Seattle for my first year in the airlines, and I decided to go to the Seattle Museum. And so I went to the museum and saw a Rauschenberg—and mind you, I had been living in LA, and John Altoon would take me to museums; I took classes from John Altoon at Chouinard , I had been hanging out with some pretty interesting people.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was it like in those days, at Chouinard?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I just took a night class from John. I didn't attend Chouinard full-time; I was actually a secretary—Ford Motor Company, public relations. And John would call me up, and I'd say, "Ford Motor Company; public relations;" he'd go, teasingly, "Ford Motor Company; public relations." [Laughs.] He was so funny. He was very funny.

And I'd go out with him and then I'd get to the part where, "Oh my God," and he'd be demanding or he'd be, like, heavier than I could take for—whatever, I don't know what—I don't even know—didn't know about commitment at that time, anyway. I wasn't even looking for a commitment, but I just—it was a big deal. I was kind of going in between being very straight—after I left home and went to LA I became like this straight little girl taking art classes. Little A-frame dresses, and I was a secretary. So I had two lives and I was going back and forth.

I saw these dopey cards with little cupids on it—and to this day I use cupids; sometimes I use the silk screen in my styles, and I would buy a cupid. I remember sending one to John Altoon, and he just said, "This is really commercial." [Laughs.] I said, "Did you like my card?" "No." [Laughs.]

So I was having a hard time sorting out—I was really frightened of what was really arty. Because what I saw as arty in La Jolla was really very edgy. And when I was leaving home, I was sleeping in bookstores at night and everything because I was really in a fight with my mother.

And I'm going to tell you something very funny. The first night I ever stayed out all night in my life—nothing to do having sex—[laughs]. It was just getting smashed at a party for the La Jolla Art Institute. And there was—after the show, where I'd painted all the stands and everything like that—and there was a party at some fancy lady's house who was taking life drawing classes there, and I was taking them, too. I was a little kid, I was with John Altoon. He got smashed, he went off and passed out on the sofa somewhere; I slept in some chair. There were people sleeping all over this house, there were people left over from the parties. It was just a bash, you know?

And I remember waking up—oh my God, it was 5:00 in the morning. And I went running around looking for John. I was looking in bedrooms, I was looking—I said, "John, you got to get me home, you got to get me home. My mother's going to kill me. My mother's going to kill me. My mother is going to kill me."

Anyway—so here's John, 30-something years old, you know? And I'm 19. And he was separated from Fay Spain at that point—was an actress. And he had some little MG—black MG, and it was a convertible. And he was sticking out of the top of it with his black mustache and his wild hair—this man. I'm in the car. We're pulling into our house just as my mother was backing out to go to work, in her turquoise and white Cadillac. She was a receptionist at her friend's place—and my parents were split up now.

And I said "Back out, fast!" And we just went running down La Jolla—and my mother came after us in her car. It was like cowboys and Indians.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh my God.

DIANNE BLELL: It was duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh [a melody like a "cowboys and Indians" chase].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: And John Altoon was going "Shit, shit; holy fuck! Shit!" Excuse me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's okay.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's all right. This is history.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You can swear in history.

DIANNE BLELL: He said, "I can't believe this. I shouldn't be in a situation like this." [Laughs.] My mother's —"Beep! Beep!"—[laughs] I'm screaming—turn left corner!

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: After that, I didn't dare—can you imagine?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Time to leave home, I say.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, after that, I started crashing at a—a friend of his; it was this guy—it was the art bookstore. And they used to have little art shows, and they had all the books and poetry. And of course, then, the only poet I knew about was that guy Benjamin ; he wrote *Never a Greater Need*. And then—[laughs]—that's the fine poetry level I was at. That was a really corny—*Hester Street* and all those things. And John Altoon used to make fun of it, and he'd say, "I'll buy you a book," and I said "Oh, Benjamin"—or what—I don't know—what was his name, Benjamin something? What was his name? [Walter Benjamin.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We'll have to look it up.

DIANNE BLELL: Anyway—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Off the top of my head—

DIANNE BLELL: *Hester*—anyway, it was just really corny, soppy, romantic, poet stuff. This guy who ran the bookstore, he had gray hair, he was tall, he was gaunt and everything. And he let me crash there. I was—the back door, and that's where I was living in the bookstore. And then I was living in another place that I was staying at—girls that were friends of mine. And they all had shotgun weddings; they all had to get married like senior in high school. So they had little houses with babies, and so I'd stay with them and stuff like that. And that's when I first left home.

And then finally I just went up to LA and I left school; I went to the nun and said "I just can't be here anymore, and"—[sighs]—you know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how did you decide to start working with the theme of the nude—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, okay. Here we go again.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean—building a body of work using yourself as a model.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, so—I don't know—this is another sidetrack, but I ended up in Seattle, in the airlines; I just want to get that out of the way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: okay.

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know why it—but—struck by a work of art, and I never did anything like it, ever. I mean, it's not what I do. But I went to a show, and there was—I went to the—some museum, their collection, and there was a Rauschenberg in there. And it was all these thick layers of heavy paint; it was not a compound. But I'd never seen anything like it.

I remember being bowled over. I remember, even though I'd see stuff at the La Jolla Art Center and all these [amazing contemporary artworks]. I remember thinking that it was just major. And it was just—you had to put everything onto whatever surface you were going to do. It just—something about that—and I remember standing in front of it; I remember the colors, I remember the hugeness of it. I'd never seen a painting quite that big in person.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: Anyway, then I ended up down in San Francisco, and I went back—I was in the airline a couple more years, and then I went back to school. And basically, the first person I used, I didn't—let me think—I can't remember which came first, the *Odalisque* or the *Surrealism and the Blues*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The *Odalisque* being the billboard?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I was in *Surrealism and the Blues*, and I was in that one. And I think the *Odalisque* might

have been first; I'm not sure. I can—I—you know, I'm going to look it up right here.

And it's because of my position in the art world, and also I was very I was aware of women. There was a woman down there named Linda Montano; I don't know if you were ever aware of her. I'll tell you what. This was profound for me. When I was in school, I went to a lecture. I was studying painting. Painting schmainting. I thought I was supposed to be a painter; I didn't know, you know? And forget photography, technology; I mean, I've always been afraid of technology, I still am. So that would be nice.

Anyway, so I went to a lecture by Tom Marioni. Are you aware of Tom Marioni? He's one of the—San Francisco Bay Area considers a conceptual artist hotbed, in San Francisco; excellent. Terry Fox and Howard Fried and Tom Marioni—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, Terry—yes, sure.

DIANNE BLELL: All those guys. And I went to this lecture and Tom Marioni—this was a real moment in my life, in the art world. This changed my life.

And it was a lecture about conceptual art. And he gave this lecture, going back to Franz Kline and Pollock and before that, where process began to show and gesture became a part of the work. And Yves Klein, rather, first, before Franz Kline. Way before, wasn't he?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, they were about the same time, but they were two different—

DIANNE BLELL: Was it the same? I thought Franz was a little later.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, for—Franz Kline being sort of the ab-ex painter, I think was actually chronologically older than Yves Klein.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, was he really? Oh—I can't remember—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yves Klein was a Czech artist who lived in Paris, right? So—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes—oh yes, yes—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, he was extraordinary; I mean, very, very advanced. he made his work Happenings before Happenings were happening, and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: All those sort of elements pieces, with the fire and water—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, and the nudes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the anthropometries, as he called them, the *Mondo Cane* performance—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, he'd have people come and observe him, the women crawling around, and then he was diving out windows and—well, so to speak, you know, the gestures.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Karate expert, hurling himself out of windows in the Parisian alleys—[they laugh]—to prove it could be done. Tragically, he died.

DIANNE BLELL: Young.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He abandoned us quite young, yes. He was early 40s or something.

DIANNE BLELL: Many extraordinary people do. They just burn out. Something happens.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I don't think anybody—

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, look at the music industry. Just—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, well, I think whenever a person dies, it's always too soon.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, it is. Yes. And that's that whole thing again in the art world. There was this thing that night, that—everybody was the same age. It didn't matter.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, the 27 [club], the Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Amy Winehouse, Heath Ledger, right.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, no, I mean—no,—oh, that. No, but I mean the party that—when I realized in the art world that we were all in the same soup, and I loved that. And there were these people that had experience, they had a lot to tell me, and I was on a level with them, and they accepted me intellectually. They didn't criticize me. They were interested in what I was thinking because I was young. They didn't poo-poo me, I mean John would tease me a little bit, but basically, they all—they're always interested in what young people are thinking.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Despite the differences in years, you were all the same age?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, that's what I meant. Everybody's in the same soup. And that night at the El Sombrero, that drunken party, there were society ladies there, there were—you know, the art thing—I thought, this is my life. This is my life. And there was myself, as a woman, as a sexual object, and there is a very big deal. I was very conscious of my—who am I, what am I, what—the whole thing about desire, need, exposing yourself to your desires, your needs, in any way, shape or form to the world.

I knew enough about conceptual art, and there was a lot of—I saw a performance by Joan Jonas. She came out there all nude with mirrors going all around her. And she's now a friend, and I have a piece of her work, and, you know—I mean, it was just all this sort of amazing thing. And I was a little bit older as a student, and so I was on a little bit more mature level, but I was still just discovering things, because I went back to school. I just felt that what was within me was really the ultimate thing to be exposed. And I was aware of the woman, the nudity, in art, and I was also aware of Kenneth Clark. And the nude, by definition, is clothed in our history, basically, to paraphrase his kind of—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a costume, nude as a costume.

DIANNE BLELL: Yeah, as opposed to naked, the naked and the nude. And I was very interested in that, and I was researching a lot of that. And so I did this—and there was classicism, so I decided to—and I—the *Odalisque*. I thought, "Look, the odalisque; she's got an audience." And then there was *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, and there's this woman with all these men; she's nude. What's this?

And I felt very vulnerable and very exposed myself, somehow, because of these things and because of the woman's role in the art world, and also just because of my own difference and maybe my double life in society as an artist and being racier and being free. And there was this whole nudity thing. People didn't wear bras, and they were wearing see-through clothes. It wasn't a big deal. Nobody cared. I mean, you couldn't do it now. I mean, now there's a woman that runs around, goes to the museums, and just totally transparent clothes—maybe you have seen her.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, right.

DIANNE BLELL: Ahhhhh! And—[they laugh]. She's always got a red silk blouse on, and she's—maybe I'm being too judgmental. That's not fair. But it's just something weird. And I don't understand it. Why should I understand it, you know? It's just not aesthetically appealing to me, and that's trite. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As you began to explore these ideas—and I would guess the chronology now, we're in the mid-70s, late '70s—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, so I put the classical woman dead center in the middle of the Carol Doda-land and I thought, this would redefine—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That—there would be North Beach, near Chinatown—yes.

DIANNE BLELL: And I kind of thought, you know, this is really unattractive to women, this whole nude, topless, and I didn't like it. I mean, I wasn't moralistically against it, but I just thought—you know, and I just thought, it'll be interesting to get away with the definition of the nude in a public forum clothed by classicism, definition of classicism.

And I bought a billboard at a society auction, and I put that up on there. I set up a photographic situation, had a drape, and did it as a detail so that the composition wouldn't be complete, full-circle in unto itself, so that the street musicians and the pedestrians would be basically her lute player, you see? And the torso would be in the context of all of this, being a classic detail, like a fractal of something classical. And she would be surrounded by all this tawdriness, and then it would be a commentary back and forth. It would force people into some kind of—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you were putting the—

DIANNE BLELL: It was a political and social [hue?].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You were putting the vulgar kind of lowlife—

DIANNE BLELL: In place.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —titty bar culture of Carol Doda-land in dialogue with classicism.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And I wasn't in that picture. I didn't have the figure for that. I wanted hips and boobs—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you hired a model? Who was the model? Do you remember?

DIANNE BLELL: Her name—her name was Martha Majors—[laughs]—Martha Casin. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's interesting that—

DIANNE BLELL: She was my exercise teacher.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —in a—in a lot of the history of art, a lot of the nudes are identifiable. We know who the models are. But—

DIANNE BLELL: She never posed for anything else ever again, or before.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But when you go to the museums, there is no attempt to identify who the model is. It's an interesting thing.

You worked with Moyo Okediji [ph], right? I'm addressing my assistant, Chelsea Cooksey, who was an African—is a Nigerian artist whose agenda is to attach names to specific works of art who can be identified by the craftsmen working today in the village where these sculptures were made going back 10 or 15 generations—

DIANNE BLELL: Wonderful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —as opposed to ethnographic to a particular tribe or a particular group, and so sort of to give an identity to individual pieces. I had to ask. I'm curious about that, anyway. So—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, now, the other piece—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was the only—is the only piece that she ever modeled for?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes . No one had ever asked her. In fact, she always felt like she was a little too zaftig or something like that. She couldn't believe I went to her and said—she was recommended to me, actually. I took her class just to sneak observe her, you know? And then I took it a few times, and I went to her; I said, "Listen, you know, I'm doing this thing, and it's going to be very classical." You know, it went viral for that day—era. It was in the Hong Kong newspapers—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I bet.

DIANNE BLELL: It was in *Domus*, it was in all the San Francisco newspapers, it went on television in California—my cousin saw it on television. It went, for that day, as viral as you can get, you know?

And I took out a page—Walter De Maria was a friend of mine at one time—he's so reclusive now; I don't even know his telephone number—but he was in San Francisco at that time, and he was doing something with Tom Marioni. I met him at the Museum of Conceptual Art, which was just a loft, a raw loft with a bar downstairs, [called Breen's, at which he hosted casual salons to which everyone went.] [He organized performances and installations upstairs in the raw space; visitors like Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, and Terry Fox did conceptual works.]

And he just kind of palled—he kind of glommed on as a pal to me while I was doing this, because he was fascinated by the process I was going through. And he saw me out there in San Francisco doing this all by myself, and he was kind of impressed. And he said, you know what you have got to do? You got to take out a full-page ad in *Art Forum* and just—no graphics, no nothing, just little titles down at the bottom and put this all in there as an insert.

And I did. [Laughter.] I just couldn't—you know, like—my first national forum. Although I was coming to New York and everything like that, but, you know, it was still—it was kind of—it was an interesting thing. You've seen the picture. So that's the picture, that's the documentation, which will take us up to date later, how I ended up becoming a photographer.

Now, this *Surrealism & the Blues*, and then that—the ones I was in, and the *Oasis for a Gallery* is another part of that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how did that unfold? How did they unfold these bodies of work?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, they unfolded in that—Tom Marioni again, my lord and master, guru at the time, was in charge of curating—finding a space for the San Francisco Art Institute, an off-site space for a year, and to create a series of one-month shows in an alternative space. I had just found a studio in the Mission District, and I had looked at a studio which was its doppelganger, you know, and there's east and west of Fifth Avenue, and where I was, in the mission on this street, there was a street going through it, and then there was the other side. [Laughs.] I forget if it was west-east or north-south. I can't remember.

I said, "You know, I looked at two spaces there, and there is an identical one to my space." And I said, "And the great thing about it is it has this weird window on an interior wall which divides the back room from the front space. And it's just this window up there." And I said, "This would be a great space." I said, "I get to do the first show." [Laughs.] [So I did *Surrealism and the Blues* in which my figure in the remote high window appeared then faded out accompanied by early blues sax jazz "Bechet and the Blues."]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good story.

DIANNE BLELL: He got a look at the space, and he said, "That's a great space. Let's take it." So they paid for it for a year, so we did it. And I didn't know what I was going to do. I had no idea. And I thought, "Well, the only way I'm going to find out is to just move in here." And I thought, this window is so weird.

And so I found this—there was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, and he was living in his van, and he was a jazz musician. And I don't know. Somehow he did handy jobs, and I hired him to do something. And I hired him to build a scaffold up to this little window. And I draped it off, I put a little pillow up there, I brought records, I brought things to read, and I just hung out there all day, every day, read things. I went through art magazines and stuff.

And I started to think—you know, I was up there, and I started to look back from it, and I started to think of Magritte and something filling up a window. So I thought, well, you know, I mean, the apple, a woman's torso, or a woman's, you know—it was the buttocks and the legs, and that was just about what I—you know—I don't know.

So I experimented with different ideas and everything, and I decided that, OK, this is going to be a commentary on painting and the sensuality of painting and the voyeuristic, captive audience that looks at the painting and finds an object of desire into it, that can't get behind the artwork, wasn't in the making of the artwork. And so I decided to screen off the door with red velvet, flood the backroom with light, have music playing the background, which was going to be voluptuous like—[singing]—"Behind—what's going on behind the green door? When I said Joe sent me someone laughed out loud behind the green door," you know? It was just this—not that movie. It was—what developed was *Surrealism and the Blues*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. [Laughs.] I'm not into porno. I have a hard time with that. I'm still Catholic. [Laughs.] I mean, I'm not against anybody else's. It's just I can't do it. And this is as modest as I can—as exposé as I can get. And for me that was a big deal.

And—but, you know what? I didn't mind. I thought it was pure. It was about pure form, and it was a woman's shape, and it was real, but she was inaccessible. She was high and unavailable and above, like an object in a painting. And the audience would be out here, and the curtain I had sewn shut, and I had the—

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DIANNE BLELL: [In progress]—but it's rendered so sensually. And it had a lot to do—and it was really basically—they were similar, the *Odalisque* and that. And then the photograph of the *Oasis for a Gallery* had a lot to do—again, I'm talking now about being left with photographic documentation. On vacation with my husband, and we're in—I don't want to say where we are right now. Anyway, just—we're in a place.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it says Morocco.

DIANNE BLELL: OK. Well, I mean, I just—you know, that's all right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's—you're somewhere.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Maybe I have it on there; I don't know. But anyway—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You do, actually.

DIANNE BLELL: —I'm—did—the city?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not the city.

DIANNE BLELL: No. Good, okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It just says Morocco.

DIANNE BLELL: All right. All right. So that's all right. okay.

So I see this man with a camel; people are going for camel rides. [Laughs.] And we're on the beach, right? So I said, "Sandy"—Sandy Walker—"Sandy, I'm going to take a camel ride. And when I wave my hand, you be ready with the camera." So I was up on the camel; I was in my bikini. I give the signal; I drop the top; picture's taken. [Laughs.] I come back from Morocco; we've got this picture. I don't know about the show yet. John Berggruen says, "Di Di, got to"—that's my nickname. Some people—not everybody—call me Di Di—depends on whether they want to or not. You know, Leo called me Di Di. And he did it beautifully—"Di Di." And John Berggruen—"Di Di, I want you to do something special here. I want an event." [Laughs.] "And only you can do it," and everything. "Oh, what am I going to do? What am I going to do? What am I going to do?"

And I had it up in my Mission District studio. And I had it isolated on the wall alone. Enter Walter de Maria again: He comes over for a studio visit, and he says, "You've got to show that piece." You know? So I thought, "Hmm." So I called him, and this is before—I mean, he was back in New York. So I called him; I said, "You know, I'm thinking of"—[laughs]—"you've mentioned I should show that piece, and I never thought I could figure out how to do it; I hadn't figured it out yet. But I'm supposed to do something with John Berggruen, and I'm thinking of putting that picture up like you said." You know, and so he said, "Do it; do it. And just—you should have only that." And I—so that influenced me.

And I said, "Well, okay. What I'm going to do is I'm"—etching out the wall so that it was flush with the wall. I rented a frame projector so the light flashed on it right the exact dimensions of the picture; took everything out of the gallery except for a tropical plant in the corner, like a palm-like looking thing; and had the lights all dimmed so this was the only glow. And the idea was that a little—I only had a 16 by 20, and I was—thought of doing it teenier, and maybe I should have; I don't know. But 16 by 20 was pretty—but the idea was that a photograph has such potential force of memory and recollection and reminder and projection, just from a simple souvenir, that it can really generate an entire environment. It can surround you in warmth; it can surround you in climate; it can surround you in memories and likenesses, even though you haven't been there, or whatever.

So I thought that it was very interesting to parallel—and I think I say that in my documentation—the single, solitary souvenir photographed—installed in the gallery was like an oasis in the vast expanse of an arid desert. And it was a little bit like *The Sheltering Skies*. I was thinking of the woman's position culturally with that, and then brought back here, and then provoking the concept of the difference between the man in his robes being on the camel and the woman and what she is beneath her robes, and then Western women and this being done in Western society. So again, it was this dual take on actual perception, actual sensuality, actual physical presence versus not; commentary on the political confrontation of—juxtaposition of two contrary situations.

And that's how I came to that. [Laughs.] That's the simple story about that one. You know, it was loaded. And it was Ed Ruscha saw it in a magazine interview and called John Berggruen and said, "I got to have that piece." And—[laughs]—that was really nice. He was the first person that ever bought an artwork from me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Terrific.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Terrific. So from these sort of early forays into conceptualism and sort of image-smithing—because you are making work that's sort outside of whatmost people associate as conceptual codes, this—

DIANNE BLELL: Now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Now.

DIANNE BLELL: Now I am. I know I went photographic visual narrative because I'm no longer purely conceptual.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean in the 1970s we were thinking—I mean, it was like Arte Povera and—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I love Arte Povera. I met some of those guys too, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the whole early sort of revival of like, Dadaist aesthetic.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, Duchamp.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, of course.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I mean, I was very influenced by *The Bride Laid* [*Stripped*] *Bare* [*By Her Bachelor's*] and all those sorts of things, and that woman in the peephole and, you know, yes. That was a great part of Tom Marioni's lecture. That changed my life. That's what propelled me into the photograph, meeting Walter de Maria, putting bees in my bonnet and having a dialogue with him. And he got a bang out of my ideas. And that nude—the other thing that was interesting about the nude happening—it was happening at absolutely the same time as Christo's *Running Fence*. I got great mileage out of that juxtaposition because there were tons of people in town–I mean, I didn't plan it that way; it just happened.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You mean the installation with the—

DIANNE BLELL: It was in Sonoma, the wine country, Napa, Sonoma.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. So—no, I mean the installation in your studio with the nude in the window.

DIANNE BLELL: No, the *Odalisque*. [The outdoor billboard installed in North Beach, Strip Club District at the same time as Christo's *Running Fence* in Napa/Sonoma.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The *Odalisque*, I see.

DIANNE BLELL: There was no installation in my studio.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, well, you were describing the window and the velvet curtain and—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, that was the other—the alternative space [called the Annual, which I found for Tom Marioni who curated it on behalf of the San Francisco Art Institute for one year's period].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The alternative space.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was a performance piece [*Surrealism and the Blues*].

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, it was a performance piece. Yes, that was my one and only performance piece. And I was left with documentation. And thus, therefore, the *Odalisque*—the documentation of that, and then that single vacation photograph at John Berggruen Gallery *Oasis for a Gallery*– I thought, you know—– something always happened; we had little technical glitches with the—you know, and I would go to Walter—I mean, not Walter; I would go to Howard Fried's shows or Terry Fox's—there was a—or Paul Cos's or Tom's. And there was always some little technical glitch, some delay or this or something had to be gotten right or something wasn't working. And every time I ever tried—and I put on events and all kinds of things, and one was supposed to have slide projections and things. I just thought, "I'm tired of having the audience captive to these glitches. Why not just address the camera alone?" And that's when I started the fashion pieces, [photo performances and sets addressing the camera alone, which became *Charmed Heads and Urban Cupids*].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: San Francisco had been, of course, since the '60s, sort of a place where people were inventing these light shows to go with rock concerts—

DIANNE BLELL: Right, yes. Fillmore West was out there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and putting, like, liquids and slides and squeezing them and sort of doing all this low-tech stuff that would be so easy to do today—

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —digital media. But you imagine the sort of—

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Light shows. Oh, God, so naïve.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —gels and light shows and sort of squishy slides and kaleidoscopes and psychedelia.

DIANNE BLELL: I know, yes. I love it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But that was not part of your aesthetic either.

DIANNE BLELL: No, I was never much for light shows and stuff like that. I mean, I certainly saw my share of light shows and things like that. But—[laughs]—I was more—always very interested in figurative work, as you can see.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, of course.

DIANNE BLELL: Why, I don't know, because I can't stand to collect figurative work. I like word works, and I like small little fractal representations of things and odd little, singular things that send you on a journey and make you think. To me it's like being in convent school and reading *Beowulf* or something. You know, I love Lawrence Weiner. John Baldessari was a great influence in my life. He's a very good friend of mine. He was another influence. You know, the words of—I mean, and it's funny because I don't do the—it's like I really appreciate black-and-white photography, but I can't do it. I don't have an abstract mind, for some reason. And I'm just about to embark on some new work, and I'm really questioning myself. And I'm thinking, "Should I try to do something that involves words?"—because I am very wordy person. And you know, I'm verbal.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: If you go back to the *Portrait of a Lady*, you did have text blocks.

[10;22]

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, that—yes, yes, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So I mean—

DIANNE BLELL: That was the only—[laughs]—text I ever wrote to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, but letters and words are also—

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, I've written some essays.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. But I mean, as visual elements, there's no reason, I would think, to not consider it.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, it fascinates me. I just always kind of—I started it—I made forays into—talk about—and also the other thing I made early, early, early forays into, when I was supposed to—do you know David Askevold? Did you ever know David Askevold? Are you aware of David Askevold?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Aware; not—I never knew him.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Well, he was a very good friend of mine. He was a soul mate. Ah! And I was actually going to collaborate on a work with him. And we spent a lot of time, and he went somewhere with it, and he used some images of me in some of his pieces—of myself. But I never—and I've got a whole folder up there of totally appropriative stuff from art magazines that I've never ever—I was getting a divorce; I came back to New York; something fell through the cracks, and I never pursued it. He had some problems with his wife, and his child got sick, and it just never—it didn't really materialize. And he went on to—he constantly collaborated with Michael Kelley, all kinds of people. In fact, I've got some pieces right now that—I've got some slides that I'm in that I'm trying to have printed that David was going to give me before he died, and his companion Norma just sent them to me.

And it just always—I have so many things that I toyed with appropriation, and it was before appropriation was called appropriation; before it Richard Prince was such a hotshot. I mean, not that I'm saying I'm first or anything. I think there's simultaneity in every—you know it's about that. These people are on a creative level, and I mean—who was it that wrote *The Treatise On Creativity*? It was the a Russian constructivist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Malevich?

DIANNE BLELL: Malevich. And it was about the creative personality, and that they see gaps before other people. So they're improving on an object. By the time that improvement is manufactured and distributed throughout society and employed as a useful tool by everyone else, this guy's already seeing something wrong– something much earlier that he'd already used—it was inefficient to him. So the creative person is always on a road. Once you start, you're ahead a few steps.

So that's the simultaneity of why things happen in different parts of the world or different—you know, like Cindy's doing her thing. Photographs are around. People are thinking of film stills. I was thinking of film stills when I did those [fashion stills *Charmed Heads and Urban Cupids*]—but I didn't do them like film; I did them like fashion photographs. But I was thinking in my little mind, I used to refer to them as almost like film stills. And then I saw Cindy Sherman's film stills, and I thought, "Oh, what do you know?" [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, one could argue that for the past century, the function of history painting, narrative painting and—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, Cecil Beaton.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —a good portion of representational art, full stop, has been basically replaced by cinema. I mean, the great historical paintings are no longer made.

DIANNE BLELL: I—yes, they are recreated in the movies and absolutely in photography, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you know—well, as a—as form, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: But the whole narrative—setting things up. I mean, the whole early—I was fascinated, I have to tell you; I became fascinated by staged also I was very early in staged photography. I was very, very early in that. I did a book thing—I was asked to illustrate a series of short stories in the *TriQuarterly* review for Northwestern. And I was reading the—what do you call them? The things—the proofs of the book?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Galleys?

DIANNE BLELL: The galleys—I was reading the galleys of all the stories. And some of the—one of the writers I knew– he was a writer in San Francisco; I can't remember his name right now. But anyway—I was asked by this couple, and they were running it. And one was the graphic design director and her husband was the editor or something like that. And then they were doing an issue on love. And then they started to get a divorce in the middle of my project, and it changed to love/hate. And I said, "Well"—because they were going to use the fashion photography series with the chasing of the cupids and all that. And I said, "Well"—– and anyway, so I read the galleys, and it was just going to be an independent thing. I said, "Well, how about if I illustrate—there are three heroines in these galleys here from three different stories, and they're each—one is responsible for the death of the male protagonist by blade. Do you know that?" [Laughs.]

So I decided to illustrate them. So I started doing more elaborate set ups, you see, only they were much, much, simpler, and later I got more and more ornate, and I got into this pictorialist thing, but my concept—my original concept was—it was conceptual. I wasn't trying to be pastiche. I've been criticized constantly as being pastiche, as if I don't know what I'm doing, as if I'm just a romantic, because I just like it, or something. No. It's about taking the human condition and yearning and illustrating it as it has been illustrated in painting, and doing it pictorially, photographically in a contemporary medium, and showing that it still exists today and that it is universal, it's mythologically based, it's been done in paintings and canvasses, that it has a continuum to it; and I'm just carrying it through now.

And it's as old as Methuselah. That's why my—then I got tired of seeing—I did Greco-Roman, I did Baroque, Rococo, Western Neoclassicism, and I decided, okay, I'm tired of seeing myself coming and going, and I did late 18th century and all that, and Mannerists and—it's time to get off, my geography in the western art world and maybe get into another ethnicity, and illustrate how it is the same core. And to me it was medieval, too, because it is. I mean—the whole mobile thing. And so I don't know. I mean, David Askevoldthought I'd use the —"why are you using all this Indian Hindu imagery? Why don't you do some of your own imagery?" But I was just compelled to illustrate the whole line of courtship from argument to desire to risk, to discord, to fulfillment. And I wanted to use it using—I used a Mexican and an Italian western girl, and I don't know. Maybe I lost a little on the way, but I do what I had to do—[laughs]—but to—there's a "thing" conceptual element to it, if you want to find that, and, I mean it is to everything, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, those pictures have a different kind of spatial—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, they had a lot to do with using Photoshop, too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: I said, okay, I'm going to use– they have Photoshop. I am now going to use Photoshop, because I cannot—I'm not Michael Cimino, I can't get a location in the desert and the budget to photograph the person against the ratio of—the romantic ratio of person to landscape.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, look at Cindy Sherman. I love Cindy Sherman's—I loved that show at the—I didn't care for the gigantic murals. I don't know why. But I got to come back to this—so I changed my mind later. I was just —I was a little disturbed by it. Maybe that's a good thing. And I didn't care for the recent show at Metro Pictures. I thought—what's the matter? I mean, maybe it's a bridge onto her next thing, but it's tough. I mean, she's breaking out of her edgy format slightly; she's just positioning herself against the great landscape, of the borrowed landscapes, which I've done too, although I've recreated the landscapes or I've repainted the landscapes. I haven't used somebody else's landscape. [I also really love her most "disgusting" pieces as she described them to me.]

I've recreated it or I've copied it to a degree by my own hand and done some changes. So it's an interesting

thing, because my catalogue for my last exhibitionhere—he just insisted on comparing me to Cindy Sherman. He hated Cindy Sherman. I said, you can't do that. I like Cindy Sherman, and I don't want her coming down on me because I said I really—I believe in her work, and I think she took what I started to do with the fashion shows—she just kept on driving it home. She just made a whole life out of it, so more power to her. I went back to San Francisco and got a divorce, and I came back two years later, and Cindy Sherman had taken over the world. [Laughs.] In my little "cause celebre," or "succés de scandale" was—it was a double page in the Village Voice and all that sort of stuff. I got a review and Betsy Baker came, Ingrid Sischy came. I was like this little star in 1979, at this cool, crazy little gallery on 57th Street [Robert Stefanotti Gallery]. Just like, out of nowhere, and then I disappeared for two years. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well—

DIANNE BLELL: So it's just interesting that—but the essay here—I'm going to give you a fresh copy of this, because it has a lot of things in it. Donald Kuspit did the essay, and he just goes in and out—he despises Cindy Sherman because he thinks she does deliberate, really hideous things, and I had to do a lot of editing to take out a lot of—I said, "you can't use my catalog." I love Donald Kuspit, and I think he's brilliant. I said, "You can't use it as a harangue on Cindy Sherman. It's my catalog!" [Laughs.] "You've got to pull back a few of these." Look, I like her. And she's a nice girl, too. [Laughs.] She's got good manners. Leave me out of this. But she remains the point of comparison.

But it was an interesting point of comparison, and he really—what I liked about him was I knew he would get the whole desire thing—the whole thing about lust and desire, and this actually is a foray more into my Catholic background and about religious idealism—

And that when you—and this is going back, again, to my education. I'm coming full circle; I knew I would eventually with all these roundabout words, but it really had to do with desire and your upbringing and how you project upon your object of desire, or you seek for it unconsciously—or consciously—the fulfillment of your ideals. And a—[inaudible]—or an example of the ideals with which you were brought up.

So somewhere in—whether it's a—whether you're a killer or a robber or bad partner—whatever your ideal is instilled, that's why I call it *Desire for the Intimate Deity*. So the godliness, whatever is your deity—you could be a Satan-worshipper—[laughs]—who you become intimate with, who you partner with, who you're searching, who is going to fulfill you, is a manifestation of some kind of deified image of the ideal. So that's how I contrived this title. Took me a long time to title this work. I love titles, though. They're very important to my work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Your love of words.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have a couple of sort of housekeeping questions regarding earlier stages of this conversation. One being, when you made the decision to work with the body as a theme, people must have been saying to you, "Oh, you should look at"—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I know, nobody was doing figures—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Carolee Schneemann or—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I know, nobody ever put Carolee Shneemann on me because I'm—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hannah Wilke or—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I know—and I knew Hannah Wilke, yes. Nobody ever did—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Yvonne Rainer or whatever.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, no one ever did. I was very aware of them, because I came back from my little New York summer; I rented the Sonnabend loft and I used to go to Max's and Carolee Schneemann was there all the time. And I knew about *Meat Joy* and all that sort of stuff.

And so—I mean, that's again—and I loved Lynda Benglis's piece—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: *Meat Joy* in a steakhouse. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: And I loved—I mean, I admired that. It takes guts. I always thought that she was very, very Yves Klein. But I mean, not that that's—I mean, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who, Lynda Benglis?

DIANNE BLELL: No—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Schneemann.

DIANNE BLELL: Carolee Schneemann. And—she's looking very good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She is.

DIANNE BLELL: She got more beautiful later.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: She just had a show at PPOW a couple years ago.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, my cousin shows there now. Talk about relatives. Are you aware of Hunter Reynolds and the body and the figure? Hunter Reynolds?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I am now.

DIANNE BLELL: My cousin. He just had a show there. It was less about the body than all of his other work. Did you got to that show?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I didn't.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, he's a big queen. Six foot four, and he's one of my few cousins whom I'm very good friends with. His motherlives in Palm Beach—[laughs]—I'm responsible for them speaking, being friends, because she came from a very scary—she came from the Dusseau Streak, [which is a creative, eccentric trait in our family]—her father was the worst manifestation of the Dusseau Streak that you can possibly imagine, my uncle Ted, her father—meaner than a junkyard dog, and a ladies' man and handsome, and a Palm Beach gent, you know, white spats, I'm telling you. He just used women.

And she was the product—Hunter's mother was the product of a—God, I'm telling you—product of a love affair he had with an actress in LA. He hung around with Gregory Peck and all kinds of people in their early unknown days before anybody was anybody.

Then he came back to Wisconsin and he had a little corral in Galesville, and he had horses, and he had a harness racetrack, and he had car dealerships, he had bowling alleys—he was quite a character.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: And he was a real rake, a real blade. And anyway, he went and took Danielle—his daughter—away from—well, I guess she as an actress and she couldn't have an illegitimate—he was engaged to an opera singer. And Beverly was a wonderful woman, and then he had a child with her and everything, so Danielle didn't know she was adopted for many, many years. And I grew up hearing about Rosemarie, Rosemarie—my mother and her sisters never talked about Rosemarie. Turned out that Rosemarie was the mother of Danielle, Hunter's mother. You know? Well, Hunter grew up to become this artist. And Danielle was here in town, came to one of my openings at Castelli for the *Pursuit of Love,* the neoclassical series.

And she said, "Well, my son's going to be in town, can he come"—of course. She said, "Oh, he's an artist and he's just going to be so excited that you're in Art Forum and you're—" And she said, "And you know, he had a little interview in Art Forum" I said, "You're kidding!" because she was telling me my son's an artist, and she once showed me a painting he did, and it was like, flowers, a portrait, and I thought, oh dear, yes, right, Danielle, his mother, you know a lot about art. She didn't know crap about art.,[He's] going to be some Sunday painter. And it was—[laughs]—and here's Hunter, he walks in, he's got a little Chinese queue, like little braid on the back, and he's just this incredibly kind of—and goatee, and he's six foot four and he's gay, and he's—and he was just kind of elegant, and I thought, wow, that's Hunter?

And then he just couldn't believe all the art people at my loft and he just moved, that day to New York from Los Angeles. And he put himself through art school out there. And he's major. He had programs in those visiting artist things they had when the Berlin Wall came down, he lived there for years, he was big in the whole Middle Europe thing, in Poland and Czechoslovakia. He showed all over those countries in the early, early days when they first opened. And then he's been a pioneer gay activist for years. And now he's had a number of galleries and good shows here and there and everything, and now he's with PPOW and they're really giving him his due. And he's getting fabulous—But you know, he runs around in tutus half the time—[laughs]—and Danielle [sp]—I mean, does it for performances and stuff. And I'll never forget one Whitney show—biennial—and I'm down in the basement and there's Klaus Kertess and Billie Sullivan and Curtis and my pals, and there's Hunter coming down the stairs in a[n] opera gown, strapless opera gown with all his [taped ?] makeup and everything. I went, "Oh my god, there's my cousin!" And like, the room went silent and they all turned around, they went, "Hunter Reynolds is your cousin!?" It was like some symphonic chorus– [laughs]. I went, "Yup." And he was working for Paula

Cooper and he was an installation guy, and all these kinds of—you know. It was amazing.

So he went to Palm Beach and he had this show, and he was diving off a diving board in a tutu and he does—and it's all influenced by a music box that his grandmother gave him when he was a little boy. It had a little ballerina on it with a turntable, and he re-enacts that. And they're beautiful, they're painfully beautiful. And he—[laughs]—he's this big, hairy six-foot-four guy, and he does these funny things. And he—*Swan Lakes* and—and he's guts-balls shameless, and he's got a lot of pathos and sensitivity. And he's been my assistant, he's helped me with things. He rescued me from 9/11.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

DIANNE BLELL: He got all my art out of here with me. And he's had AIDS for something like 25 years; he's one of the longest survivors. He's one of those few guys. And he's had strokes, and he just keeps on trucking, he keeps on making more work, he just keeps on going. He's been at death's door like five, six times. He's amazing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

DIANNE BLELL: So his mother, I had to explain. I said, "You know, you don't understand that Hunter's milieu is an accepted art form. It is really—he is a very respected artist in New York." And I said, "You may be embarrassed by him being"– but I said, "In the art world, you don't understand that he's a force of nature and something to be considered." And then I had to explain her to him, because I said, "You don't understand your mother. Your mother barely survived life. She married a mean guy to get away from"—that's Hunter's father—"to get away from the father. The father wouldn't allow her to go to college. Her aunt wanted to send her and pay for college, and the father came and got her out of college. And he was meaner than a junkyard dog, and he used to just taunt her that she wasn't the full daughter and everything." And I said, "She's just barely hanging on by her fingernails. She doesn't have any compassion left over. She doesn't understand. She doesn't understand the die-hard art world."

So they now have a dialogue and an appreciation for each other's whatever. And her limitations and Hunter's overwhelming generosity and abilities of expression. And I just, you know, it's very interesting to have another person in the world, in my—I was alone in my family before Hunter. [Laughs.] I mean, I was the only one. But now, I find I have another cousin—what is he? I don't know about those removed things and all that, but he's also part Indian and he is a big deal special effects guy. His last name is LaCross. In Hollywood; you can Google him. He's done, like, Alice in Wonderland, all these things—blue screen things, and—that Tom Cruise movie where the ruins are caving in, or—no—no, Leonardo DiCaprio.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh yes—oh, I see.

DIANNE BLELL: He worked on that. I mean, the guy's a—and he gave lectures, art school, it was all about not stinting creativity. Whether you're studying math, whether you study accounting, do not stop creativity. And no matter what you do, teachers, this is—he talked about how he put himself through school, and all these various things. He didn't have it easy either. He's just a mensch, so it's kind of neat. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's—well, it's—so you—

DIANNE BLELL: I haven't met him yet! I'm dying to go out there just to meet him! Hey, I do Photoshop! Hee hee! [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you have no siblings?

DIANNE BLELL: I have a sister. She actually can draw better than I can because she's untaught and she has a more rugged line. I'm very facile. I've been facile all my life. And I got talked out of drawing, so in art school, they criticized my drawing as being too graceful, too thick-thin, too facile, and I got kind of like shy about drawing. So I haven't been able to draw since.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm.

DIANNE BLELL: I go in and out—but until I got to the—this, and then I realized that—I went to India and I got a master who sort of helped me do some stuff in miniature style, and I realized that I did it already. And he said, this is not the first time you've done this. I said, well, it's kind of—goes with my sense of line. It's funny, it's very fine, very thin, very—you know. And I just can do that. And I practice handwriting. I learned the Palmer method and did all those exercises.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, sure.

DIANNE BLELL: And I've used that. So it was kind of wonderful thing—this is the other thing about my work, is that it—oh, here, this one's even cleaner.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, good. Perfect.

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know—yes. Be careful, this white—here. I'll put it in an envelope, too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you.

DIANNE BLELL: Anyway, one thing about my sets—and there's a series we haven't talked about, and that's the little *Circus Animals*' *Desertion* series, that's kind of a crossover series. Maybe next time. That one there. Those are my drawing elements. Every once in a while I can break through, but I have a hard time with it because I got stifled. It's funny.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's strange; drawing has come—

DIANNE BLELL: They wanted me to get strong and tough and—[makes noise]—like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, representational drawing has returned with a vengeance because of the digital animation field.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Well, I never even got that well. I can't draw the figure very well.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —10 years ago you could become a digital artist with software skills; now you have to know how to draw the figure. And so it's because the technology has caught up with the analog tools. So it's an interesting development, but I see—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, you have to—I mean, I can't tell you how many people in here—every one of these figures I altered and I had to reinvent a new body part. And I took it off of another pose of the girl, because—and I said, oh, her hand, but there was no link from here to here, and I had to render the wrist bone. But I was just kind of this—I'd be like this and I'd look at my wrist bone and I'd go—and I go—uh—or I look at my foot—oh—[inaudible]—ankle—and I'd go like this and I'd be going like this.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's kind of like Auguste Rodin, who would chop an arm off the wax of one sculpture, attach it to the other.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Well, she's made out of five pieces. This is an entirely different body underneath the sari. That's another girl. I put her on top of it and then I didn't have her posed going this way with the arm, so I had to take another arm so she could hold the flower off of something else, put another hand on it, off of another part of herself from another pose. And then her head was all looking up because I wasn't thinking of doing this piece when I did this, so I had to cut her head off and tilt it down and then get her neck bones right again, and get the back—and get the shadows just right. [Laughs.] And I don't really know how to do it, so I just kind of struggle.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You figured it out.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Well, you do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's interesting because all of these images have a kind of invented quality that doesn't feel photographic at all, really.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I can address that. That's deliberate.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Please do. Well, I assumed it was, but—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, because when I started doing photography it was the stepchild, after my divorce—I came back here in '80—1981—1980 or early '81—and I was very interested in, again the photographic documentation situation, and I was taking myself out of my own work because I decided I wanted to control the photograph. I was getting too many results that I didn't expect with me being in them and thinking I was explaining it. I wasn't doing storyboards like I do now, even for myself. So I just thought, yes, the hell with it, And also I thought I was—it was vanity, I was getting too old, because I wasn't—[inaudible]—even older.

I don't know, I just really wanted to—I got fixated on this late 18th century transformations books, and I wanted to do the *Pursuit of Love*. Because I have this theory called everybody gets to do theory. And the *Pursuit of Love*, the *Four Seasons*, *Woman at the Bath*—[laughs]—do you know what I mean?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm [Affirmative].

DIANNE BLELL: People having picnics. It's just what I call part of everybody gets to do the nude, the classic nude, you know. And so I chose a selection of different classical artworks basically almost entirely from that

book. Well, there were just five, I think, maybe one of them may not have been—and studied each, the development of each painting that was represented in there and went to the library and found versions by many different artists of—like, for instance, at *The Origin of Drawing*—oh, I'll show you this one here. You know *The Origin of Drawing*, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The girl tracing the shadow? Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, combining—and to me that was a feminist piece—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, because it means the first artist was a woman.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, and she drew by desire, as a keepsake for the loved one—a keepsake, souvenir, vacation photograph, all this, having to possess, possession. It's possessing the image, you know. This is possessing the image; he's tattooing on her the image of the flower. All these things creep up. I've done *Young Woman Overtaken by a Storm*; I've done that a couple of times. I've done Women at the—*Beauty at the Bath*; I've done that a number of times. Okay, so what was I going to address? I was going to address—oh! So, all right, I decided to go back to school a second time and I went back for two years to study photography. Went to ICP and I went to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Pratt?

DIANNE BLELL: Parsons.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, Parsons.

DIANNE BLELL: I think Parsons, yes. And I studied 4 by 5 photography; 35-millimeter photography, color photography, fashion photography, studio photography. And the point was, I thought, "You know, they're criticizing photography." Photography was now—you know, lot of young—it was an emergent thing to collect. There was what's-his-name, started collecting photography, sort of fabulous—Sam Wagstaff.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wagstaff.

DIANNE BLELL: John Coplans, was a friend of mine. Anyway, so—and they were—collectors that I knew through people were just—"Oh, photography doesn't have the texture of painting, it's just not sensual enough, it doesn't have the surface." I thought, well, I'm going to bring the surface to them. I'm going to fool them and instill it into my photographs. That's why I got so painterly, so textural. And then I felt like what I wanted to do was incorporate all art forms. I wanted people, I wanted reality. Absorb into fictitiousness to make the fictitiousness real, to bring it into the present and to incorporate drawing process. I want them to all actively—I wanted them to all interact dynamically on the same plane. All these talents, all these mediums, all these persuasions, all these—you know.

So sometimes I would leave something just drawn. Or borrow, scan in something from another painting and put it it on the landscape. I did that very much—[Side conversation.] I did that very much in the *Circus Animals' Desertion*. That was all about using all the leftover little things in my mind. Photographs of objects I have around the house and flotsam and jetsam that's in the studio. Just making them all work on—and I just went to town on Picasso's *Saltimbanques* and I just used—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's what it looks like, exactly.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. I got criticized for it, but I mean, I knew what I was doing, so—[laughs]. So to me it was the landscape of the mind and the stream of consciousness, because it did come from a dream I had. So I did borrow the landscape of Picasso and I put this stream in it, and that came from a dream of my own, in my own head. And it was about crossing the stream into other zones, and that is myth and religion right there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: There is an essence to that one right there. And here is something—a study for something I want to break into in the future, and right now, something I'm considering. So I put that up. And I'm going back to my first show at Castelli in 1983, photographing theatrical—weird, broken objects with pathos, like used, tragic furniture and broken urns and vases and things I can find—I don't know. I hope I can do it. This—if you want to look at this piece here. So I brought this kind of painterliness and compositional element of painting into the photograph. That's what I was doing, I was trying to make photography live for people.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have a few questions I want to ask you about the development of your studio practice from early on, because we've been sort of leap—

DIANNE BLELL: I'm a leapfrogger, sorry.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Leapfrogging around, and I just want to make sure that we chink all of the gaps in the conversation, because when we return next week, what we're going to have a chance to do is we're going to have a chance to sort of revisit a number of the things about which we spoke.

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know if you can get any linear theme out of this. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it doesn't matter if it's linear or not because the way these interviews are used by scholars, by journalists, by critics, by whomever, is to sort of acquire an insight into the mind, character, personality of the artist that they cannot otherwise acquire via just simply reading pictures.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or looking at your work or having a look at catalogues. So there's a—and actually, you're one of the interviewees—whom I feel really should have been videotaped, because of your extremely animated and colorful and funny and—

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Thank you. I hope it's not too much.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, it's great. And it's thoroughly enjoyable. But I wanted to just stop the recording for a moment and take a break, and then maybe we could do a little bit more.

DIANNE BLELL: Would you like some juice? Orange juice? You want some soda?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Perhaps. I'm going to stop the interview for a moment, okay?

DIANNE BLELL: Okay.

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DIANNE BLELL:

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So I've just started the—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the recording again. Can I ask you to—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —back up a minute or so—

DIANNE BLELL: Sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —you were talking to Chelsea about Moyo Okediji or—yes, the Nigerian artist. And I returned to my chair and you told me I should hear this.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, well. So she was saying that he was an art historian and he also painted, and I—and she was telling me also—just tribes and the works of each of the tribes and everything. And anyway, I was just that it was wonderful that there are so many different artists in the world from so many different locations and everything.

And it reminded me in a little bit of that first party I mentioned that—when everybody was in the same stew and it's just sort of marvelous. And I said, "Well, there are probably too many artists," then I said, "Well, no, how can there be too many artists," really, in truth. But what I really hated was the business part of everything. I just hate it, I just hate it. And I'm not good at it, and that was the beauty of being with Leo, I said, on one hand. On the other hand, it made me lazy. He had a lot of big boys and I wasn't a big boy, and I could easily get swept up, but if I had been brought up a little bit like the young ladies today, not like I was brought up to get married or whatever.

I mean, Leo was like a father—a father complex in a way. You didn't have to worry about anything. If you sold, you sold. If you didn't, you didn't. I had a hard time getting with Leo. Everybody thinks that he seduced me and everything, and it's far from the truth. I mean, Leo was a flirt and Leo had his girlfriends and he had plenty of them and I knew a lot about a lot of them, and we won't go into any of that. But, I mean, he was an amazing person and from another world. And that doesn't—maybe it exists in some places; there are probably some few left over little pieces somewhere here and there. But it was wonderful being with Leo because he really took care of his artists. Everything was beautifully put away, beautifully packaged, beautiful—

I remember having one show, and the person said, "You know, I just like having shows with Leo just to get the

packages. The way everything is wrapped, the way everything is—it's just perfect." [Laughs.] Just the way it's shipped is just first class. And if I had been a little bit more clever about myself and not so lazy resting on the laurels of just being with Leo and having a window dressing every few years whenever I wanted—if you're ready to have a show, you'd tell him and he'd figure it out. I would have utilized his staff, I would have been a little bit more like H! [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: But I didn't. I didn't say, "Now call this guy, now get him over here." I mean, I would– from time to time, I did a little bit of that, enough to stay with Leo, and that's what got me with Leo. What happened was—this is jumping around; that's how the Nigerian artist led me into this whole thing—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, this is a kind of consciousness, streaming conversation, so just go with it.

DIANNE BLELL: Okay, all right. Well, there's being too many artists and they're not being too many artists, and then not liking business and then going to the beauty of being with Leo.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the lament everyone raises now is that it's all about money, it's not about ideas.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I really think that it is. Well, I think it's both. There are still—god, Richard Bellamy, he was nothing but a living embodiment of the idea. You knew him, didn't you?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, not personally.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, that's a portrait I took of him [Bellamy] up there. I took it for Laura Decoppet's "The Art Dealers". And he was one of my very dearest soul mates. I'm so lucky, just to have known Richard Bellamy and Leo Castelli and people like that, and Robert Rosenblum. It makes me tear. I mean, the souls that went into the forming of those intellects. And Leo had an incisive, interesting intellect.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, he was and he wasn't. He was a party boy in a funny way, but he was a great gentleman with tremendous sophistication and knowledge and elegance. And that doesn't come from not knowing—[laughs]—about a lot, you know. Leo just had a very clever way of, not really—it's like—it's like Robert Rosenblum who didn't like to talk about art history, he liked to talk about amusement parks or something like that. He liked to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, art history was his day job.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. [Laughs.] He like—it's like that architect that liked to talk about miniature golf courses. What was his name? Charles Moore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh, yes. [They laugh.] From Yale.

DIANNE BLELL: And he just—yes. And Leo—I remember asking him one time—I came back from Africa when I had a Guggenheim fellowship. And instead of doing the project I was going to use it for—because I'd already—by the time I got the fellowship, I had almost finished the project.

So I saw a television and I decided I needed to get out in the world; I've been stuck in this studio for four years on this project. And so now, I said I'm going to Africa. I'm going to work for wildlife conservation, and I did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did that come about?

DIANNE BLELL: I invented the project. I saw a television program about orphan elephants, and my assistant came in just before the opening—she was helping me schedule the opening and the dinners and everything—and I was tears. I said, I am going to Africa on my Guggenheim fellowship because I'm just so worried about the world and the wildlife and the globe. And I did.

And I had a friend who was a—he had a clinic at Harvard and they were looking for AIDS medications and cures and things. And he was a major scientist. Now, he's in that bulb, biotechnology guy. And he met Leakey, and he wrote a letter of recommendation to Richard Leakey for me. So I just picked up the phone, called Leakey. He had me over to tea, wrote a letter, gave me carte blanche to every reserve and warden down there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow!

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And I just went around for two years. I got grants from Toyota, film grants from Canon for equipment use. I went to Canon, I said, "Look, this is what I do, this is what I don't do." I said this is what I've

done with my—I went there on a safari. I introduced myself to a lot of people. I now want to go back and photograph endangered species—this one, this one, this one, this one.

And I said, I want you to loan me the equipment and trust me that I will take pictures with 35mm, as I did develop in four-by-five. And they did. They gave me all the—not to keep, but on two-year loan. I just had to constantly—you know.

And I did. And I had a—and ended up having a wildlife exhibition with Leo doing the fundraising thing. It was all pro bono. And it ended up becoming published a lot and a lot of stock and a lot of this—and now people are kind of wanting to buy my animal photos.

The show wasn't even reviewed, it was kind of like, "Oh, well, it looks like National Geographic cards or—postcards." Even Jasper was going out of the studio one day and he—out of the gallery, and he said, "Di-Di, what are you putting up here? These look like postcards. Did you get these postcards at the airport?" [Laughs.] I said, Jasper, shut up. [Laughs.]

But that was being with Leo. I mean, there's Jasper, there's Roy. I was so lucky, it was just so bloody incredible. And now getting with Leo—I had met him a couple of times through the gravy, through the stew. And Leo, flirt that he was, sort of cottoned to me and I—you know, and he was fun and I liked him and he's just charming. You know—it's kind of teasing conversations with Leo.

But I set the record straight, and he—besides, he had a girlfriend, and she befriended me immediately. And he had a wife and all this other stuff. And that was great for me—[laughs]—because it let me off the hook. And the first thing I took him was *Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary Collection*. Turned me down flat.

The next thing I took him—God only knows what I took him. I took—oh, I think the first thing I took him was the little series of—the Circus—no, it was, it was that. It was the *Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary Collection*. And then I had him over to the studio to look at some other things I was developing and I was kind of flailing about and—"No, no, no. I don't think so."

And it was my third try. I had this crazy urn, and that is what I have on my screen now. And it was this gold urn. I was going around to prop shops, and I was half-doing the Robert Rosenblum books. I was breaking into that. And then I was getting theatrical props for some of these sets.

I fell in love with this one prop, and I photographed it in all these different ways. Frankly, I think, some of them are just deplorable. But Leo came over here for a lunch one day with a friend of his, and he loved the urns, and he said, "Now this, I love the obsession of it. This I can do. I will give you an experimental show at Greene Street, downstairs in the basement, a new space." [It was the *Various Fabulous Monsters Show*.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: And I said, I'll take it. [Laughs.] Hello? I didn't say no, I want 425 West Broadway or whatever.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] It turned out that it was a very fun little space down there. And I had the show, and, oh, everybody came. It was my first show in New York since the previous one I'd had in 1979. This was 1983. That many years it took to secure something else.

And it got reviewed nicely and it was a nice party and I heard that—oh, what's his name from IT&T [Patrick Lannen]? He was a collector—had come by and there was a big show upstairs by Tony—oh, what's his name? I can't think of his name right now[Robert Longo] —it was an experiment—so Metro Pictures couldn't handle it. So everybody would go to Leo to use this huge space at Greene Street, and I was in the basement and they had the gallery shut so this guy could have his portrait taken.

And they didn't let Lannen in, and I heard from Richard Bellamy, who had been in a limousine with him taking him over to Di Suvero's space and all this stuff over in Long Island City and said, you better—I would call so-and-so, he said, because they wouldn't let us in. And I said what? So I did H! and I called—[laughs]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: H!

DIANNE BLELL: —I called Patrick Lannen and I said, listen, I'm really sorry that you were not allowed to go downstairs at Green Street. I would like to invite you to a personal tour. Of course, guts—you know. I thought, I've got to sell something because I want to get on Leo's books. I want to be—I want invoices to be sent out, I want pictures to be filed, I want to make sure —

And another friend brought two pieces and somebody else, a coin collector bought one and then—a real estate

developer named Bill Judson—he bought one and then Patrick Lannen bought two others. And so there I was. I was in their little system, and I made it work for them. I made it kind of pay for itself. And that's what happens and that's business. And that's what you have to do. It doesn't happen for you. And being a girl in the art world—

After that, I kind of rested on my laurels with Leo a lot. I tried to do what I could when I could, but if I had been a little bit smarter, I would have utilized everything that was at my disposal. And not—It wasn't always easy because they had Roy, Dan Flavin, Jasper Flavin, and Rosenquist Stella, they had big stuff to deal with. But I could have been a little bit tougher, and without being tough. I mean, I could have just been a little more persistent or a little—I could have done it, but I didn't. I didn't. I was just—Leo took care of you and he helped pay for 50 percent of the production of your art costs.

And it wasn't that hard—life wasn't that expensive in those days either, at the same time. It was—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did—

DIANNE BLELL: —pre-9/11.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —did he put you on a stipend?

DIANNE BLELL: I didn't have a formal stipend, but if I ever needed reimbursement for expenses, blah, blah, blah, I'd come up with a listof things like that and, bam, a check would be issued. Or if I needed an advance, he'd say, well, I'll give you this or this or we can give you—what do you need it for.

And then—then Barbara Bertozzi arrived, things changed came along, forget it. And she brought in all new accountants, from what I understand, and she managed his address and telephone book. She let Patty and Susan go. Are you interviewing Patty and Susan? I mean, they're not artists but they ran the gallery. I mean, it would be a good—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm not sure who's gotten that assignment. There are two or three people interviewing—

DIANNE BLELL: They took wonderful care of me. And they loved—and they were very protective of me. And this was the other thing. Getting with Leo Castelli's gallery, it was not easy to get through the girls or the cerberus or the cerberae—cerberae, cerberes—it was plural—ae—of—[laughs] cerberus—at the gates.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Patty and Susan and these other gals. I mean, it was a—whoo! I remember sitting there , you know. And then later on, I really realized why they were that way, because they didn't know. They thought I was just some girl. Because there were always girls—he had girls waiting for him all the time. I mean, Leo was a real ladies man, and Barbara—I don't know, I think she thought maybe I was a—some sort of romantic interest or something like that. But, my god, I had had five—four shows with Leo, four one-person shows. And I worked my head off, and I didn't do so badly. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not at all.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] But anyway, it was just a different world. And he also was ill, and she basically came in and he became dependent on her. And Toiny [Antoinette Fraissex du Bost] had died, and it was interesting how everybody—he was—led a life independent of Toiny, but in the end, he was very dependent on Toiny, too, in that curious way that you find about people that have a marriage. It really was—I mean, he really fell apart after that.

And then he was—slowly had these various other girlfriends, and there were innumerous of them, but they were very opportunistic. And so it was necessary to filter Leo and be wary of them—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: To try to protect him.

DIANNE BLELL: To protect you, yes. Patty and Susan ultimately embraced me because they realized that I was just a great fan of Leo's and I really, truly loved Leo as a—just as a generous—you know, my dealer. I respected him, my father figure, my everything. I really loved Leo. I just adored him. I adored him.

And he was funny. I remember asking him one time about somebody—oh, this is how it got—I came back from Africa and I asked about a friend of his, Laura. I said, Laura, how is she doing. I've been gone for, like, 18 months and—two years or whatever.

And I had come back and just basically—there was no cell phone then, and even fax didn't work down there very well. And so you couldn't call Namibia from Kenya. And I was trying to set up a project in Kenya and it was easier for me to come home, do all my set-ups and then go back to Kenya, where I had a little cottage up in Karen and

fly from where I needed to fly and do—it was too—[laughs]—it was just too bizarre. It was easier to go all the way home, set up, reload—get your film set in, renew your camera—assign me camera equipment, get whatever more film you needed, get Toyota to give you a vehicle to borrow, a vehicle or something, and then go back.

So I come home for three months and then go back for four. Well—and so, he said, "Ah, Laura, Laura. Laura is, well, very busy or not busy doing or not doing what she should be doing, depending upon which way you look at it." [They laugh.] This was Leo in one sentence, covering every base. That is a one-sentence Leo. He could cover every base in the most elegant way with maximum aplomb and minimal words.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he—

DIANNE BLELL: "We'll talk about that sometime. Bye." [They laugh.] You know what I mean? And then he really could listen when he needed to. And he would either buy a project or not buy a project. And then I remember—so I was doing these urns, and then I told him I was proceeding with the photographs that I was interested in from Robert Rosenblum's book.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm [affirmative].

DIANNE BLELL: I started doing these massive scenes now, and everything. And he said—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Now when you talk about the photographs from Robert Rosenblum's book, you mean his—

DIANNE BLELL: The reproductions of the paintings.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —19th century—right.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, yes. Late 18th century.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, "Transformations in the Late 18th Century." Yes. I call them photographs and everybody calls them my hard paintings. [Laughs.] They said you're painting—I bought into that. I tried to make them look like paintings, and now I have a yolk around my neck. Your paintings, your paintings, your paintings.

And now I even print them to look like gouache. So I don't know what's going to be next. But Leo said when I told him. I said, "Okay, now, I'm making these sets and everything. He said "Well, that is good news because it is absolutely essential.". I mean, it really was a very interesting relationship and dialogue. And I was very fortunate—it was a gift from—being able to participate in something that doesn't exist anymore, knowing people like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The erudition or—

DIANNE BLELL: The graciousness, the style, the manner of the old dealerists, gallerists, the old—the support for the artists—not having to deal with—I mean, believe me, I think those guys do their business, they know their business and I should have known my business better. I mean, I never learned it.

And now actually have a dealer. My last show was at Charlie Cowles's. Charlie Cowles, forget it. Charlie Cowles, it was like, you deliver it ready to hang.

He didn't want any part of one penny on the way to that. That was such a shock to me, because I didn't even know that when I bought into finishing up the project and having the show there, I didn't realize that he—he really, really wanted me to pay for part of that catalog. And I got Holden Luntz in Florida to coproduce it, and Donald Kuspit took off another, bit of chunk so that we could do it, because he also wrote three times as much as he was supposed to write, which was nice.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So in other words, he charged—

DIANNE BLELL: He took a third off. Yes, yes.

MR. MCELHENNEY: Like, less for his essay, in order to make it happen. That was generous of him.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Oh, very generous; I mean, he's a wonderful guy. I'm most honored that he—because he said, "I cannot take any more assignments, but if you send me the pictures, I'll be glad to look at them." So I did, and then I came back from out of town, and there was this voice on my answering machine saying, "Oh hi, this is Donald Kuspit. I'm right now looking at your work, and I just think it's beautiful, and yes, I would be thrilled to do this essay. I'm busy but I really love these pieces." [Laughs.] So I'm very much in love with all the people that have worked with me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Small world story is that Donald Kuspit was, as you know, on the faculty at Stony Brook.

DIANNE BLELL: Right, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so is Richard Leakey, although he never goes there.

DIANNE BLELL: He still is?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He's officially—maybe he's emeritus now, but he was officially on the faculty at Stony Brook.

DIANNE BLELL: Well—well, I remembered—yes, I forgot about that. I forgot—I haven't seen Richard Leakey in many years, not since I was in Africa. I haven't been back to Africa since 1990. I miss it. I loved it. Oh my God, it's a wonderful place. There's a magnetism in the bedrock of that continent that is just—you know where else has that? Syria, Syria has that. It's just a crime what's going on, a crime. I drove all over the Middle East and Syria, all through the—and drivers, met Bedouin drivers—oh my God, and the—Wadi Rum—and I'm a traveler. [Laughs.] And I like to travel hard. I don't—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you mean, travel hard? Sleep on the ground?

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I stay in native hotels, and then every once in a while I'll go to a semi-quasi tacky version of the old days,—because, I mean, I can't afford the, you know, I'm like—the Raj, the Palace, the blah blah blah—but I will go to like, I would go to the Amboseli Lodge in order to clean up.

And I would sleep under the stars and in fly tents, and the bush, and African hotels, and I mean, I've slept in pens with goats and cows and—[bleats]—all around me, little munching, munching, munching. I chose to sleep there rather than in this concrete bunker that smelled like urine out in the middle of the oasis where this guy with his ladies in full purda, you know, and this sort of rag-tag campfire and he's going, you know—"Pour quoi les americans—[they laugh]—Ne paie pas! Help us!" And I'm—and they treat me off-handedly—and then I—oh, this was in Mali, because it's Muslim, see. And so when I got there, and immediately they stuffed my car full of all these guys, and the driver, and this pal of theirs—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you need a navigator.

DIANNE BLELL: Well—believe me, I'm very good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A water bearer. A goat handler.

DIANNE BLELL: No, I mean, you need the driver. I mean, yes , they had this one guy who was a friend of the head of the area, this one area. And he is by profession always a—what do you call it—animal doctor, a—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A veterinarian.

DIANNE BLELL: A veterinarian, because of the livestock situation. Everybody's—it's full livestock or salt. Even though they have camels, so it's all about livestock. And they're the Africans and the Arabs, and so they and his buddy was this guy that made—it was an African photographer, Malian, who– he made postcards for a living and had—he was, he was an irrepressible guy, I said—I'm not used to people talking around wildlife, and in Zimbabwe, and in Rwanda, and in Tanzania, and Kenya, and Namibia and all those places where I worked, you did not talk above a whisper, and even sometimes then, this was just a completely different, it was just like—you know. And I'm going, like, shhhh, and they wouldn't listen to me. I had no authority, I was like a nothing.

And these guys, we'd go into the oasis, and oh, this guy would come out in his turban and robe, and oh, le chef! And he'd give the bucket of water and bar [of] soap to the guy that I'm paying for his French bread and his Vache Qui Ris cheese bits, and everybody—[laughs]. And I said, "Un moment, s'il vous plait. Je suis le chef." [Laughs.] Finally I said that, and I took the bucket and I get off for the first shower, finally, after about five oases. I just couldn't stand it anymore. [Laughs.] Excusez- moi!

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You got to let them know who the boss is. Who is the boss?

DIANNE BLELL: H. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: H. That seems to have made quite an impression on you. That one letter—and the five legs.

DIANNE BLELL: And the five legs—no, the 10 legs. I don't think I've ever achieved those 10 legs.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's like the Balla, right? The—is it Balla? The dog, the futurist picture?

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know that one.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Walking feet and a walking dog, and just these—

DIANNE BLELL: I'm sure he could shoot me a cat running. I'd like to find him today. I found his picture in my kindergarten picture.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'll email you the Balla. It's funny.

DIANNE BLELL: Did I answer your question? [Laughs.] What was the question?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: All of them, and a few that I didn't pose. So I think we're coming up onto the sort of end of the disc here, so we should probably conclude for the day, and carry on next week. Terrific conversation, is there anything you want to—any loose ends you want to—

DIANNE BLELL: Maybe you could video next time, I don't know. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Any loose ends you want to talk—

DIANNE BLELL: I might not be as active, I kind of—maybe I just sort of, just shot the hole—[laughs]—I may be empty.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Something tells me there's lots more—

DIANNE BLELL: Replete with more–

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —to which we can look forward, so.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, that little girl, we didn't talk about her, but that's coming back—oh, the Florida dealer. He's selling like hand over fist. He's doing very well.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's terrific.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, and he's like little bit of an old world guy, he's just—his name was Holden—you know what, can I tell you something magic that has to do with Leo? He's an elf, just like Leo. Teeny. I don't know what it is about these masterful—and he's smart, and he's an English writer, major, he's a—you know? Informed, historian —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He wrote, he wrote the piece that's on the web, Holden—

DIANNE BLELL: Holden Luntz.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. There was a piece—

DIANNE BLELL: He writes a lot. He writes all this—yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There was a piece on *Desire For the Intimate Deity* that I took off of the webyes.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, maybe—he's a very good writer. He's extremely informed, very smart little guy. He and his wife are teeny people.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And where is he in Florida?

DIANNE BLELL: Palm Beach.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Palm Beach.

DIANNE BLELL: And I was just there, and I have this big, big—can I tell you? Three times in my life, I have had premonitions of, like—not even a premonition, I just knew I was going to show in the place, and I was walking along Palm Beach with my cousin Danielle, Hunter [Reynolds]'s mom, one of the first times I'd met her after she was like in Bermuda shorts, and I was like—then I didn't hear till we were both adults and I went down there. And we were walking along Worth Avenue, and I see this gallery. And in the window is this piece by Nicholas Africano, who used to show with—yes—Holly Solomon. And I went, "Oh, that's Nicholas Africano." I kind of voiced that aloud. I said, "You know, it's funny. I could show here." I kind of had this feeling, I just stopped dead, and I thought, I'm going to show here one day. And I kind of went and looked, and I kind of went out, I didn't—and it turns out that that is Holden Luntz's father, and Holden was just—took over his father's space from his other space. He started an upstairs photographic place in the mezzanine, and then went and opened his own gallery, and then went back and took over his dad's space. And now I'm in the window on Palm Beach where

Nicholas Africano used to be.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's wonderful.

DIANNE BLELL: And it happened to me—and I always knew I was going to show at Leo's somehow. Somehow, someway, maybe I thought, maybe a group show, something, something. My first show was a group show. And then the next one was—I went to Aperture over here, it was on 14th Street, I think?

And I went into this gallery, and the two guys had come here, and they had—[laughs] come to interview me about a potential group show about work that was very, very, you know, that was fabricated—imagery, stage, photography, very elaborately staged photography. And—great, okay, and I forget his name. I have to look it up. [His name is Charles Stainbeck. -DB] He's now at the Norton down in Palm Beach. And I went into this space to an opening that some friends of mine were going to, and dragging me along. And I walked in, and it was like being on the inside of some sort of amazing ormolu—just oh, it was just fancy and carved and dripping, and I love that. [Laughs.] It was more classic than that, but I mean, it was built, it was very—oh, gothically—the fancy—Corinthian. And I went, "I can have a—I'm going to have a show here." I just felt like, "I need to be in this space." And I said something about the space, I said, "I want to have a show here,"—she says, oh, well. And this woman was very snide to me, and then up comes this young lady who says—"Oh. Hi, I'm Dianne," I said. "I'm Dianne Blell." She said, "Oh, you're our next show." [They laugh.]

And then in Los Angeles, I was on La Cienega Boulevard, and I saw this courtyard, and it was 454 La Cienega—whatever, it was a number—and it was Earl McGrath's space. And he had hired Isozake to redo his place, and his colors of his rich, beautiful, colored walls, all stucco, and it was this Japanese—and it was just this little courtyard with this beautiful L-shape, really odd glass around it. It was just modern, meticulous, Japanese—something so special. I looked over in the courtyard and I was climbing up, and this Japanese woman comes out, she says, "Well, can I help you?" I said, "This place, this place." And she was so nice to me, and we became sort of pals.

And then next thing I know, I'm in LA, and I'm with Beatrice Monti von Rizzoni, you know—and do you know her? She used to be a dealer in Milan, many years ago, she had an art gallery—and she was best friends with Leo, and that's a whole other story, very interesting. And it's Camila McGrath's special lunch, and I'm invited at that moment with Beatrice and I walk in, and it's that gallery. And I said, oh! I lived in LA, I said—I have to show here, you don't know—this—it was five years ago, it was four years ago, I don't know, this Japanese girl—and he showed me. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Great stories.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] You just kind of feel at home, you just feel—everything kind of melts. It's a very a strange feeling, it's a psychic feeling. Everything kind of melts, it's like you just, you go into the frosting. It's like that stew, that soup when everybody's the same age.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We keep getting to the stew pot.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] That's why I want drawing and people and fictitious backgrounds to all work together, interact on the same dynamic plane, and it makes fake real, by having real people in there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Next time, I'd like to talk a little about your gardens.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, all right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because that seems to be sort of—

DIANNE BLELL: It's a big deal.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —yes. And an extension of all—

DIANNE BLELL: It took me ten years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —an extension of all of this and sort of—

DIANNE BLELL: Betsy Baker says, "Dianne"—I said, "Betsy, I haven't done any art." she said, "Dianne, this is your art now."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, there's a whole precedent for that, with Monet and Churchill—yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I know — but it scared me, I mean, I always felt like I should be making art– but I tell you, it's irresistible. I never grew a weed before I got this house. And it just kept happening, because I could—you see, I built this bedroom on top of this hideous extension that I knocked down, put back up to support the

bedroom so I could get some relief from the low ceiling of the old house—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Let's wait and sort of tackle that task.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I was able to do it from a graphic point of view from upstairs in the master bedroom, so that's interesting. —it's very interesting, because it's a different way of dwelling in it. I don't think I could have done it otherwise.

MR. MCELHINNEY: We'll start with that next time.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you so much.

DIANNE BLELL: You're welcome.

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JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Dianne Blell, artist studio on Cedar Street in New York City, on Thursday, the 28th of June, 2012.

Hello again.

I was wondering if we could talk a little about your garden. I see that you have an article from the Times; August 23rd, 2009, and an issue of House and Garden that you shared with me that had a spread on your place in the Hamptons. The garden is amazing. What was the genesis of it? How did you begin—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I bought this junkyard dog piece of a property—and I mean really a junkyard dog. And it had three buildings on it, and all this land—albeit a shy acre—I mean, I'll show you the pictures; you're not going to believe what I bought. And on it was about 6,000 square feet of concrete.

And when I was looking for a home, I first thought, "Okay"—well, I didn't know; I was looking, I wasn't sure it was feasible for me to buy anything, so what I did was I was driving from one house to another in between looking at various locations, and this thing revealed itself to me, and it was like a "coup de foudre," you know?

I saw—boom, you know—just this plain, unprepossessing house, and with a—eyes for windows and a door for a mouth. And it was shaped like a child's drawing. It had sort of a hip roof—a little bend in it, which made it sort of charming. And then it just came straight down two stories. And it was sort of like a little girl who never wore lipstick; it was kind of all shabby. It reminded me of the *The Goose Girl* fairy tale—who was really a princess and just dies, was the goose girl.

And I thought, "oh"—I just came—it was just—how I even saw it, I don't know. But there was a sign in the driveway this cardboard—"For Sale"—written—[laughs]—you know, like crayon—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —on a cardboard thing nailed to a—[laughs]—nailed to a stake. I pulled over, I tiptoed back; I saw that there was another bungalow, cottage, i.e. structure behind it, plus a garage. So I immediately thought, "ah, middle income? Ah—studio." [Laughs.] Everything. I couldn't get anybody to even show it to me because they said, "oh, it's such a mess. It's just more than anybody can handle."

And so, anyway, I insisted on seeing it. I saw it. And it was at the bottom of the market, and—as with everything I get into—usually, I tackle something I don't know anything about, otherwise I would have been intimidated in the first place—[laughs]. And having had no experience, ultimately, it took me a year, but I bought the place. And the man—there was a couple that was separated, and he was living in the cottage in the back but she was living in the front, with blankets over the windows—[laughs]—so she didn't have to look at him. And they were split up for 10 years and they were selling the property, finally, to just go their separate ways.

And then he had a heart attack somewhere in the middle of all of this. And then one day, I was coming from a—I was at a little spa—fasting, which I do every year because I'm going to do a water fast or a juice fast. And I got a call, and it was from this man saying he was looking for me; he was walking around the real estate offices looking for that nice young lady that was interested in his house. And he wanted to sell it to me. [Laughs.] Every one of my friends looked at it and backpedaled out just faster than they could even—[laughs]—change gears.

And anyway, so I flew back and I got it at the bottom of the market. And I proceeded to haunt my house. And I inherited him, for about—he stored his lawnmower on the property—what little lawn there was; it was mostly concrete.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And why was it concrete?

DIANNE BLELL: He just taught industrial arts at Riverhead High, and he had all kinds of friends in the business. And from what I hear from the neighbors, just—guys kept going back there and pouring concrete. And he had miscellaneous cars and machinery, and he just had stuff parked all over the place. It was just really a junkyard dog. It was like the worst piece of property on the street, which was a nice street called Lumber Lane, in Bridgehampton; it is rather manoresque for Bridgehampton, for town; it's their street with the largest old established homes in town. And it's a big through lane from Montauk Highway to Scuttle Hold Road, back by the farms.

And so here I was, with this thing. And I just taught myself architecture—rendering, architectural rendering. And I knew a little bit about it, having been married to an architect and engaged to a couple others. I'd gleaned a little bit; I was familiar with—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You knew a T-square from a triangle—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I was familiar with—yes, and I once had to draw some elevations for a dresser because nobody from my husband's office could get it right. And finally I just took it under control. And someone told me, "Well, you're just sort of—the inches are—you just reversed it and flipped it. [Laughs.] And so they'd show me what scale was, and—so—[laughs].

I just—I had measured drawings made, right away. And I just went from those and I drew all these fantasy kind of, sort of European—[laughter]—sent 'em off to my ex-fiancé and said, "What do you think?" I didn't hear back. [They laugh.] He's an award-winning—he's very clever. And I thought, "Well, this silence is really ominous." So I called him; "Fred"—his name is Fred Fisher; he's a wonderful architect—and I said, "I failed architecture, didn't I?" [Laughs.] He said, "Well, Dianne, let me send you a book on the American shingle house." [They laugh.] "I can understand your aspirations, but"—I said, "Don't worry"—[laughs]—"I'll get over it."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: He said, "Look, I don't have time to do it." I said, "would you—could you?" He said, "I don't have to send you measured drawings or anything like that; I'm swamped. But what I'll do is I'm just going to do a big, rough charrette drawing for you, and I'm going to fax it."

And so he did one drawing in kind of thick Pentel. And I wanted a tower. And he just did it; he drew it, he faxed it to me, and it came out in rolls. [Laughs.] And I made a model of it and then I hired somebody to do the—I redid most of the drawings except I couldn't do the octagon towers; it was beyond my capacity. So I hired somebody to doctor them and make them very correct.

And submitted them, and went down to the—I very prudently went down to the board, and—the planning board. And I talked to the senior guy; I said, "Look, I'm just a little old lady. I bought a house by myself and I don't want to get my dreams—my hopes and then design something only to have it come in here and be too highfalutin for anybody, and not be approved. I want to know what my constraints are and I'm going to ask you ahead of time." And I just—it was the best thing I ever did. Everybody that goes in there with their drawings and architects, they just make them go through hell. This guy felt like he was a part of it. I drew it, I got everything passed; everything I wanted. It was amazing. It was fabulous.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What year was this?

DIANNE BLELL: This was 1993. By the time I submitted the drawings, it was 1994. I stayed out there for a year; it was the deepest snow since 1800 or something like that. I got boots that went up to my hips—fishing boots. I just went out the front door and walked straight, walked through every ice puddle—this, that, snowy bank—stayed out there all alone; it's when there was no year-round businesses out there. It was really godforsaken, especially in this kind of snow.

And I had half the house demolished. And I had plastic sheets over the back; I basically was living behind plastic sheets. I was like a bag lady. I was haunting this property, and I was tearing out stuff as I went along—tearing out things from the walls, taking down sheetrock, pulling up rotten, scrambled egg carpets—[laughs]—they looked like rotten scrambled eggs, with their brown and yellow, and they were all like—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ooh.

DIANNE BLELL: —pile, and going like this.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: 1960s shag rugs—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I'm telling you. And I discovered this extraordinary wood, which [is] pictures in some of that blue wood.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, what—

DIANNE BLELL: Somebody had washeddown some kind of a primer or something; I don't know– nobody remembered. They just higgledy-piggledy—and then I took off the sheetrock and the four-by-eight "faux bois" paneling, which was really hideous; painted chrome yellow.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why have "faux bois" and paint it chrome yellow? [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: I thought it was so weird, yes. And—[they laugh]—then underneath was this sort of tongue and groove, incredible planks that had aged to this kind of silvery, bluish-gray that looked like a Kashmiri boat house or a Norwegian boat house or—it was so worn-out Gustavian or something; it was just really wonderful.

And so I kept it. And there were—I saw horseshoe—ghost marks on the walls, and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

DIANNE BLELL: These were horses that kicked it—– they used to board their horses—and the guys in there; it was a rooming house for black workers. And it was called the Argyle Apartments. And it turned out that it was on the corner of the Montauk Highway and—behind the bank—and that this man bought it for $300 and moved it to the property, and then he bought the garage. And they were all pre-1900. 1850, something like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he trucked in all the buildings under this—

DIANNE BLELL: He trucked in two buildings and then built that weird little cottage. And he had asbestos siding on it.

And I just proceeded to dial everything up, with a little good advice.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: And these were the pictures of what I saw. And the first thing I did was I put a nose on its face, because it had eyes and a mouth but no nose. So I clear-storied the—you walked in and you had to turn right, left to go up the stairs—boom, boom, boom. You could barely get in the door one step before you had to make a choice. So I just took out what it was overhead, when you walked in the front door, were the closets to the bedroom—two bedrooms upstairs—and there was one bedroom in the back, and then another bedroom.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good Lord. Wow, daunting.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] I wasn't daunting—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So did you keep the bathtub? Did you keep the—no—

DIANNE BLELL: No. Oh—no, that bathtub I actually brought on the property and put it in the cottage. But I have subsequently gotten rid of it now, because I now have—I've gone middle class. I've gotten a walk-in shower.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It has a basement—uh-huh; it looks like a—

DIANNE BLELL: They're—Bilco Basement, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like a chamber of horrors down there—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, that's the porch. It's now got beautiful stone on top of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, right.

DIANNE BLELL: And it's got a beautiful—well, here, you can just look—and these are the first beginnings of fixing it up. [Pause.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, the garden's matured much since then.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long did it take you from the time that you acquired the property until you deemed it

to be, really, fully livable?

DIANNE BLELL: Oh—well, the buildings—I did one building at first; I spent the first year tearing apart and thinking, "dwelling, haunting," and trying to figure out how I moved and where I wanted to sleep and all that, and what orientation I would have, how—and then I proceeded to renovate the cottage so I could get some rental income—modest at first, because there was a lot going on, so I just rented it for a song to people. And then I moved the garage to the rear of the property, at the suggestion of Fred Fisher, and canted it a little bit and had a nice double-track drive going up to it.

[Phone rings.]

So it took, a—[phone rings]—a building per year, plus—

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DIANNE BLELL: [In progress]—because then the next year I did the studio so I'd have a place to crash while I did the big house. And then the big house took a little bit longer. And then I did the grounds—so there was a lot going on with the grounds and that was an evolving process. So I would say about five years.

I mean, I lived in it the whole time, off and on—I just camped out. But the garden, that's like when it was just beginning to be installed—hardly all the—the rose bed isn't there in brick; the brick borders aren't in yet. I did it very gradually. It was like building a painting. I didn't just come up with a design and implement it—I would put in this and say, "Well, I want a pool," or—put a little reflecting—little pond, or I "Oh, I want this, oh, I want that." And also—what's his name; I can't—there was this wonderful landscape architect, just I can't remember his name. It's just—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I guess that's the question, is—

DIANNE BLELL: He said, "You can't be afraid to move things." Well, there's Chet Larson, so—this wonderful landscape designer.

Anyway, I was very naïve and I had no idea. And I did have a very good friend named Robert Jacob, who is a major gardener. And he was the partner of—I don't know if you know David White, who's in charge of all Rauschenberg's—he's his curator and art—everything, right-hand, main guy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He's involved now with the foundation?

DIANNE BLELL: Still—yes, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, that's a lot happening there, I understand.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, good.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, anyway, they had a major piece of property out there, and they became good friends. And I—the garden was so beguiling that I just felt like I wanted a garden. And I wanted a garden that was silver and blue and black. With maroon, black kind of flowers—it's very hard to find them now. Anyways, I don't have the black and white—I can't find—I'd have to sort of do incredible research and order the plants and—Robert Jacob used to—he's like– he's German also—[laughs]—so he does everything very scientifically, very systematically. And I'm just kind of—seat of my pants—and I just did it as I went along. And again, what I did was I immersed myself in whatever I do, I go out and buy 20 beautiful books on it—like mobiles. So I have every possible, beautiful book on mobile—[laughs]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: —you can imagine, of every school. And the same thing, when I'm going through the gardening—I did the same. And I just had *Classical Small Gardens* and *Gardens of the World* and *Gardens of England*, *French Gardens*, chateaux—[laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, did you go travel around to have a look at famous gardens?

DIANNE BLELL: I did them from books.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did you go to Biltmore or to Giverny or any of these places?

DIANNE BLELL: No, I've never been to any of these gardens.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Are you curious now, to go?

DIANNE BLELL: I am now, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: I have to tell you that once I bought this house I kind of quit travelling—[laughs]—because it took me—it was a—one total immersion. And before I bought that house—I used to buy lots of clothes—it substituted my art-making drive, for many years. That garden became my main production.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's not uncommon. You think about somebody like Monet—

DIANNE BLELL: Did he do that to the exclusion—or did he just—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I think a lot of that was going on during a period of his life when his eyesight was failing because of cataracts—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, really?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He had them late in his life. He had an operation that removed them and improved his vision. But also, you think about the American painter Frederic Edwin Church, whose home—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, Frederic Church, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Olana became his obsession as he began to develop arthritis; and it made him less deft with brush work. And it was harder for him to paint, so he spent much more time—

DIANNE BLELL: Mine was just obsession.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: A transference of obsession. I didn't have anything, really, outside of that other than my friends and clothes. [Laughs.] Well, for me, it was to say furniture supplanted clothing, and I started subscribing to design magazines, and I just eliminated all the fashion magazines. And—[laughs]—I just completely—I felt like I was building a piece of the earth.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's interesting. If you ponder the fact that a lot of artwork, especially wall art, paintings, drawings, prints, even photographs, are somehow implicitly designed or intended to be hung on some interior wall, mostly.

DIANNE BLELL: And mind you, I've always had—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —kind of a nice, friendly art collection. And I've—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —you can see we have very little room here—[laughs]—between my work and other people's work. And Robert Barry, Joan Jonas, and Brice Marden and Sol LeWitt and I have all kinds of fabulous art here. And Carleton Watkins, early photography; I have some Atgets in the bedroom—[sighs]—and out in Long Island, I'm chock-a-block, too.

But one of the problems I have is I didn't have in California. I always have a lot of window ratio to wall space, unfortunately, because I really need light; I need a lot of window area.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the wall space is secondary in importance to you?

DIANNE BLELL: It is. I have to have have to be indoor, outdoor.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I guess my question is, if we can accept the fact that wall art paintings—movable paintings and wall art inevitably exist in some kind of a relationship to environments—home environments, gallery environments, museum environments—

DIANNE BLELL: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We could probably also agree that a lot of artists, when they're creating that artwork, are not imagining the work hanging—

DIANNE BLELL: Finished.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —in a home, in a gallery, in a museum. They're concentrating on what's inside the frame, or what—

DIANNE BLELL: But then the framework of the canvas or paper or the—yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —within those spatial boundaries that they've chosen to operate within. But—

DIANNE BLELL: Even if you start out with a cartoon you will alter it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Absolutely.

DIANNE BLELL: I started out with cartoons for these mobile pieces. I knew the setting I wanted, my models—and I already had shot the models; I knew which compositions, which themes I was going to tackle. But they changed.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So my question to you is—buying this house, doing this garden in effect transformed you into an environmental artist. —

DIANNE BLELL: I would say so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And how did that then reinform your studio practice, when you were making work, again, to be exhibited on walls?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I sort of—the *Desire for the Intimate Deity* came about, and it was all—I started working outdoors, as you know, on that sort of open, vast, Picasso-esque landscape of the mind, so to speak. But it was not organized graphically, like the works I was doing that had architecture in them, or these little scenics. And I think that it structured my exterior scenes a lot more. I wasn't doing exterior scenes other than that, and that was specifically a platform field with a river in it. I mean, anything could have gone—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: But these other ones—I can show you the sets—just the exclusive sets; I have some—I have the images of them here without them—before they were moved around, and deconstructed and then reconstructed into third and fourth and fifth and six different elements from each set coming together to reconstruct—I had to make them work for a living because I had—[laughs]—these massive sets on one hand—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —and I had to have a huge studio that I had to sublet, and there was a barn out there, in order to finish something. It cost me a king's ransom, and now I have them sort of rolled up in storage and—it continued —[laughs]—this albatross. [Laughs.]

I really want to show them one day. And I don't know—my problem is I'm just a little disorganized ambitiously, and passive. And I should just be like calling up Alanna, the ARTonAIR over there, which does big stuff, and—the Clocktower—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Alanna Heiss, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, she's a very good friend of mine. Not that that's going to—that's not like in, you know, like Bob's your uncle, but I mean it might be—I'm just saying, there are a number of possibilities which I have not yet exhausted in terms of maybe exhibiting these things. And every once in a while I see shows that are—[laughs]—like, have to do with this sort of stuff. I go—[laughs]—"I really got to get these things"—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that Clocktower space is enormous. It's sort of a challenge to get there, but it's—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, they have—–

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: They construct up there all the time. It is portable; I mean, I took them off the stretchers. And they're rolled up, and some of them are in sections.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's a terrific idea, I think.—

DIANNE BLELL: And actually, the idea was—well, I really had thought about those things, but nobody wanted to show the sets. Somebody thought—they were complaining; they thought it took away from the ultimate work.

Maybe I could have marched forward or whatever, but Charlie Cowles came along; he really wanted to show these miniature pieces. And he wasn't going to turn over the entire gallery to the major sets; he wanted to do those photographic works that—I mean, those—the very—the prints that were done with the pigment and the inks and stuff like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you ever consider the idea of exhibiting the sets with a kind of performance component?

DIANNE BLELL: I thought maybe of a—well, I just don't know how I would have a performance that was secondary to—I haven't figured that out, how it would be secondary to what was already in the—pictorially.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: I thought maybe of having a model in there, but I mean, what's she going to do, just sort of sit there and peek out? I don't want to—I don't know; I would like—basically, I would like to show them with a facsimile of the work—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: —maybe just not feature all the work; just have a smaller idea. Because I always liked the idea of—my working of—in like Hollywood, they have working titles—was *The Pursuit of Love in Miniature*. That was my working title because I was doing the opposite of a miniature; I was—my original idea was to do the mural size—which I've always done—works—and these huge sets. The other idea was for people to be able—for them to float around the sets. They were not to be just backdrops; you would be able to go in, out and around and among them, and—be backstage, so to speak.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: I wanted to install the sets but it just kind of died on the vine. And I hope that maybe I can figure out a way to revive it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I guess the questions arose when you shared that issue of House and Gardens and there was an image of your studio prior to the renovation. And there was one of those—

DIANNE BLELL: Here we go—[laughs]—yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —leaning against the wall, and it did look like it would be an object which would be quite compelling and—

DIANNE BLELL: It's quite beautiful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, and not only that, but I—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not just as a backdrop, but I mean as—

DIANNE BLELL: I used to have dinner party here that you—that well—[where all the art is?]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: That's where I did all my sets for the *Pursuit of Love* and *Various Fabulous Monsters* and that solar system thing there, that—you call those things the sky—[laughs]—nebulae—that nebulae.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, right.

DIANNE BLELL: And all those except for—I mean, the Picasso landscape I did at a studio over in Brooklyn because it was 30 feet wide and 30 feet—20 feet deep, or 25 feet deep and 35 feet wide. But all those other smaller ones with the Sphinx figure and *Eros and Psyche*, they were all done back in there. And then I shipped from there, and then back in there.

And it's it's very interesting because it's shot with a four-by-five camera so that everything in the foreground—it's fun; in the foreground you have to force reality. If you want something to look high and large, in a four-by-five lens, you walk in here, it's like you're going down the rabbit hole because then the little cupid that's up on the upper left-hand side flying away in the picture is really quite down here near the camera. [Laughs.] And the drapery, if you want it to sort of read as the corner of the upper right-hand side, it's like right down here. And it's about this big a section that you're photographing to make it look like this.

So there's a tremendous amount of tucking and placement and Polaroid-ing to get it just in the right place and everything like that. So it's topsy-turvy, and very strange perspective; it's reverse perspective.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you still use Polaroids as kind of a sketch book?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I don't know. Right now, I've been doing mostly digital.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: And well, yes, my last big four-by-five shoot involved Polaroid tests of the exposure and the pose.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: And I basically don't milk the Polaroids like I used to. I used to do hundreds of Polaroid per set—because I would look how it photographed on the set, I would have to see it as flat art, and then I would rephotograph or reposition something; because it was really like making a painting; every Polaroid was a proof.

I mean, I could show you a step for *The Origin of Drawing*; there are many Polaroids. Photographing this piece of fabric, photographing the—placing them, everything. I mean, it was—my cartoon would sort of evolve. I didn't really just—it wasn't as fixed as this one that I did digitally—the last one with the—*Desire for the Intimate Deity*, which I kind of basically knew my cartoons for those. And it was more like fill in the blanks because I painted the sets, but even then, I would end up not liking something that I envisioned.

I'm not very good at envisioning things in total and then just going there and doing it. There's always something that I have to change dramatically, and it's a lot of work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, it's impossible to anticipate without some revision exactly how everything's going to work.

DIANNE BLELL: Mmm. Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, even if you're hiring a model they could lose weight, gain weight.

DIANNE BLELL: Well—[laughs]—if that happens, I—stuffing her into this little top that I had made for her—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right—arrive with a sunburn or whatever. [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] That's happened. I've had all that. And they cut their hair.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. [They laugh.] Or show up with a new tattoo.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, God. Constantly. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So actually, once you have everything assembled, once you've built the set, you're constantly changing it and adjusting it.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And they came over for dress rehearsals and then Polaroid rehearsals. I rehearsed it down to the big toe. I would draw where they put their big toe—because I did have to coach them; "Please, make sure all your toes are on the ground." Because they had to sit in the right place because, four-by-five, you can't—you can't play with four-by-five.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

DIANNE BLELL: So once I got a Polaroid that I liked—that I knew it was the final rehearsal and everything like that, I traced their feet so they could come in the next day—that bench was there, their toes went in there—[laughs]—they were locked in to that spot.

And there were three girls—and one time I had three girls; their names were Laurie, Laura, and Lauren, the models. Can you imagine directing that?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How to keep track.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] "Laura—no—Laurie– I mean, Lauren, could you put your—I mean, Laura"—[laughs]. I mean, I'm just trying to give you an idea—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Are you able to do—

DIANNE BLELL: —Polaroids. I mean, this is like—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We're about to have a look at some Polaroids.

DIANNE BLELL: I wonder if I have—it would be very interesting. [Pause.] I don't know where my Polaroids are anymore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, off—off transcript, we'll just keep rolling.

[—]DIANNE BLELL: I mean, if you want to see developmental stages of just like the first little germ of an idea—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: And also, I painted my sets as to how they would photograph. It's like special effects. It wasn't like how I liked to see them, like a fashion shoot or something like that. No.

I would go, "Okay,"—or I would do a texture on a wall, or I would want it to look like—first of all, the set was flat, so I had false perspective to make it look like a corner; it was shaded in there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: So I'd constantly take Polaroids along the way. It was very expensive.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So what kinds of things were—

DIANNE BLELL: That's when Leo was helping me produce work. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So was he helping you with stipends?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, you mentioned a stipend before. He didn't do stipends anymore, but he was very financially supportive.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He would—If you needed to buy something, he'd help you buy it.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, yes. And also, he'd pay for half my production costs. He said, "Just bring over your expenses." And then we would add them up, and then he would cut me a check for half of the production costs. Polaroids, film, processing, models, equipment, lighting, you-name-it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then you would square up after the work sold?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. I mean, like—some of his biggest, famous, money-making artists—I mean, like—the light artist—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Flavin.

DIANNE BLELL: Dan Flavin. For instance, Flavin was stipend until the day he died. And I'm not sure who died first, Leo or Dan. But anyway—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He was a big collector of Hudson River School drawings.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, he was; yes. And I saw that show out in Long Island, in his little house. And they are such wonderful—and he himself did them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: And they were beautiful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's quite surprising, when one learns—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, he was a very—he had an eye for beautiful things.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, then, a lot of artists who establish themselves as abstract painters were actually fascinated with continuing to draw from the figure or draw landscape. Artists like Richard Diebernkorn or—

DIANNE BLELL: Mmm-hmm.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Jules Olitski—

DIANNE BLELL: Mmm-hmm.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —who weekly hired models and kind of—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, did he?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —yeah. So—

DIANNE BLELL: I hear they did these field like—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, exactly. That was sort of the major list.

DIANNE BLELL: You want to keep your hand in it. You know, I guess—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why not? Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why not? So what were the most surprising things that would come to light whenever you would prepare a set and then photograph it for the first time? What predictably—

DIANNE BLELL: One of my favorite things was always finding the right model. I remember I had a casting call and I was looking for the model in pursuit of—*The Origin of Drawing*. And all of these guys came through, and I had them sit down, and I photographed them sitting down and I photographed them—and I called agencies and I—All of a sudden, this guy Dario walks in and he's the opposite of what I thought I asked for. I asked for somebody fair-haired—you know, he was very swarthy Italian, dark.

And I said, "Oh!" I said, "Well, I thought I asked for all these rather fair-haired—"—I don't know why I did, come to think of it. He said, "Oh, that's okay. I don't have to and everything." And he had these broad shoulders and he was really short.

And, anyway, I said, "No, no, no, come in, come in." And he was this—he had a nice—but he was strange-looking. Long, kind of greasy-ish brown hair, but he was neat-looking, he was just different-looking. He wasn't your classic model. And so he undressed and—they all had dressed pretty well and he was—and they all needed to pose in their skivvies or something.

I sat him in that very chair and I knew the pose because it was the pose that was in the painting—and Dario took it. My research is quite very interesting. And it was in that one, *The Origin of Drawings*, which pretty much pre-described what it was. There were some adjustments for reality. [Laughs.] That's different than painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm.

DIANNE BLELL: It really is. Sometimes legs and arms just don't do what they do. They look natural in a painting, then they just don't go there. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: One can take liberties greatly with his—

DIANNE BLELL: So it was like, oh, god. And it was really hard to get them to—anyway, so—[laughs]—he sat down, he took his place and I said, okay—and turn your head. And he just went like this, I took—I knew the minute he turned his head and I took that picture, I just knew. I just knew. There was just something about the way he did it, his shoulders and the way—it just—it's really something. It just takes your breath away.

And when I found Eros, I was looking and looking and looking for this model. I wanted one that looked just like him. That came out of a bougereau. He is like they just cut him out and then went hocus pocus diddlyocus and then he fell in the air. And it's Cupid rescuing Psyche, taking her up—and I have them in a picture in the book—one of the books in here.

Anyway, so I call all kinds of people and then I called this one guy and I said, someone said that you have an interesting model that you photographed. "Well, you know, it's blah, blah, blah, so-and-so, maybe it sounds like—he's got curly hair and he's tall and he's got this nice European waist, kind of broad shoulders and slim," and anyway.

So he comes over and I was here with one of my stylists. And the doorbell rings and we look through the little magic eye, and we couldn't even answer the door for five minutes because we were running around celebrating inside going, "It's him. That's him. Oh my god, that's him. What do we do? It's him, look."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: And the other person looks—"Oh my god, that's him." [Laughs.] "You're the one!" [Laughs.] We

opened the door—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did he respond to that?

DIANNE BLELL: He's like, oh. [Laughs.] "You're perfect."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And where is he now?

DIANNE BLELL: He's in Germany. [Laughs.] He taught Alexander Method. He was studying to become a master of the Alexander Method. Gunter.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Gunter? So he's German?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, interesting. So that's a great story.

DIANNE BLELL: So, those are the kinds of things, or when suddenly, the drapery just gets just puddles and the guy gets it just right. And it never stays. It's constant. When I have crews that just—a guy that just deals with drapery alone, someone that just is constantly looking at every little detail—you know, a hair falls out, a piece of chalk.

I've got one picture—I always was shooting for the perfect picture—oh, when am I going to get the perfect picture. And I thought that that was almost the perfect picture was *The Origin of Drawing*. And then my painting assistant, whose helped me chalk up the sets and everything like that, she left a piece of chalk—to this day, you can see it in the picture underneath the chair on the set.

I know it's there. Nobody else knows it's there, but I know that's a piece of chalk. [Laughs.] I think the perfect picture ended up to be this one here. I moved all my art back and forth around the—a couple of months ago, so half the things are wrapped. I've taken stuff in here from Long Island and it's the only one where nobody ever bought a piece of it. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So do you only do your major stagings here?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I've done some out at Long Island, but shooting out in Long Island on a four-by-five is really asking for trouble. I don't know if you can see it with this map. There's a piece of chalk—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A piece of chalk.

DIANNE BLELL: —on the floor.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, interesting.

DIANNE BLELL: Now—like, in this one, for instance, we forgot to—I might have corrected that in Photoshop. I think one of these things is too close to her or something like that. This one's pretty perfect. This one's perfect.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmitive.]

DIANNE BLELL: These two—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Lovely.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I mean, this is good too. I mean, I have no complaints about that one.

So, I mean, we had—I drove out to the Bronx to get these Cupids to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Now, where do you get Cupids?

DIANNE BLELL: Rubber—there's these terrible rubber statues and they make all kinds of devils and weird things and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: —they make—it's this kind of weird rubber. And I wanted to keep them as sort of an ephemera, that belongs to my—in my [larger ?], my backup. But they kind of rot and fall apart and get dirty and they corrode. And then the neck falls off and they have—so I've got like Cupids in 25 pieces out there, beautifully painted eyes, collecting—makeup all cracked. So it's sort of strange—[laughs]—but all along the way, there are rewards.

There are rewards at the end of the day. I love my models. They're rewarding. I call them my peaches.—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Your peaches?

DIANNE BLELL: My peaches. I call my crew and my models, I all call—all my peaches. And I've been working with pretty much some of the same people for 20-some-odd years, 30 years. One stylist, I've been working with her since 1978.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you actually have to take these Cupid dolls and make them up?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, they're just white rubber.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I see.

DIANNE BLELL: And they're in a mold.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. And they have to be painted and—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And I had my assistant paint them. And the first one I did just white. I started out what I call guerrilla baroque. I started out really sort of kind of crudely. Didn't do much, 80, 79, here. This goes backwards.

You see that? That's how they look. And then I went out and got more of them and we painted them up to look like little humans. Little—not humans, little gods. Little Eros—Eries—whatever. Plural for Eros. [Laughs.] Eroses.

But, all along the way, there are tremendous exhilarating joys. You know when you get a pose, you just kind of know it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the reader—

DIANNE BLELL: But I would shoot 50. I'm sorry to—– I used to shoot 50 takes. That was an exhausting day.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's almost like making a film.

DIANNE BLELL: Totally. And people say why are you doing all this for a still? I said, because I think in stills. Because even if I go see a film, I walk away from the film with one or two scenes on my mind, where they're like a still frame from the movie. So to me, it encapsulates everything. And my way of animating an image is to do a triptych. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, there are a number of other artists who are doing photo murals, like Wall and others. You know, and now—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, yes. I've been doing it since the early '70s.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So these would be younger artists, but do you know—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, everybody's everywhere now—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm.

DIANNE BLELL: Everybody does everything now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But have you any insight into their processes? Because they do look a lot like sort of film stills.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, like Gregory—what's his name; does those TV things?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Gregory—what's his last name? He's married to Ivy I mean, to Joe Shapiro's daughter.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And is it—

DIANNE BLELL: Gregory [Crewdson]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Jeff Wall, the Canadian artist for the—is he Canadian?

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, the Canadian artist that does the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like the big—

DIANNE BLELL: —the light box and all that?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Jeff Wall?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Jeff Wall.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. No, he's been doing it for a long time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Yea, we were kind of the same ilk, only he does light boxes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: He's doing—yes. I love Jeff Wall, not all of his stuff, but a lot of his stuff. It's interesting because he would re-enact things in a contemporary way. And I kind of went more and more back—I have to sort of say that I think part of my going back into the classics—I started out doing those set-ups with myself in them, and those were kind of modernized versions of the pursuit of love and Cranach scenes and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —all kinds of stuff. And Fereol de Bonnemaison *Woman Overtaken by a Storm* from the Brooklyn Museum. I did that in Triptych, to kind of animate it and that sort of thing. And I first saw it there.

And so I got a lot of attention for that, and I think it's because I did it in contemporary costume and everything like that. And I've subsequently seen a lot of people doing things in contemporary fashion, and I kind of felt it made me want to back to the truth and—in other words, my MO was that the raison d'etre still exists classically so that, I'm going to just go back to the classical implementation of it. And then by doing it photographically, it makes it alive for me. It re-creates it and makes it believable.

And there is that old thing about photography, if you photograph it, it's real, which isn't the truth anymore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

DIANNE BLELL: It's gone full circle to the opposite. [Laughs.] It's a painting now. And just what I I was plagued with when I said, "Okay, I'll fool those people that want paintings. I'll make my photographs painterly." And then they started saying, "Oh, we love your paintings." I said, "No, but they're photographs." So now it's all, you know —

And then the other thing—the whole thing about getting away from that nudity—and I thought about that and I—there's so much raw sexuality depicted. I'm not moralistic about it; fine with me. I had my spring at nudity and all that sort of stuff. I mean, I'm not—it's just that I kind of felt—and then it's just like no secrets. I mean, some of the stuff that people tell on themselves about—

Tracy Emin, I just love her. I love her. I even own a Tracy Emin piece. But I just kind of felt like I was going back to the moods of the '50s. I wanted to regress.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mystery.

DIANNE BLELL: Because I felt like it was being taken—yes. Under wraps and it's all under the wardrobe. "Seeing through clothes," like that guy wrote that book. And it's just—I kind of felt like I was going to—being more truthful just in a funny way, in an odd way. It's not a polemic, it's just my reaction to, "Okay, everybody's doing this now, I'll step back." Or everybody's—I'll make an old-fashioned version or I'll be more historical or I'll—

I just have always been a little counter—contrarian to what's going on. I remember when I was in school, I used to wear my hair in a wave here and my mother had a bleach blonde streak. And so one night, I bleached my hair wave blonde. The next morning, she was furious. I said, "Well, you've got one."

So I went to school, and all my girlfriends went and then did a little blonde wave here and went like this. So I quit doing it. [Laughs.] I look up and I see myself coming and going—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It becomes a uniform.

DIANNE BLELL: It's like five of us looking alike. I mean, it's just crazy. I've always had a gut reaction to just be a

little perverse. And I think that that's probably—one of my little summaries here's—here was that my early—although my parents came from modest backgrounds—farming—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —laborers and a working class or a farm class agrarian kind of background, but my early exposure was to a vast economic class system because of that. And then it was—and even though they worked their way—they were ambitious and worked their way up to the suburban kind of gentility, and I was really basically then in the kind of a class of entitlement—I went to private schools and all that with very, you know—

So it was interesting because their aspirations were on a certain level. And that gave me something to rebel against and to always be more Catholic in my tastes because I had that as a child in my background. Did you ever see the movie—it's a German movie and it's about people that—a couple that's escaped—a family that escaped Nazi Germany and they went to Kenya. Very—it was a beautiful film. I can't think of the name of it. [*Nowhere In Africa*, 2001]

And she was loathe to go there. He went in the military or something, and then he ended up working there for a local farmer. And then he brought his wife over and she brought all her china and everything and everything she thought she could get out of Germany.

And she just did not want to make that move. It was just against everything in her. She went back there and actually adapted to it. He wanted to, in the end, work his way to a situation where he could go back to Germany. So in the end, she's the one that adapted and he's the one that ended up having to go back. And the child that was brought up there was very, very liberal and would sleep in the African huts with the little African shamba boys on the property, just as friends. I'm not wasn't a sexual thing, it was just a naïve—

And there is a—what do they call them, I forget—an Askari on the property; the guards are called Askaris. And he was the head guy or something like that, but an African—he was very close and affectionate with the little girl; pick her up, hold her. She just—the physicality, there was no reserve or anything, it was a very interesting kind of reverse racial situation movie. And I kind of felt like of my life was like that in that, here I was young, I wasn't running away from labor class kids, I—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm.

DIANNE BLELL: —all my whole family were modest and farmers or janitors or worked in factories. And my mom had aspirations to have physical possessions and mink stoles and—[laughs]—pretty rings and the Cadillacs and the pretty house and the little garden.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Living kind of the Donna Reed and the Ricky Nelson-type—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. All that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —America.

DIANNE BLELL: And everything—appearances and, you know, she aspired to that. Butif you looked at the magazines and the advertising, it was all about that, so she was a pure product of that. She fell for it. And I've never really—if I fall for something, I know I fall for it. I'm not—I know I don't unconsciously fall for it. That has also been a real thing in my life because having—I've had, as I said before, this dual life.

And I was reading about Joan Mitchell, a biography of Joan Mitchell, and how she also was brought up hoity-toity but she couldn't stand any of the fake aspirations to that. She had no—I met her when I was in Paris when I was 23 or [2]4. And a friend of mine was her assistant and took me over to her studio, and she was very lovely to meet.

And she was sitting on a tall barstool and she was at her bar. She wasn't drunk, she was a lady. And I've heard that she was supposed to be difficult, but I didn't have that experience. And she was so nice to me. And she said, "Oh, come over anytime." And she was with Jean Paul Riopelle at the time, and they had this fancy car down in a garage downstairs that opened up onto the street. And it was all wicker-sided. Evidently, he collected fancy cars sort of like Tristan Tzara or one of those guys—[laughs]—you know what I mean?

So anyway—and I didn't—I wished I had. And I went to a Rauschenberg exhibit when I was there, and he—there were these sliding doors. And I was thinking did he copy—was he doing the glass, Duchamp's Glass—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: —because they were doors. And I have little notes in here about my exposure to them. But, anyway, so it was just kind of interesting, that duality. And now why did I bring that up, this duality? You said

something about that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, we were speaking about the nudity and sort of how—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, how regressing back to—yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How now everything is—

DIANNE BLELL: Exposed.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —how eroticism has become—

DIANNE BLELL: It's not even erotic anymore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, no, it's become—I mean, the sort of the prevalence of genitalia and explicit—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —acts of intimacy. Like the Jeff Koons—you know, the *Made in Heaven* series—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —which I always thought was a little bit—

DIANNE BLELL: I remember that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —ironic because it was right on the heels of the Maplethorpe scandal.

DIANNE BLELL: But he was doing himself—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, and his

DIANNE BLELL: —and his girl. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and his wife.

DIANNE BLELL: And his girl, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And his wife.

DIANNE BLELL: His wife, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this is a heterosexual married couple—

DIANNE BLELL: That was gutsy. That was one gutsy—I mean, I—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, it was. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: Gutsy for a guy. More gutsy for a guy than even a woman, I thought.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—

DIANNE BLELL: Because in—I put a note in here. In my dealing with nudity and everything, I felt like—I was feeling my ultimate vulnerability. And by doing that, I felt like I was taking control of it. I was issuing it. I was taking control, I was pointing back at you about being the observer, about being the voyeur—about the art audience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: And the entire art experience is voyeuristic.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the art historian James Elkins, out in—

DIANNE BLELL: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Art Institute of Chicago, wrote a book called *The Object Stares Back*—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And in it, he talks about the—sort of—

DIANNE BLELL: I wish I were a scholar like you. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I'm not hardly a scholar, but the—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, totally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But the—married one, but a scholar by association.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, really?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But he talks about the use Gustave Courbet *L'Origine du Monde*—

DIANNE BLELL: Courbet is who I was trying to think of the other day—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, okay.

DIANNE BLELL: The woman; she's lying back and—spread eagle, practically.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh—well, that—right. But this—

DIANNE BLELL: Very erotic.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But this—specifically *L'Origine du Monde*, which is allegedly—

DIANNE BLELL: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Josephine Heffernan, who's a girlfriend of Whistler—that's—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, was that—I didn't realize that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes—and how it inspires a bunch of conflicting—a number of conflicting responses and—

DIANNE BLELL: That's actually tantric, too

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right.

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, when you think about that as the woman, that's what the whole tantric philosophy's based in.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you were saying that you were feeling more drawn to a different kind of eroticism, or a different kind of—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I felt like I wanted to come through in the—even if it's historical, in the most pedestrian way—with your clothes on, smoldering, still looking—a little clothes on, a little clothes. I was interested also in another culture; how they dealt with nudity in another culture. Well, semi-nudity—erotica's never completely nude. Well, she is in *The Bathers*; she is in the *The Bathers.* Teasing *The Bathers*, because he stole their saris. [Laughs.] "Pick up his clothes."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the return to classicism, or exploring classicism or exploring, the Mughal images is a way of not only examining historical approaches, but trying to rediscover for yourself another way of trying to connect with this whole idea of desire—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I was also trying to get out of the West. I was tired of seeing myself coming and going; I kept dealing with—I dealt with Baroque and Neoclassicism and Greco-Roman. And I mean, it's just—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, this exists in other cultures, and if in my lifetime I get to the African culture—I hope—I'd like to—just try to touch on this universality—archetypical yearning in the human condition. Man. Man is man, whether he's black, white.

That's why I was interested in using non-Indian people in my work. Mexican and Italian-American girl—just paint them up to look this that. I don't know. I get criticized for using costumes a lot—I have been.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why?

DIANNE BLELL: Just—they think I should maybe take it to another level, withdraw it from that and maybe abstract it more out of– rather than repeat its context. This is what—I've heard this, I've had this discussed, I've had it written, I've had it—you know. It's been called pastiche. Not everybody, but—I mean, it's—and that I'm over—that I'm very romantic.

I mean, Robert Rosenblum—I mean, that's why I like Transformation in Late Eighteenth Century Art. I used to read—as I said, I started out drawing love comic books and love scenes from comic books and things like that. So my interest in the pursuit of love goes back to since when I was a little girl. Romance magazines, romance comics and book, you know? It's full circle; it's still in me.

Robert Rosenblum used to project my work *Love Fleeing Slavery* during his lectures because I got it from his book. And that's not the only one I got from his book. I think I got the *Vestal Virgin* from his— I think the *Origin of Drawing* came out of there, too. And he was very interested in romanticism, and there's a parallel in there with being modern. To me, modernism in and itself existed by virtue of the technology. So to make that mythology—remake that mythology today makes it, to me, real, because it was—then, there was this whole thing about if you photograph something then it becomes real.

That's now—it's Photoshop, which makes everything fake. So—[laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. But another irony would be that the number one skill today for a digital animator—

DIANNE BLELL: That's what you said, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —is life drawing. And it makes perfect sense.

But it also seems like your work is resistant to the tendency of, shall we say, the conventional avant-garde having this appetite for kitsch and irony.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I hope so in a way. Not to critique it, because I am very catholic in my tastes and I love a vast amount of work. I get into arguments with people all the time because I'll accept something just by the mere fact it exists and they're all doing it—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean—

DIANNE BLELL: I'll say there's a reason why there is this burgeoning of this imagery for this reason. It's worth investigating as to why. So why is there an outcropping of this; it's coming from—it's a natural spring. And I can accept that.

So I don't criticize it as "Oh, this is more valid than that," or blah blah blah. But—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, but you could argue that, let's say, kitsch is—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, it's just that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —a pastiche that's either ignorant of or oblivious to its sources.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I do think the kids are more exposed to—I don't think that they're as historically interested or—and have the education. Maybe I'm wrong, but I've heard this said.

Information is so readily available and expression is so immediate that it really sort of flies off the cuff. And I don't know how much delving—I mean, I don't know if anybody takes the pains to do stuff like this, now. I'm sure there are people that do; I'm not saying they don't. But I just think, on a vast scale, I would suspect probably they don't as much as—I mean look, here's my—here's my—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

DIANNE BLELL: I did all this research into this pose. And this came out of—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So we're looking at—

DIANNE BLELL: —this comes off a Greek sarcophagus.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Lookit. You see where that pose comes from? Nobody's made that comparison in books.

Look at these things. I go up to the art history library—oh God, this is really a precious Polaroid here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: You can just look. See—you see, now this was the last Polaroid—this was the final.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, this is what it looks like. So we're looking at about a three-by—

DIANNE BLELL: Four-by-five.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right; it's like a four-by-five—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Small Polaroid of the *Cupid and Psyche*.

DIANNE BLELL: And that's number 149.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. That's a lot of takes.

DIANNE BLELL: And there's more—well, I mean—a lot of them are involved with just set-building or designing the square on the floor or where we want the pillar to be or how this looks, whether it should be lower or higher or this, you know?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

DIANNE BLELL: So I mean, it's very interesting. And the Psyche's pose in and of itself is the Greek mourning pose. And I figure out—it was very hard to do a composition with two people standing apart in it. And I learned it from what's-his-name—a guy—[inaudible]—a Greek—oh, it was wonderful drawings. I'll think of it in a minute. Anyway, Penelope and—the goodbye—from Penelope saying goodbye to Ulysses. And then in the mourning pose, she's mourning—she's on a sarcophagus going like this. She's got her arms down. So it creates this circle of—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I see.

DIANNE BLELL: And I'll do these energy drawings so that you see his hand is curved; it follows this up here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Hit foot goes over here; it goes around to him. His wings bring it back around. You see, this goes back to him and then it comes back up there. So it's just—it's very—I really—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sort of big, spatial movements.

DIANNE BLELL: I do this very, very—[laughs]—I do a lot of studies, a lot of research. And then these are all the various different versions of different—I mean, this was posed—was done by a number of different artists.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, the—

DIANNE BLELL: Here's one of the first studies. It's my two assistants. He helped me build sets and she was my painting assistant.

And I mean, I'll just spend months in libraries and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you're using similar kinds of research that artists have always used.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, people have always borrowed—

DIANNE BLELL: See there's a—you see? Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I guess—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I know—Flaxman. Oh, there you go; there's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: John Flaxman, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: There, there, there, there. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There he is.

DIANNE BLELL: It's him, it's him, it's him. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There he is. Gunther.

DIANNE BLELL: It's him.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They're looking—[inaudible].

DIANNE BLELL: That was the one I had out, pinned up. And there he was outside my door; I went, "My God, it's"—[laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: John Flaxman, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think its John. But he illustrated *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and the—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh yes. In which way I studied it as freshman year in the high school. I mean, it's just—you studied all that.

So I mean—poses, all these—all the derangement, which poses—look at these; I traced them out of books and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Terrific.

DIANNE BLELL: Figure out which ones I want and what did I want Eros doing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But drawings on tracing paper.

DIANNE BLELL: I would trace them out of the books.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. I'd get a pass from a teacher up to the research library, that beautiful library.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: Now, look—you see, look at this. Here's the *Origin of Drawing*. Look at all the various versions of the *Origin of Drawing* in here. See?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The woman tracing the lover's shadow on the wall.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, there are tons of them. Super.

DIANNE BLELL: So I mean, this—I have files and files upon files of stuff like this. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, where's that Polaroid?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's in there, I think.

DIANNE BLELL: Did I put it back in there?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Maybe—

DIANNE BLELL: God, I've got to re-file this entire studio. It's just a mess.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] It's not a mess, Dianne. It's a process.

DIANNE BLELL: Here's drawings for—[inaudible the frieze?]—oh, here's some drawings that went into the—this was my dream; I drew this—I drew this from a dream. And these guys are—they're the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I see.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh no, they're in another one somewhere. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So we're looking at a portfolio full of—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh here, look at these little—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —drawings on tracing paper, right?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: These are—

DIANNE BLELL: These are my own drawings.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see. It's sort of like a Picasso-like—

DIANNE BLELL: So these are the—yes. I saw my first Picasso in real—it was from the Maremont collection. I went—I dated this guy named Nick Maremont , and they had a Picasso over the fireplace. And we used to sneak out of our house—go home, and I would sneak out the window. And we would go over to Nick Maremont's and party. And we—[had a beer]—and there was a Giacometti sitting there like this, on the table that we knocked over. There was a Picasso up over the fireplace. And we're just these brats. 15 and 16, having beer blasts with nobody home, in this mansion with Picassos and Giacomettis all over the place.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Spilling beer on the art. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: I—you know—[laughs]—so I mean, I did have fits and starts—exposures to these various things. I've always loved *The Cooling Towers*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, some of these are just—I don't even know. That was a Picasso kind of thing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: So that's a terrible sketch. And these drawings—now, she's very good—these are sketches for—these are my assistant; she's like an old master. She's now in Virginia. Look at her. She's like the school of Raphael or something. It just pores out of her pen—pencil.

And that for a frieze that was along the top of all those sets. And it was a whole story of Mars and Venus—love and war, and babies.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yes. Love, war and babies.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Well, this is Cupid—but I mean, that thing was called *Work Interrupted*; it was about Eros's offspring, or is Eros coming to visit her and is interrupting her work as it—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Eros as daycare.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And that was a—and these are all Gretchen Zimmer's—yes, Gretchen's drawings. The horse—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And where do you find your assistants?

DIANNE BLELL: A couple of them were students. I don't have any right now; I could kill for a—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: From NYU?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And some of them I've had for years. I didn't do that much drawing for the—I did it on the canvas, and I had models and I had—I tore out pictures from the—I Xeroxed pictures from the books. Ah, look at that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: There's one of the little pieces that—*Through the Arch*; my assistant did that. Anona Evans did that. Yes, she was very good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Really terrific. Some complex ones here.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this looks like a drawing for a set—

DIANNE BLELL: Some of these aren't my hand; some of them are. Who is that—that's not mine—yes. That is terrible—awful.

I mean, here's a drawing of mine. Oh, this goes—this actually—that's funny. This is a throwback. This actually goes back to—well, that's funny. I actually used that very drawing, only I used it in 2008. [They laugh.] Oh, there's a drawing of mine. [Laughs.] [Inaudible.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So just lots of drawings; some of the pages folded. [Pause.] This is another tracing—yes

DIANNE BLELL: Yes—tracing, yes. [Pause.] Notes, notes, notes, notes, notes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So when you're working, would you hang these on the wall or would you keep them in your portfolio, or just—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes—yes, yes. I have them—I have them hung around, depending on which—here's some little—see, here's one of my cartoon sketches.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

DIANNE BLELL: I draw the size of a Polaroid, because I started to see in Polaroid. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So when people talk about cartoons in a historical sense they

DIANNE BLELL: This is looking at the furniture I wanted to be used—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —they imagine more or less a drawing the size of the final piece, but these are much smaller.

DIANNE BLELL: There's an idea for the—[inaudible]—that's my guy.

But I've lost—and there's another one, yes. It's this one; God only knows. [Laughs.] Oh, well. So this is just—I always thought it was fascinating—oh, and then I would get things from—I would take from—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, these are very interesting for understanding your process.

DIANNE BLELL: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this is all the preparation; this is all sort of—

DIANNE BLELL: And along the way—it happens along the way, too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So once you've actually got the set built and you've hired the models—

DIANNE BLELL: The models sometimes work through the poses; we don't have the pose for the model and—sometimes until we work with her.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you use the model to help you find—right.

DIANNE BLELL: We photograph her in different poses, yes. It's a huge commitment of them to have done this. They just sort of grew with me. I found the girl.

First of all, I didn't know I was going to do five. And then she came over; she turned out—she was the daughter of a friend, and—what's this?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Something official.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, because I was tracing at the library. Oh, that's one of my hand drawings. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I see.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I drew a lot. [Laughs.] From one of my library books. Oh, I would just draw on anything; it was terrible.

Anyway, so—[laughs]—she came over, and then I thought, "Oh God, I just—there's something so neutral about her"—she looked like an eggshell with a nose on it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Here's another Polaroid—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, great. [They laugh.] Thanks.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We're finding treasure in here.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, this is funny. I made this card when I was 20. [Laughs.] What's that doing in there?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Still pondering—

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Dopey.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: "Lots of Christmas and New Year cheer." Wow.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] There's a drawing of a leg I had turned. Oh, God. Oh, these are—I used to have hand-painted shades in there, and they all got ruined in 9/11. Here are my drawings for them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. These portrait[s]—are these—pardon me, these—

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —sketches and notes are quite fascinating.

DIANNE BLELL: Really?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think so.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Oh, this is the other one I did. [Laughs.] Oh, this is when I was 12. Katie Keene.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, there we go.

DIANNE BLELL: Look how hard I used to press down with—and this is with two thumbs.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure she used them both.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, this is a drawing for the poster for the Animal Rescue Fund, a ying-yang dog and cat. [Laughs.] I don't even know what all these things are doing in there. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's interesting to have a look at them, as they're migrating from one portfolio to another.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, well—I mean, I got a massive filing problem in this studio. I think I probably put for safekeeping miscellaneous drawings in here. But this one is—you know, I actually thought—you know, had a kind of a notebook of pieces of things for the—*Desire for the Intimate Deity*; I don't even know where it is now. Oh, that's all my animal stuff. They get pulled apart; I'm very bad at saving anything for prosperity. Very, very, very bad. But you can get an idea of some of this.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you need an archivist.

DIANNE BLELL: I do; it's really bad. Oh, my God.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, tell us a little about, if you will, what a day in the studio would be like during a shoot.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How many people are working for you, apart from the models? How many people are in your—

DIANNE BLELL: I worked alone for a long, long time. And then, once I decided to go to shoot—well, it depends if I'm building a set, then I'll have sometimes carpenters.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Will hire a crew—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I have a—my Mexicans out in Long Island; they're my carpenters now. And my gardener was Luis [sp] and his brother, my co-garden designer and installer.

And he became my model because he was mowing my lawn one day, and Keith Sonnier came over. And Luis was going around, and he had taken his shirt off and he tied it like this, and he looked Tutankhamen. And I said, "Look at Luis over there." And he says, "My God, he looks like an Aztec prince." I said, "I know, doesn't he?" And then right then, I thought "You know what? He'd made a great Krishna." [Laughs.] And he had never seen

Krishna or Vishnu, nothing, [Laughs.] He was from Coyola, a volcanic mountain village in Puebla. But, artistic and an intelligent old soul, sensitive, and creative.

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I introduced him to books on Indian miniatures and asked him if he would consider posing as Krishna and asked, "Hey, would you—can I paint you blue—" yes, I didn't know him that well yet, but– I just liked hanging out with him a lot, and—I hang out with my workers. My workers—some people say that I don't know how to delegate duty and—I'm not aristocratic enough with my workers, I'm too friendly. [Laughs.] I have this friend China who's very arrogant, she, "you're too friendly!" I said, "I always am these are my friends, it's—people that work for me." It's—the same, it's like I have as much respect for them and their work as I do—and I need them. They do what I can't do. I think they're geniuses. [Laughs.]

I like to bring out the creativity in every person, and I like to utilize that, and every—Mexicans—they are so artistic. Every little thing they do, you know, it's just—quietly, they go and they put a little stone down, and they put it in the most perfect way, and I'm sitting there, I'm trying to—just the other day, I was trying to put these five stones down the right way in front of my cottage, just yesterday morning. And I'm going like this, and then he's going—he looked troubled, and he went over and he went like this, and it just made the stones fluid. [Laughs.] You know, and—or a tree will come on my property, and—I'll say, Antonio, where should—I've been given these two trees, and he said, "I would put one here and one there." Oh, perfect.

So between all of us—I learned a lot along the way, you know, and I imposed—if you want to go full circle onto my landscape—symmetry on my landscape—I mean, I am a lot about balance and symmetry. I mean, it's just—even though my work might be not just perfectly symmetrical, it is really about balance—and I pretty much am kind of that way. And so this I designed from my—if you look in here, there's a window up on here—anyway, so Luis, I had him—he said one day, "would you mind if I"—see this up here? That's my bedroom upstairs, and it looks down over that, and if you see it from here—I think you can see it. Here. You see, there's—there are the French curves, and Luis put in this stair here, I had the property level. I wanted it level for a long time, then one day he just appeared and he was leveling it. [Laughs.] He was grating it. I agree, you must grate it. But I mean—sometimes he just imposed some things in there. He decided it needed to be done and he just did it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you remove all the concrete?

DIANNE BLELL: I hired jaws, big huge thing came and boom, boom, [sound effects] boom, dump truck. 5,000 cubic—5,000 square feet, five plus—and then I had to put dirt, topsoil, and then I figured out where I wanted the driveway, and then I gradually started designing it from overhead, and I basically started very innocently. I got a birdbath, I put in an alée—this alée I've used along the driveway going back to the studio. I got everything on sale or at wholesale shops or in October, when they're getting rid of their boxwoods and things. I bought them all very small—half the size of all of this. These were just little balls, like little—they were like this big when I got them. Now they're like this.

And I think maybe I first put in these—these were on sale, so I said, "Okay, I'll get four of those," then I go and I say, well, where do I want four of those? Oh, let's put them there, and I'll say, "Oh, well it needs something more, so let's put them there." I put the—one of the first gestures I made was this wall, this hedge, and of course, that was put in very raggedly, because it was privet and it had to grow to the shape. You need to keep cutting it and it started out small, and you could peek over it, until it got enough to make it blunt—it's in right angle, rectilinear, and then cut an arch into it, and then put these—so those were put in, like the two grapevines—the grapevines were on the property, and I wanted to use what was there. I used things that were left in the property. I didn't discard anything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So everything was just a—

DIANNE BLELL: I wanted—I just felt like it was hospitable thing to do, and it was an honorary—honorable thing to do. They're all falling off. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, everything except the concrete and the old industrial equipment.

DIANNE BLELL: Well the concrete, no, I didn't want the concrete.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: But I wanted to look down on a spread—I mean, I love the great gardens and the—and I love the parterres of England and France, and I wanted to have something to look at—I'll tell you what drove me is—I have that sensory deprivation thing—in the winter, at 3:00 in the afternoon, I just want to go slash my wrists. It's like, what? The day is over? I can't stand it. What am I supposed to do, go to bed? It's dark! I'm like a bird, you know. I don't know what to do with myself. So I thought, "Well, I've got to get some evergreen around here. You

know, I need some evergreen structure, and it saved my life. Because I mean, in New York, you can get away with that dark. You just work in the studio. You can get on a computer, you can be doing something and you can just get nose to the grindstone—and sometimes it's 4:00 in the morning and you're so busy you just use up the time. But when you're out in the environment and it's getting dark out, and it's 3:00 [pm], that's pretty gross.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Don't move to Sweden. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: I couldn't stand it, and I am sure I have—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you think that the experience of organizing this environment out in Long Island, your house and garden, that that had any influence on your work?

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I think it had a lot of influence on this. I tried to actually use real-life garden scenes, but I couldn't make them work. I think it gave it structure. More structure—even more structure. I'm talking about structure and—here are the two poses before I integrate them into that set.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is "Desire for the Intimate Deity."

DIANNE BLELL: And for instance, here's this image. You see—and then here's her pose.

And what I would do is I would make the sets a little bit interesting so that the models didn't have to pretend like they were actors on a blue screen. I would put a little wreath down or something. Like here, you see—these two never met, for instance. They never met. I took their pose from that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, and you Photoshopped them together.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, stuck them together.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So they never met, these two people?

DIANNE BLELL: No. They never even shook hands. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting.

DIANNE BLELL: The immaculate conception.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'd dare say.

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, here's a physical adaption of—and there's my paper set for—to get the model to do this. I mean, that was an impossible—[inaudible]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And we're—and we're talking about the image called, "The Lovers" in your—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, that was "Lovers." These are three or four different images.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so the lovers actually are individually posed and then you Photoshop them together?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And here I photographed them together, but I couldn't stand her, so I photoshopped her out of there and put another girl in there. [Laughs.] And then had to chop her up because I didn't have her in the right pose because I didn't know I was not going to use the other girl at the time. So—like this one, I ended up having her—or have him drawing a flower.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, you spoke about that last week.

DIANNE BLELL: . We kind of do it as we go—I have some preconceived notions, obviously. I have some preconceived notions, and then I go on the set and it molds itself. You know, something doesn't really look right, or I change it—or something would be stronger or it needs a little more of this or a little more—and then sometimes I do it way after the fact, post-production in Photoshop. I'll go scan something out of a book, say, "you know what? This building needs and awning," and I'll just go steal it from a book. Scan it right into the thing and then alter the color and stretch the awning, put a pattern on it or something like that or maybe add a border; turn it into a little something else. I have no problems about just going, getting a page and scanning it right in if it needs it. And then if I can't find it in a book, I'll end up going here and drawing it and then scanning it in and then cutting it out and then bringing it in.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So can you describe what you would like a person to come away from an exhibition of yours with? What kind of feeling—

DIANNE BLELL: That's interesting, because I think about that. That's sort of what drives me sometimes, and it's

basically a kind of a sympathy for the human condition, of universal connection, a recognition.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You talk about yearning and you talk about desire, but the work is very pleasurable to look at. I could see that being, sort of—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, that, yes—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A problem with some critics who want things to be edgy, or—

DIANNE BLELL: Do you think it—yes, there is that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —verbal, and there is a great deal of, sort of, the Matisse armchair in your work, don't you think—a bit of the—

DIANNE BLELL: Matisse armchair?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, he said that, you know, a good painting was like an armchair, that you could find enjoyment in it, that it was not all radicalism and revolution and theory and cerebral and this—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I mean, I—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A realm of delight.

DIANNE BLELL: —I shoot for that. I shoot for beauty. I'm—no qualms about it. I wonder if sometimes that gets in the way, but sometimes I think that, rawness can get in the way too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Whoops, you used the B word, "beauty." What are you—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, beauty's a big deal to me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like, what are your views on beauty? I mean, what—

DIANNE BLELL: I love beauty. [They laugh.] Beauty of all kinds. Birds, bees, animals, cats, art, a bracelet, a pair of shoes, antique piece of fabric, folkloric, utilitarian. From a—from a—from a nomad? [Laughs.] [Inaudible]—artifacts, primitivism—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you think about it not as—so you've been talking about it as a philosophical construction. You're talking about it as a kind of—

DIANNE BLELL: Aesthetics.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —as a physical pleasure of—

DIANNE BLELL: I appreciate—appreciation for all—a vast array of human production and natural life. I'm a sucker for all things like that. Broken, whole—I tend to try to make things perfect, and I tend to sort of like my objects broken. [Laughs.] I mean, maybe it's something to do with what's in me, or maybe—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You like the idea of the fragment, that the missing piece is to be supplied by the imagination? Like having a look at a—

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, I've always loved going to see extraordinary ancient pottery collections where they've got—[laughs]—a million pieces all glued together, and then you see where they molded the papery links—like, big pieces—puzzles filled in there, and—[laughs]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, over your right shoulder there's a deity—there's a—like, a Greco-Roman terra-cotta—

DIANNE BLELL: A Venus.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Venus, Aphrodite—and she's not quite complete, but we can imagine what might have been.

DIANNE BLELL: I know—well, it's interesting. I'm sort of moving into incompleteness. [Laughs.] I'm moving—it's almost like I'm trying to—I don't know where I'm going. I mean, I know is, I'm kind of interested in objectification—objects, more than figures, but I may add figures to these objects, I may not. I just don't know. I'm not enough into it. I'm just—there's fits and starts, so I don't know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Still life, you mean.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, like these chairs. I mean, those are just the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, chairs—

DIANNE BLELL: I have those chairs. I have so much stuff that's all broken down, but that—[inaudible]—broke that the other day—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, one could easily say a chair is a narrative about the absent person who might sit there.

DIANNE BLELL: I like it to convey that. I'd like to it be loaded. I've got to be sure that it is intrinsically, inherently loaded. I've got to be able to capture that. [Inaudible]—I mean, I haven't even figured out where I can and cannot do that yet. I think that that urn does it. The chairs yet—I just don't know. I've been so distracted with restoring my bloody garden—[laughs]—because it's like, when a baby's diaper needs changing, it needs changing, and you can't just not change the—"Oh, I'll change it tomorrow." I'm already late on the garden, and I've got to get something going in there just so it comes back—just because of the fall and because it makes rain. [Laughs.] And I can't let it go any more—I can't let it overgrow any more. It'll be like a—the wood will get too woody and then you can't cut anything back and it'll get even huger, and the property is to the point where it can't support size any larger than where it's at. It is structured to the limit. I don't—the things you're going to have to sort of—they fluff out, you trim them back. They fluff out, you cut them back. We already had to cut back too much hardwood, and I'm afraid I'm going lose some things because of it, because we did so much severe cutting, because I really sort of advocated for the last year and a half under this renovations of the property, because there were dumpsters and things all around.

I couldn't see the forest for the trees,—and I have not only an emotional investment in this property and an aesthetic investment in this property—I have a responsibility to it. I mean, I believe it's a responsibility. I set the course, and I never used to be very responsible. One thing this house did, it made me responsible in a material way that I never used to be—I used to live—God, I would always just about get my light bill paid for before they turned things off, because I was so busy I would just make art—I would just not pay attention to things. Bills were all over the place—they still sort of are, but now I got to be an artist, I've got this garden—the garden takes up such—the house—the property management takes such a huge aspect of my life, and—I mean, it's—I don't know—I mean, I'm going through a very interesting thing about what to think about. I mean, how much time do I spend on it, how much of it is a work of art—my artist friends Betsey Baker says it's a work of art. All—Mary Heilmann says it's a work of art, Keith Sonnier says it's a work of art, and my friends—and if it is a work of art, I've got to maintain it—[laughs]—Robert Irwin's running around designing landscapes now—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right—

DIANNE BLELL: But I mean, I don't have much assistance, nor can I afford—I mean, I can barely afford the assistance I've got now. The problem is that it's grown to such maturity that if you blink you've got to—you have to keep—you have to—it's constant—it's constant maintenance—constant.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you kept all of the drawings and the plans and—

DIANNE BLELL: I never drew anything for the property. I just did it by sight.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, you just—

DIANNE BLELL: No, I never had a master plan.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there's no—

DIANNE BLELL: I would put in bush at a time—I would buy four of those if they were on sale, "Oh, I'll take four of those. Oh, I'll take two of those. Oh, I'll take six of those. Oh, I'll take two of those. One of those."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So there's no portfolio for the garden the way there is for—right.

DIANNE BLELL: It would present itself to me—well, whatever was on sale, I would pick out something wonderful that I —and then I would find a place for it. Sort of like how I shop for clothes. It's how I've shopped for furniture. I never have a decorative master plan—"The chairs go here, and oh, we're going to find this, we're going to have that made." No. I just go, "Oh, those are great!" Bring them home, see where I can put it. And then to me, it's all composition. It's about how you put it together. That's why I'm so eclectic. You think this was by design?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: This was just, like, gleaning through the world. I'm a gleaner.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you're not of the school that if you're going to design a room, you start with a rug and then—no.

DIANNE BLELL: No. I've never designed a thing in my life.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I dare say your narrative images are highly orchestrated.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, but they came from an impact of—I had been obsessed with miniature painting for a long time. It had been haunting me. Things haunt me for a long time, and then finally I get around—and I don't get around to everything. There's a lot of stuff I'm going, well, gee, what about—and the reason I'm revisiting that urn is because it's been haunting me for a long time and I've always wanted to go back to it. And I've always wanted to go back to these drawing plate studies. So I don't know. I'm sort of torn between the devil and the deep blue sea, and I barely have time—every day I was going to go into my studio this week. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, all day every day I was working the property.

But it was major because they showed up. The Mexicans showed up. So they showed up, so I had to show up, because I had to take advantage—I like to work alongside—I love collaboration. To me that's the definition of my studio. Everything I do is—and it's like how I appropriate, I consider it a collaboration. My influences, the people that work for me, I use their talent, I let it show, I give them credits at the show.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh, you do?

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, yes. In my catalogue. I didn't have it—no, I think I might have had it posted on a wall, just to I think I might have had the credits. I can't remember. Lot of times I do. If not, it was in this portfolio—in the catalogue.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you identify your models?

DIANNE BLELL: You know, I don't know if I—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like screen credits?

DIANNE BLELL: I might or might not have. I don't know. If they wanted to be, I would.

That's interesting. If didn't, that would be terrible. I'd have to look and see—let's see. Well, Christina Avoletta Radha. Luis Hernandez, Krishna, and even assisted in painting background sets. Tran Nguyen, model for *Eloping* and *Lover's Quarrel*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you do give them credit. [The exhibitions in which the people listed assisted with are *Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary Collection*, 1978; *Charmed Heads and Urban Cupids*, 1979; *Pursuit of Love*, 1985; *Circus Animals Desertion*, 1989.]

DIANNE BLELL: Valerie Van Cleef McNeil, design makeup. So I've been working with her since 1978. Gretchen Zimmer, I've been working with her since 2000—no, 1980—'83, Gretchen Zimmer. Not now, she lives in Virginia. She's sadly, tragically schizophrenic now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sorry.

DIANNE BLELL: Isn't that terrible? It struck her in her twenties. But she did come back and work for me for a while, but she has to keep it very low and small-town—I think she's got a—I hope—a control– it comes and goes. And I—Antonio Sanches, did my set construction. Yes. Assistants—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'll send that catalogue to the archives.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So they have one.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, Okay. I was wondering, do they need any photographs of anything, or—do they have photographs of your work, or—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure that that would be welcome if you wanted to share any of your files, I can let—

DIANNE BLELL: Would they—do they do like JPEGs and stuff, or what do they do?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I can have someone call you and explain the process.

DIANNE BLELL: Whoo! That'd be a—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It occurs to me, having a look at those portfolios, that they might be interested in notes and drawings, anything you want to share. If you're not still using them. I mean, they—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I don't think I would give up my original ones at this point.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, I need to reorganize my—obviously, and then I did have copies of this stuff at one time, so I may be able to send them copies.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I'm sure—

DIANNE BLELL: And there may be copies in there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure that there would be probably reason to have a conversation, so I can—

DIANNE BLELL: You know, you asked me about what was the first thing that hit me, and I was just thinking that a really—it was just so—why it was hard to talk about for me, because it was in fits and starts, and I was always rewarded for being artistic, and then just—one knows about Van Gogh for some reason; one knows about Picasso; one knows—you know. You see pictures and images of these things somehow, you don't even remember why or how. I don't remember the first time I ever saw them in person. But I think the first Picasso I ever saw—it might have been at the Art Institute, but it may have been in person at this guy's house. I remember it clearly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, with the beer blasts. [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: It was a portrait, I remember that. But I don't remember of who. It might have been of—it was a woman, a portrait of a woman. I remember that. Anyway—and it was a head. Anyway—and big blocky sections of color, I remember that. But we didn't take it—I didn't know who Giacometti was. I only remembered it was a Giacometti when I grew up, and that's what we were tipping over because I remembered it so specifically—holding it in my hand going, "What's this?" [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Put that back on the coffee table, Dianne. [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: And Nick Maremont [of Arnold H Maremont Collection] I remember—saying, well, that's a Giacometti maquette. That's a very important—.

Anyway, so my exposures to art were incremental and gradual, and through the art history and Catholic Church, and I learned about it in college.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affermitive.]

DIANNE BLELL: And then I do remember one thing. I went to the bookstores in La Jolla and I got two books. I got one on Dutch drawing and one on German drawings, with Durer and Cranach and various things. And I copied the drawing in the books. I copied them. And that was like a lesson for me in how to draw.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a good way to learn to draw. Actually, it's—yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And then I went to the San Francisco—and then I went to the La Jolla Art Center, and that's where I was first—had my total immersion with what a community of artists and what it was really like to meet real, living older artists—a vast generation of people mingling together, and real artists, in a soup. As I keep saying. It was really—and the craziness, and I knew that that was my world. I was comfortable, and I felt embraced and that they didn't ask any questions. They embraced you, they coddled your personality, they got a kick out of you, they were interested in your young thoughts, your—what you did, if you did—drawing—all—they encouraged you, you know. I just felt like I—it was a home.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You said that regardless of—

DIANNE BLELL: It was a refuge for me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —regardless of years, everyone was the same age.

DIANNE BLELL: It was such a—yes. And it was just fabulous. I remember each teacher and—just feeling like it didn't matter. I was just as important. And it's funny, there was no parental thing going on. And it was a refuge. I was lost. And I had to support myself. I went up to LA and I got some jobs, and I visited the art world as a kind of like a visitor, like a tourist a little bit during those couple years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sounded like during that time when you were working in offices and in the airlines, that you had kind of stepped away from the art world a bit.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I was scared. My mother had scared me so much that I was sort of offbeat and beatnik and that I was so—[laughs]—not normal that I needed to prove to myself I could make a living. And I did. I saved up enough money and I knew at some point, now I got to bite the bullet. What am I going to be, a 20-year-old Bonne Bell ski-girl? A 30-year-old Bonne Bell ski girl? Yuck. It's time to check my resources. I just knew I wanted to live in other countries, I wanted to learn another language, I wanted to travel, I wanted information. So I did—so I left the airlines and went back to art school.

And during that time I started actually—I did a little—I dabbled; I did some art classes. I did a little of this and a little of that. I bought art, a little art. I went to a lot of art openings. I got involved in going to art openings and social kind of—being culturally, socially cultural. And then I just thought, this is it. It's either now or never. And ever since then, that's where I've been. And I don't know how I would have survived without it, because I knew I couldn't live in the normal world. I couldn't have a job. I went and I visited—I worked in retail to work my way through art school a little bit, and because that was something I knew.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that's what you grew up with.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And they kept promoting me. And I just couldn't stand it. And I was falling asleep at the director's table, and just going—[pounding sound]—"Miss Blell you must" know these things, and I said, "You know what? I can't stand here today. I just can't stand it. I like clothes a lot, but I can't stand the year to date columns. I'm sorry." [Laughs.] "But we have an investment in you, Miss Blell!" And you know just—[laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, as a woman in the arts at that time, how did you find—

DIANNE BLELL: That's—[inaudible]—nudity, was I was discovering the nudity in the art world. Because I was now—and then I went to a lecture with Tom Marioni. And that changed—[snaps fingers]—my way of thinking about the art world. And that's when I got into—when you're in art school, I mean, you're—I went to art school because what I wanted to do—and this is what I've always done with whatever I've done in my life—I have totally immersed myself in it. Totally. When I decided to do the Moghul series, I went to India. I must have 30 books on Moghul art. I read Tantric things. I read—just everything I could possibly—to the exclusion.

And then I also read a lot of philosophy and books on love and desire and the pursuit of—but I reread those constantly. I mean, Octavio Paz's book or—from Fromm to Stendhal to—I'll flip through to [*On*] *The Nature of Things.* Everything I can—that'll have some reference on the way people think about it in different centuries, and courtship, romanticism.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: *Roman de la Rose*. Knighthood was in flower. Everything. And it just so—I don't take notes on it like a scholar. I'll take a few notes and stuff, but I just immerse myself in it, and then I kind of like let it come through in some sort of mush of myself. [Laughs.] It's the only way I can sort of say it, just let it flow. And then I apply my eye to it. And I worry about my fancy eye for aesthetics. I have such a natural sense of placement, beauty, balance, and I feel like I should violate it. But I have trouble, because I think, "What am I supposed to do? Just suddenly scribble it?" It's like when that teacher said, oh, my drawing was too facile. It was just—too thick-thin, too thick-thin.

And it really—I've never been able to draw properly since, the figure, because it so scared me. Although those came out, by theirselves. Every once in a while I can, but if I try, if I need to, I can't. And it's a very strange thing. And I don't want to take figure drawing. I hate going to figure drawing classes. I don't like the models ever, and it doesn't interest me to draw the model posing there. I don't know what it is. I was thinking of taking just a plain anatomy course, because I like scientific approaches to things.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, there are a lot more places where that's offered these days.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, like botanical illustration, or like drawing little cells or like little seedlings. I love doing stuff in sharp, sharp, sharp pens through magnifying glasses, with just the littlest line. I love doing that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, perhaps you'd like an ecorche class, where they build the body up out of clay from the skeleton and the muscle and all of that.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Oh, boy. What's that called?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ecorche.

DIANNE BLELL: Ecorche? Where would you take that?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, New York Academy, National Academy, Art Students League, any of those.

DIANNE BLELL: Do you know that I—they have the thing, the nude, Take Home a Nude?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: OK, I donated one year and it sold, and then a couple years later I was looking through some things, and I had a detail of Eros over there that I had printed, and I thought, you know what, I'm going to call them up and see if they want ones for Take Home a Nude. Called them up and I sent them a JPEG of it, and she said that it was too dicey.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Too dicey?

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Because of the overt nature of it, they weren't sure that they—and they had this drawing of—they had this watercolor, painting of Eric Fishl's where this guy was walking across a boat where there was all these topless bathing suits and he was just hanging out of everywhere. And I'm going, "What?" [Laughs.] "Where is this coming from? Isn't that weird?"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you think that's at all anything to do with gender?

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know. I'm going to tell Eric. I saw Eric just this weekend, because you know, he just bought a piece of mine, *The Primordial Tree*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You showed us last week, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: And so I saw—he doesn't know I delivered it, because I delivered it on—yes, Thursday night. So I saw Eric on Saturday afternoon at a lunch place in Sag Harbor; I said, "Oh, Eric, I just delivered your piece!" He comes over, and then I thought afterwards when I got back here and I was looking at that, I thought, "Oh, shoot, I should have told him that last year this weird thing happened." Because he's major on their committee. I bet you he wouldn't like that.

It's just too weird to judge like that. I mean, Take Home a Nude—hello! [Laughs.] What, am I supposed to have a fig leaf on him? [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, one wonders, maybe they only want—

DIANNE BLELL: And some of those bad drawing they have—they have a lot of really bad anatomy at those shows.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Maybe they only want men painting honeymoon tackle. I don't know.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't know—I don't understand—

DIANNE BLELL: Honeymoon tackle—I never thought of it that way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't—it—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, anyway, so—back to here that—so I taught myself some drawing through that. I was quite good for a while there. And if it weren't for the art school and all that—and so then there was La Jolla and nude classes there. And then there was the Art Institute. And so those—I think the three probably electrifying contacts with art were this Maremont thing I forgot to tell you about. For real, that was pretty—in person. And then maybe seeing, in La Jolla, seeing this—even though it's not the work I ever went on to do, but it was the first work I ever saw that anybody could do in a geometric way that was considered artwork. And it definitely impacted my mind.

And then that lecture of Tom Marioni on process, going way back to the performance artists and taking into consideration some of the Viennese school, Schwartzkogler and some of those people, and back to Yves Klein and Pollock and the gesture, and incorporating the human energy, the abstract, the A.E. in how that school brought into play process in art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A.E., abstract expressionism, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, and all that. And that really made me look at art in a totally different way that —about concept and about process, about the tools showing. And architecture was going on that way too. Frank Gehry and all these. And it was really, when I was old enough to start really meeting people—when I went back to

school I was about 26—25, 26—where I really became a little more aware of—it was late, because I really had—– disappeared for a few years there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This would be a good time to pause and change discs, so we're going to do that.

[END OF TRACK AAA_blell12_9515.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney. We're just resuming at 3:25 p.m. a conversation with Dianne Blell on June 28.

So you were saying?

DIANNE BLELL: What was I saying? [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you were talking about Castelli.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I just was saying that I ran into Dorothy Spears this weekend out in Long Island. She has a house out in Sag Harbor. And she worked with—she does pieces for the New York Times. And she's a writer and I just told that I was doing this, and she was—she was curious about it. So she worked for Castelli.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I don't know if she's being interviewed as well, but—

DIANNE BLELL: Are you—is Keith Sonnier being interviewed? He must be.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I can—yes, just —let's write those names.

DIANNE BLELL: He was a very good friend. And he lives right near me out there, too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I can check. I'm not part of the—

DIANNE BLELL: I would assume—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the selection process. I think that that is basically the result of a conversation between the archives and—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I have—I have a very small [cog in the wheel] at Castelli's. So if you're interviewing me, they're going to be interviewing him. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure. So you indicated the last time we spoke that you knew Leo Castelli from just being on the scene. How did you actually—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, the first time I ever laid eyes on Leo Castelli in my life, I think, was at John Berggruen's gallery in San Francisco. I think he was having a Rauschenberg show. I just laid eyes on him. I might even have shook his hand or something like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you come to know him?

DIANNE BLELL: How did I come to know Leo?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you described last time how he—how you offered him works that he was not interested in—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and you continued to invite him to your studio. And finally—

DIANNE BLELL: I think I met him —if I'm not mistaken, I think I met him at a lunch or dinner or cocktails, believe it or not, at—okay, I would come to New York a lot, just when I lived in San Francisco and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: —and I had gals I went to art school with and I would stay with them here. And I was friends with people like John Baldessari and I'd come back for his show. I knew John Baldessari from—he did a teaching thing at the San Francisco Art Institute visiting artists show. And he stayed with me.

I put up a number of the artists, and—when I was in art school, since I was a little bit older and went back to school and got my MFA and BFA at the same time, I somehow was a little bit more friendly with the faculty– but you are in art school and I—but they often asked me to put up like visiting artists or I hosted parties for them.

Like I had a party for Brice Marden and Dan Flavin and John Baldessari. They put them up in—I had this really great cottage near the San Francisco Art Institute. So it was kind of like a little salon thing going on at my place. So that was kind of neat.

So I started coming back to New York, and I came back for one of Baldessari's shows. And while I was—I got to meet Ileana Sonnabend, and Antonio and Elan Wingate [sp] and that sort of group. And so I rented the Sonnabend loft for one summer. And that was a trip, that was really nice. It was one hot, sultry summer.

And I went to Max's Kansas City, of course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative]

DIANNE BLELL: Every night. [Laughs.] It was great. And I met a lot of people there. And Brice was always there, and Joel Shapiro and—just everybody. And, I mean, John Baldessari, when he was in town, Robert Smithson was a very good friend of mine, God bless his soul.

I met Richard Bellamy, we became friends. Just all those people.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative]

DIANNE BLELL: And you meet one, you meet two, you meet three, you meet them all. You're all sitting—getting a booth and everybody went there constantly. And I knew Irving Blum from John Altoon. I met him when I was 19. I think I actually might—my relationship with John Altoon, while I was thinking about it, was like, two years. Not three, two because I went into the airlines at 21, and I was about 19. I was almost 19 or just 19 when I met John; the summer before my 19th year.

Anyway, I would stop in—I would go see the shows in the gallery. So I went to the Blum-Helman Gallery and I was chatting over with Irving one day. And I got to know Joe Helman—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative]

DIANNE BLELL: —who was his friend. And Joe and I became friends and acquaintances, and he invited me to a lunch. He had a lunch or something, and I was in town and I went to the lunch. And Leo came to the lunch. Either that or it was cocktails. I don't know whether the cocktail was first or the lunch was first. One time, he came with his girlfriend, the other time, he came on his own. And that's how I met Leo.

And so, you know, Leo, "Stop by the gallery anytime, anytime." So I drop in, you know, and I had a show at Robert Stefanotti. And Leo came to the show. And he bought a piece—very sweet. And his girlfriend was interviewing Robert Stefanotti, and I was in the gallery one day and she befriended me. And so I got to know him very well through his girlfriend, Laura, because she became one of my best friends.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Her name was Laura?

DIANNE BLELL: Laura DeCoppet. And I would present Leo with, as I said, a couple of pieces and he went, "No, no, no, no, no." [Laughs.] And then one day, he came over here. Laura brought him over her—I had them to lunch, and I was doing all these urns and I basically was going to photograph him for that, for the Avenging Angel for his 25th anniversary for a page in Interview Magazine.

So I set it up so I wouldn't have any trouble. I said, "Okay, now, Leo. Stand there." Click! I'm moving fast—catch him fast. So I photographed him by the urn.. But he really took a shine to the urn all over the place. I had urns everywhere. I mean, *The Urn*, but I had these sets and—

It wasn't really—it was quite piecemealed. It wasn't really that resolved at that point. But I had a lot of different versions of *The Urn*. He said, "I like very much the obsession with this urn. Now this is something I can consider." So I followed up on it. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're speaking about the photograph we saw last week with—

DIANNE BLELL: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —*Winged Castelli*, right?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, there's the *Winged Castelli* there. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: And then I have a *Winged Urn* over there, too. And I had the wings because of the urn, but then I

—when he said he wanted to be photographed like an avenging angel, I just clashed it up against black velvet and he thought, okay, we're ready for Leo. I kind of sized it, so I didn't want to have him slip through my fingers because he might have gone, well, I don't know. The wings—[laughs]. So it just happened on the fly. And he was a good sport about it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative] So your first exhibition was of the urns?

DIANNE BLELL: And that was 1983. And then—actually, my first exhibition was a piece in a group show. He showed me in a group show. He showed me in a group show before my—before my main show. No, maybe that was after—no, it was after. Yes, my first show was after—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he showed the urns and then you were in a group show.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, that was it. Yes, I was in a summer group show after the urns.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who else was in that show? Do you remember?

DIANNE BLELL: The group show?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative]

DIANNE BLELL: I can't remember it. Cindy Sherman. [Laughs.] And I had a piece from 1979 from my—from my Stefanotti show in it because I had it made mural size. It was that one right there, the Three Mile Island piece.

There were a series of figures. I don't remember who all was in it. I'd have to look it up. I don't even know if there was an announcement for it or what, but that was in—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was the late '70s.

DIANNE BLELL: My first show was in—when was my first show?—'83, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At Castelli—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and that was of the urns.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, well, *The Urns* and it was called *Various Fabulous Monsters*. It was some mythological—the one with the—not the asteroid, but what do they call that?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The image of the Sphinx?

DIANNE BLELL: The Sphinx but the stars—the ones next to it. What do you call those?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Nebula.

DIANNE BLELL: Nebulae, yes. It was sitting there and I couldn't get it back —once I said asteroid, I couldn't get nebulae back. The nebulae that and something called—it was—oh, this piece. This is what I—*Love Fleeing Slavery*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yes.

MS. B: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The white cupid—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes—that piece.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Flying off the right, kind of—

DIANNE BLELL: And that's when I started working on the *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century.* That's when I started on that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how did you do in that exhibition? Was it well received, did you have a lot of—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I did. That's the one where I said that I wanted to be sure that they had to send out invoices on my behalf—[laughs]—and that I would be archived because I just wanted to generate some business. So I did; I think I sold four or five pieces out of that show. Maybe—about five pieces, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: All to private collectors, do you recall?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, one of them was that guy—let's see; Patrick Lannan because his collection was called something else, now. He used to be in Palm Beach. He bought a couple pieces. I can't think of his name; he's no longer with us. And that's the one where Richard Bellamy said, "Oh, we tried to get in and they were photographing Richard Longo. Richard Longo had the upstairs, and I was in the downstairs space. And it was a really neat space; we did a lot of fun things down in that basement space.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, you spoke about walking down the street in Palm Beach and saying, "We're going to show in this gallery"—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh,yes. Let me see. But it's now called something else. I can't think of his name. He's with IT & T— he was with Mary McFadden for many years. He was a big, big heavy honcho; big collector. Can you think of his name? [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, we can track it down.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So this obviously led to more exhibitions at Castelli.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, but—now. But it went from there—now, that work went from Patrick Lannan– you know, if I look it up—[Pause.] Oh, that work went to the Center for Creative Photography. They disassembled that collection because he died and he had a little museum of his own down there, and they distributed the work among different places. And so now those two pieces are at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona.

So I got to figure out his name—I'm sorry. So we'll get back, now—what did you say—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, after the success of your first exhibition at Castelli you obviously had more, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: It was nicely reviewed, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what was the consequence of that? Were you then represented—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I then—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like a represented artist, a member of the stable?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I—kind of. I mean, I always—yes, I was—I would just hang out at the gallery a lot. And if I wanted something done and I was making a new body of work, I would go to Leo; I said "Well, Leo, I've got an idea for this new body of work and I'd like to—you know, let me know when you blah blah blah in it" and whatever. And I would get to a certain point and say, "Well, I think I'm ready to show it," and he would figure out when and if we could show it, that sort of thing.

And the next one was the *Pursuit of Love*. And that was in 1985. So I got to work pretty fast.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was a couple years later.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And then the next one was in '89 and the next one was in '91, and then the next one—and then I bought my house in '93. [Laughs.] And I started this series sometime in about the late 1990s, about—I can't remember when I started the work.

First, the little things—the figures, the this, the that. And then Leo came to the studio out in Long Island; he was already not in great health. And he was with Barbara. He'd been with Barbara for a while then; they were already married. I think he died like the year after that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: So—but he did see the pieces; he did see the beginnings of them. So I did a little dedication in the—in that book, even though I showed it at—Charles Cowles in NYC—and at—and at Holden Luntz, my current gallery– in Florida.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're speaking about the Mughal pieces? Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, that they were initiated and Leo had seen them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did your experience in the gallery evolve over the years? How did the gallery evolve

over the years? How did you observe changes in the practice of the gallery or changes in the staff?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, Susan and Patty were there the whole time I was there. And there were a lot of interns and young people coming and going. There were—oh gosh, one girl—I can't remember her name—darn it. She got married and—she was there the whole time I was there. I'm sort of drawing a blank on her, now. [Pause.]

But there were some people would leave. They would get married or they would grow up or—[laughs]. And you know, he had—for a long time, he had the gallery uptown, and then he gallery over here at—well, you have 420 West Broadway, then you have—I think it was 578 Broadway; I can't remember the address. And I showed there.

I sort of showed at every venue. I showed on Greene Street. I showed at 420 West Broadway twice; I showed in the little room and the big room there. And I showed at 578. And so I had four one-person shows there, and I was in a couple group shows—doing summer shows, some other kinds of things, art fairs, etc. Castelli traveling shows.

And people were very loyal to Leo. The thing about being with Leo is—it was very nice because it was sort of like a ship, with ballast. Like, did everything. He was your home plate. [Laughs.] And they'd have a Christmas party, and you'd go to the openings and you'd automatically see everybody. You really didn't have to sort of worry about sorting your social life or think about doing much; it was just kind of all centered around Leo and the gallery. And there were so many events around Leo all the time, but it was just kind of terrific. He always had people coming through—there were like Claude Berri making a biographical film of him, and the—it was just—exciting shows. And when Jasper got the prize in the Venice Biennale—and Jasper was in the Venice Biennale. And I had been to Venice Biennale before, but then I went for this because I thought, "Well, this seems like it will be fun. I'm with the gallery." And I think that was about '85.

And it was wonderful to go to all the fabulous palazzos and wine and dine with Leo, and go to dinner for Jasper on that island and that wonderful sort of greenhouse restaurant place, or whatever it was, with all that wild grass all over the place. [Laughs.] Take the boats everywhere. It was just like a really nice, sort of little gold card; I have to admit. It was just pleasurable.

And Leo always had a lineup of people. I met—oh gosh—the most amazing people in the gallery. Wait—all right, I met—what's his name—he does the writing—he just died. Italian; lived in Italy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Twombly?

DIANNE BLELL: Twombly. I met Cy Twombly sitting there. Did I mention that?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

DIANNE BLELL: He was sitting there in the little chairs, in those architect-type of chairs, sort of Breuer. [Laughs.] They're big and padded leather with the chrome. I don't whose it was and whether they—Bauhaus chair—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Breuer.

DIANNE BLELL: Breuer, or one of those guys, and you know—[laughs]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You say chrome and leather, I think. Right.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, yes. And they're Breuer chairs. He changed some of them from time to time. Sometimes it was a sofa, but he's—anyway, they're all lined up; nice little benches.

And there is Cy. And I didn't know it was Cy at the time, and I sat down. And he was such a gentleman, and he said "How do you do? I'm Cy Twombly." [Laughs.] Oh, my God. "Holy cow," on my side. [Laughs.]

And we're chatting away—and for the longest time Leo's in there "ni-ni-di-di-di-di-di-di-di"—talking for a long time to whoever, and then the next person, "di-di-di-di-di-di." He always would hold court at the end of a day. And so Cy said things like "Well listen, when you get to Rome, look us up." I wish I had. I just never did. I was too shy about it. I'm not—it's funny. I went to Rome a lot and went to Italy a lot, but I was just—I didn't have the guts.

And another time, after my '83 show, I went down on Greene Street to check with—you'd check on your show from time to time, and you ask the girl to look at the book or whatever. I had somebody in tow; I can't remember what—and I see this person just fishing through the back wall. I think it was the end of my show; my show was just taken down. That was it. And he was pulling all my stuff out, and he was just, and I go back and I go, "Oh hi." And it was Cy.

I said, "Oh, hi, Cy." [Laughs.] I said, "Oh, that's my show." He said, "This is yours?" I said, "Yes." He said, "But

they look like"—I said, "Yes, they're dryads and—and it's a wood nymph," or whichever one it was. I'm can't seem to [find it ?].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

DIANNE BLELL: —maenad [ph], what—nereid. Anyway, so—[laughs]—and I think it's a dryad for wood nymph, isn't it? Anyway, so—[laughs]—and he said—anyway, he got, and he said, "There are these, like, wood nymphs, and they're mythological." And I said, "Yes, you know that, huh?" And he said, "Oh, I love mythological work.' And it was so neat.

Mimi Thompson worked there for a while, and she met Rosenquist there and married him. And she's a very good friend. We share birthdays. And they're very good friends to this day.

And Christmases were just great. Someone would always play Santa Claus, and you'd sit on their laps; it was compulsory. And—[laughs]—just sit on your lap and say what you wanted for Christmas, and everybody would bring presents to Leo. And he just—he loved it. He'd always have a really nice—he didn't serve drinks. I can't remember whether they served drinks, or I guess they did in those days. And then we'd come to Barolo afterwards, and he'd have sort of an open reception there. And a lot of people would just spill in, and you'd meet all kinds of people.

Lawrence Weiner is a very good friend of mine from way before Leo. I'd known him for many, many years through mutual friends and through John Baldessari and all kinds of other people, and David Askevold. And I met him, actually, on the West Coast, and he was a nice—Roy was always around. Roy was such a kind, lovely, charming, sweet man. And I liked Dorothy very much. And you just met the world. And they took very good care of your work.

Now, for me, it was a little tough being kind of an underling and not being a big, famous person or a household word. I was taken over by a lot by a lot of attention being paid to the big boys. But the thing is Leo was—he would always give you your show when you were ready. He was loyal to you. And he did beautiful—a beautiful man, the most beautiful announcements, first-class press release, first-class installation, everything, things put away beautifully, people at your disposal. And Leo was very generous to me. He allowed me, when I was doing *The Animal Project*—I didn't even have a typewriter down here because typewriters were getting semicomputerized, and that was—and I was trying to write all these grants, and it was very difficult, and faxes and things.

I would go to the gallery, and I would just get a little desk that somebody wasn't using, and I would just practically be a gallery member just trying to get my business out for the African projects. And he was very supportive and very nice. And sometimes I'd get kicked off of my typewriter or get kicked out, and said, "I can't do it anymore." [Laughs.] He would really try to accommodate. He was really, really terrific—and [I] was very spoiled, very, very spoiled because—nobody's sort of like that anymore. It was—everybody was of a family. It was like a family.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How many women were in the gallery, other than yourself?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, not very—there was Hanne Darboven, who I don't know very well, and she would have a show—she's had a number of shows. She's wonderful. I love her work. And she was there for many years. And then there was Laura Grisi, who I've met, and who was famously an ex-girlfriend of Leo's.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How large a role would be played in the gallery by his wives and girlfriends?

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know how he did it. He had a lot of girlfriends.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were they influential? Did they come in and—

DIANNE BLELL: No, they were frozen out by the staff. They didn't want to deal with Leo's girlfriends. They couldn't stand them. They didn't—as I mentioned, at first, when I first was there, I felt a real—it was a real bulwark. But I eventually made friends with these girls because I knew that I was really—had kindly intentions, and I was very professional. And in the end, the boundaries melted, and these girls are my—we're still very close now. And Laura—they loved Laura [Decoppet]. Laura was accepted. Laura was a very engaging person, and she was just larger than life,benign, and right now she's—it's unbelievable what happened to Laura. But after Leo's death and after the death of a couple of other friends of hers, she just became housebound, and she doesn't leave her house, and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That does happen to some people.

DIANNE BLELL: It's so weird. This girl was a social lioness, and we can't get her out. We can't pry her out of the

house. And she—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sad.

DIANNE BLELL: It's very sad because she's—I just don't understand. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Planet is clawing at my shoulder.

DIANNE BLELL: Planet, no claws. No picky paw. No picky paw. [They laugh.] So I mean, I don't know how much light to shed on Leo. You know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you got a good Leo story? Like—I've heard a few.

DIANNE BLELL: That I can tell? [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you can tell them, I suppose.

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know. I have to get up the nerve. I don't know if I have the nerve. I mean, I—what instantly comes to mind—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was one of Leo's favorite jokes? Did he ever tell jokes?

DIANNE BLELL: Leo never told jokes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did he laugh at jokes?

DIANNE BLELL: I don't remember many jokes being told around Leo. But he—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, maybe that's—

DIANNE BLELL: He got a joy out of charm and—I remember when I had a litter of cats and I brought—I was walking around with my litter; I just carried them everywhere. And he went and he looked in my bag and he said, "Ooh, I like the pink one." [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he didn't have an artist who would come in and do the Catskill shtick, and he would say, "That guy kills me," or anything like that?

DIANNE BLELL: No, Leo was not a joke person. I don't—frankly, I don't think he would get them. I don't think he was a joke-oriented person. But he would enjoy things. I mean, he loved beautiful lunches. I catered a luncheon one time, and I didn't get it done till 3:00. [Laughs.] When I came out there, everybody was, like, laying all over the place.

I made chicken—polo en pane, chicken in a Tuscan dough. And I had done this at a dinner with Leo, and he said, "I must do this—I must do this for the gallery." And I did it, and finally, they had to send somebody down from the gallery to help me finish it and even carve it up there. [Laughs.] By the time I got it up there, half the people had left. Barbara Jakobson was still there, and she took a plate. [Laughs.]

I said, "I'm sorry; I should never have said I would cater this. I should have just had people down there." [Laughs.] It was just really—so the crew in the gallery ate it—[laughs]—and Leo ate it, and Barbara Jacobson and me, and it was just like—we lost about four people. I wish I could think of something else because I'm sure I probably will think of them later, sort of like—oh, what are some very funny stories?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How would you—

DIANNE BLELL: He was a clever character, Leo. If he wanted to give you the slip, he knew how to give you the slip.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you mean?

DIANNE BLELL: You should have seen him give Larry Gagosian the slip in those days. Larry Gagosian was chasing him around like a puppy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, didn't he work for him for a while? Or—

DIANNE BLELL: They had a partnership gallery—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. In SoHo, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: —on Mulberry. And now Leo—I mean, now Larry is—and I have to say, success becomes Larry. Larry was not fun when he didn't have what he wanted. He was a very difficult guy. Ooh, cranky and—–

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And now?

DIANNE BLELL: Success becomes him. He's at the top of his game, and you know, he can stop and be charming. You don't want to keep him for very long because he's got somebody that's got $80 million he's got to go talk to. But he'll stop and pause and have a very elegant smile on his face. And he looks good. But there was a dicey thing about him. Girls didn't—everybody was very suspicious of Larry in those days. And he would borrow a lot of work, he was bound to pay and that sort of thing. I mean, Larry's Larry. But Leo played along with him.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: When you sold pieces, were you paid promptly?

DIANNE BLELL: Oh yes. I was paid—when I owed money he would hardly even deduct anything I owed. But I paid my debt with art; it was long before he—just before he died.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: Because at the—at the behest of Keith—and I mean

Evidently I heard my debt wasn't even a tenth of what Dan Flaven's was and that Dan Falven had been on a stipen for many years and he stuck to it contractually. I know that they didn't give any—he's done a certain number of experimental young shows there too. Leo had a hard time with —I remember he was very upset when —first Jullian went from Mary Boone to Leo and she begged Leo in tears to share him and then he left Leo and he was very mad he wasn't speaking to Jullian for a number of years. Then Jullian was constantly nice to him and I remember being in LA at a fair and I was sitting at a table with Leo and a couple other artists, people that were around, an LA art fair, and Jullian came over and was very cordial and everything and I said something to Jullian, I teased him about it a little bit and he said "Well, it's worth just being hospitable and charming." And I said "You're right, Jullian." And ever since then I've always liked Jullian, he always has time to say hello, tell you you look well, ask you a question. He's like a mayor, he's just terrific. He's got manners, I know he's gone megalomaniac producing but so can I when I'm producing a set. I can be a monster. There's so much pressure someone's pointing at you all at once, you're just like "AHHH".

And you sometimes have to be kickass. I've been very insensitive in my life, and I don't think I'm that way anymore. I've evolved. But people used to take it I mean they didn't mind, I would say when they come over, "Look, um, if I don't stop and say excuse me, could you kindly pass a scalpel, please forgive me." Because if I just say "Give me the scalpel!" I need it, and don't take it personally. If you're going to take things personally, you can't work here. Because I get really pressed and I get hysterical.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you ever watched surgery?

DIANNE BLELL: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well it's sort of like that.

DIANNE BLELL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The surgeon is—

DIANNE BLELL: I've seen enough of it that—it's that type of thing—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —an absolute tyrant.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Yes, well—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And people have to live in expectation that any instant an order might explode.

DIANNE BLELL: I had things happen down here at the studio or I have been traumatized by something and I'd call up the gallery in tears and hysterical and out of my mind and Leo would be like "Well now." Somebody would always try to figure out how to—or Leo would say "Now we've got to do something—could you—take care of Di Di." [Laughs.]

You know I wasn't like a total—because I really couldn't dominate but sometimes when it gets down to a show, and I saw Richard Serra walk in there one time, just furious about stuff. And I've seen people in rooms with Leo and that that glass room which must have been soundproof and just [thumping noise]. And Leo being very cool. He never lost it, but he could give you the slip—[laughs]—he had a way of—it was funny.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How would you say that your experience working with Castelli shaped you. How did it develop who you are today

DIANNE BLELL: I wish it had developed me more, I wish I utilized it more. I wish I had been a little bit more of a business head on my shoulders without feeling that I would have been aggressive or something like that, I think there was a way that I vowed to be professional and get people to help you to do things without seeming aggressive. I think I wouldn't know how to handle that better than I did then. I think I rested on the comfort of the laurels of being with Leo a little bit too easily. I think I thought—it was almost like having a silver spoon in your mouth for me. I just couldn't think of—I could have cultivated other galleries while I was there. And people do. I could have tried to be in other group shows and various things like that—keep it moving. I would just work to have my show and then I would have my show with Leo and then let the chips fall where they may. So it's kind of hard for me to say that—"how did it form me?" Other than, my god, the memories? And the extraordinary level of people that I was able to meet? I've always met interesting people on my own too, so maybe that was part of coming to Leo Castelli—through that ability I came to Castelli in the end.

So I guess many I'm attracted to a certain level of polish.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you think it was his—being a European?

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, totally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Trieste

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, totally. Totally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And having that whole background of wealth or at least being raised with a certain amount of privilege and—

DIANNE BLELL: Totally. Totally

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How would you contrast what you perceive as being your experience with Leo Castelli with other artists you know and their experience with other galleries? Artists, when they see each other, they talk about a lot of things, they talk about art real estate and about their dealers. With whom were you close who was exhibiting with Mary Boone [sp], Nancy Hoffman [sp], whoever.

DIANNE BLELL: I don't know Nancy Hoffman at all. Mary Boone? You can't chit-chat with Mary Boone.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no. I mean the artists.

DIANNE BLELL: I mean I used to chat with Mary, we went to the same gym. Like going into a mausoleum trying to talk to the statuary.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But I mean artists who were exhibiting with other dealers, how did you perceive their experience dealing with other dealers compared to your experience dealing with Castelli?

DIANNE BLELL: I'm just trying to think of I had any specifics on that. Mary had her stable and she was—I never talked to Eric Fischl about how he deals with Mary. I know there are other people who show with Mary and Mary is a perfectionist. I know how Keith deals with Mary and Mary is on the phone about which degree of minus cyan? Blue and she gets on the phone about every piece of minutiae. [Inaudible.] They always have such nice announcements. I mean, Mary is a very good dealer, and I think she's wonderful to her artists. I'm sure she is. And I know she's very close with—Eric adores here, there's a real simpatico there. She used to have that little stable that she marched around with. She didn't [inaudible] without her six boys. Then her stable became larger and bigger and more high profile. Leo—in some ways he was a gallery of not very new, not very Avant-garde, because he had those established people I mean Ruscha is always hip, but Roche is already established. Lawrence Weiner is a prize, as far as I'm concerned. He did beautiful things with Leo, I mean it was such a varied thing.

I never tried to have any peculiar instillations with Leo. So I don't know—he certainly had some very unusual installations, so he would do that. That girl, she fell off and broke her neck, she did this sort of Japanese water scene, with bridges—I can't remember, I don't know where she is now. Nauman was a big deal too. And then of course Lichtenstein, Johns and Rosenquist.

I feel fortunate that I was sandwiched in between any of these people. I mean, I felt—as I said, I felt a little intimidated by the company sometimes, even though I was on a friendly basis with all of them. And I would have them over here for dinner and everything, but in terms of trying to talk to the girls about doing business, I always felt like I didn't deserve to—I was a little too self-effacing for my own good.

Because I mean, I think—I'm very proud of the years I was there. And the family context, it was just—made it very—and I felt safe. I felt safe, but I think I could have probably been more aggressive with my work in terms of other venues.

I would never have left Leo in a million years because I was just absolutely dedicated to—to me, the man, the history, the aura, it was just—I don't care—and what I sacrificed, I would do all over again anyway because I just—it was a rare world. A rare world. I remember one time Leo calls me up and he says, "Oh, Di-Di, now we have to start thinking about the announcement for —the show is coming up very quickly. And he said, "We need the announcement. Just get it up before something in March." I said, "Why?" and I said, "I thought it was May." My show was in March. I got my Ms transposed.

And he didn't—"Well, okay. Let's see what we can do about this. You'll be ready in May? All right, so now. Okay." [Laughs]—he just went and organized another show for March. I mean, how does he do that? I mean, that really is—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It sounded like he made it easy for you to rest on your laurels, or anybody, for that matter, because if the business—

DIANNE BLELL: I mean Leo was known to pay his debts. He never owed anybody money. He was known to pay right away. He was honorable. If anything he was overly generous. He was a spendthrift.

He was way—that's why Barbara let half the staff go and brought in new accountants, took over his books, took over running things. Barbara was initially, protectively suspicious of everyone. She also mistakenly believes me to be an ex-girlfriend of Leo's and some sort of interloper or opportunist. And a friend of mine was having lunch with him and she started to say something sort of fishing like, "What's that?" And Leo stood up, "No. No. No. Di-Di is not like that. Di-Di is not like that at all."

That my debt wasn't that big; that I wasn't a taker; that I wasn't always fishing; that I wasn't a user; and I'm not. I work very hard. And I try to sing for my suppers. Maybe I didn't bring in the money like Jasper Johns and Lichtenstein and Ruscha. I know I didn't. And I've had shows that were lost and I had shows that—couple shows that I probably—I don't know if he ever made much money on my shows—[laughs.]

I managed to make a few thousand dollars, but I don't think Leo in the end—and he had a lot of people like that. But he was loyal. He was extremely loyal, even though some people would criticize him for being a little bit on the chic side or sometimes giving somebody the bum's rush or giving them the slip.

I mean I've seen him. He gave me the slip a number of times. He would have something socially more important to do. And I thought I was going—"Oh, Di-Di, I must go." "But I thought we were"—"No, no. I'm sorry, but something has come up. [Laughs.] "Oh. All right." He would do it—I mean, you left there sort of like, "Oh. I thought I was going to—"

But I mean, he was, for the most part, pretty great. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So what do you think would be his take on the art world of today?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, even on my own photography he referred to my work as, "Wow. I—you are what I refer to as fancy photography."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Fancy photography.

DIANNE BLELL: Because Toiny had the other photography—she had those sort of stable of people like Ralph Gibson and—Ralph Gibson used to be Leo's buddy. He was Leo's boy buddy. And he was very good at being Leo's sidekick and giving Leo advice, manly advice.

But Leo really was captivated with women. [Laughs.] And he bought them lofts. And there were some lawsuits after he died about—they claimed that he was going to support them for life and they lost. Barbara—you don't want to tangle with Barbara. And she, rightly so, cut them off. They were terrible. They were some terrible ones and everyone disliked them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Rotten gold diggers.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh they were just—a couple of them were just the worst. It was really upsetting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why was he so prone to—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, Daniel Templon—when it came to Toiny, for instance, they fought. They were, at the same time, it's that codependent, that fierce thing. When she died, he flipped. He really flipped. Because I went to the

Lichtensteins' out in Long Island for the burial and everything and Leo was just beside himself. He was just deer in the headlights, stunned. And he couldn't stop talking about the last time he saw her in the hospital.

This is leading into something. Oh and so Daniel Templon, there was one time when I called Leo—this will be a personal story. I called Leo. I was very upset about something of my own, a guy that I was going out with. And we just—[claps]—hit the skids and he worked at the gallery. He was working at the gallery for a while. And we had a big clash.

And I was very upset and I was changing something I was doing and I called Leo up and this was when I had one of my big fits—and, anyway, and I called him and Toiny thought that I was upset with Leo because he was my boyfriend. But Toiny thought everybody was Leo's girlfriend becausea lot of girls came around.– well, Toiny was right to be jealous about anybody.

And so Toiny—and I was always really nice to Toiny and I would take time with her because I felt sorry for her. And I would always go sit with her and talk to her and listen to her stories about Leo. And she was very curt with me and I was startled. And she said, "Well, you are very upset with Leo and you called Leo because you were upset—called him upset." I said, "But it wasn't about—it was about so and so. Nothing to do with."

Anyway, so I was very upset and I was startled. And I was talking to Daniel Templon, I said, "Geez, Daniel. Toiny thinks—oh, this is terrible. I mean, what do I"—I said, "This is ridiculous." He said, "Oh. Forget Toiny, she judges everybody. You know Leo. *Il est faible*. When it comes to Toiny, *il est faible*." He is weak.

And so with women he just absolutely—I don't know, it was a—maybe it was because of his—but I met Leo he was very old, when I met Leo. And he had a history of girlfriends that was a mile long. And what I saw at the end were not—I mean, they were young women.

One of them is probably in a mental institution now. And she was obsessed with Leo. And she ended up in Leo's doorstep with luggage and her dogs and her bracelets and she kept saying, "I am Mrs. Leo Castelli. I'm Mrs. Leo —" In the summer that he met Barbara, she took herself to Castellaras, I heard, and appeared at the gate in Castellaras and said, "This is Mrs. Castelli." She was totally deluded and she would camp out down on 420 West Broadway on the stairs. And her parents finally had her committed. And I would see her from time to time with Leo, and she was obsessed with him. And I guess she was losing it and then she just lost it at the end there.

But I don't know. Certainly—the gal that I just mentioned earlier that was known to be with Leo for a while, Italian woman, Laura Grisi is a substantial person, a decent person. She was coherent and makes a lot of art and everything, and she continued showing with Leo for years. And because of Laura, women like myself, I think, were prone to probably—and then maybe that's why there weren't many women at Leo Castelli's gallery. Maybe that's why I was prone to the rumor.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: And I hope that—I mean, there are a lot of people that know that it's—I hope it goes on record that that absolutely was in no way ever, was there ever any, ever, a romantic connection between me and Leo.

DIANNE BLELL: Keith Sonnier lectured Barbara for years, saying "Barbara, you don't understand Dianne"—I mean, Keith is like my brother. "This is not true and you've got to get over"—she thinks I'm one of the people that was taking advantage of him. And it is just so mistaken my god—I'm an artist

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It could just be attention, too. It could just be that—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, Barbara was very, very, very not accepted at first, it was difficult for her. The gallery staff was suspicious and in turn resented her taking control. All Leo's friends socially, flat-out—she was spurned.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why?

DIANNE BLELL: But she stuck with it.

First of all, she was 40 years his junior. Leo was very ill when she came on the scene. She came on the scene to do a story for a Japanese publication– I think it was interview about Jasper Johns—or was it about Leo? I don't know. It was thought that she just honed right in to take advantage of him when he was basically on his deathbed. And at the end, they were always with the lawyer revamping his will, I was told, this is on records.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: And evidently—one story is that Jean-Christophe—there was a Tiffany lamp, the snake mirror. And—not mirror, lamp. And Jean-Christophe was getting an apartment with his girlfriend and he wanted to come over and get the lamp. So he called Leo, and Leo said, "Yes, we'll get the lamp, and if you want it"—"I've always

been partial to this lamp for furnishing the apartment, and I'd really like to have the lamp." And—Toiny left it to him. But it still had remained in Leo's apartment where he was with Barbara. They got back from their trip, they walked in, first thing, she says, "Oh my god, the lamp!"

So Leo was like—[laughs]—– "Jean-Christophe —"

She made him get Jean-Christophe to bring back that lamp. So it was like that. And he gave her control over his notebook, his address book. He wouldn't look up a telephone number, anything. Evidently controlled everything, but Leo gave that control to her.

So, can you imagine? It was kind of—and it was a very slow process, but it was very evident. And Leo was completely under her influence.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And protective.

DIANNE BLELL: And she—would tell him "Don't do this, you can't do this," and when they had a survey of exhibitions of people that had been with the gallery, I had had four one-person shows and had done two group shows, and they didn't put—she wouldn't allow me to be in the survey. But she had Laura Grisi in there. Laura Grisi befriended her, because she was Italian. So I think Hanna Darboven was in it, but—oh, and then there was Mia somebody, a sculptress. Mia—I can't think of it. She's Canadian—sculptress. [Mia Westerlund]

But I remember very early she complained about not having enough attention from the gallery. She was there in—[a token]—didn't show much the whole time I was there, but she had a history.

There was Barbara Bloom that did this Japanese bridge garden that hurt her neck, who had a major installation there. And Roni Horn did something there too. None of these girls had relationships with Leo. So he was quite capable. But it was male-dominated. But it was a different era. Leo's gallery was from a different era.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's what you're saying, even in—

DIANNE BLELL: Even in its era. It was not—wasn't a young—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Even in its era, it represented an established aesthetic.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. He tried to do one thing, and there were these two guys—one of them, believe it or not, was Rob Pruitt. And it was a partnership exhibition, and they did all these album covers with gold and all kinds of weird metallic paint, I don't know if you remember. And for some reason, that show was panned and—I didn't realize to the degree it was. I knew people [were] up in arms about it, but at one point somebody came in and was going to buy—it was either Saatchi or Asher Edelman was going to buy a bunch of the pieces and then reneged. And I met the other guy and he works at the photo gallery uptown where—I can't think of the name, it's a major photography gallery.

I don't know if he still works there, but anyway. He was partnered with Rob Pruitt in the show, and they were drummed out—off the art world sidewalk. And Rob Pruitt writes about it and talks about it to this day, that it was—show was considered racist and be damned. And he had to fight his way back to the top.

I just can't imagine in this day and age, with all the tongue-in-cheek—as you say, kitsch—and black language—I mean, people are making fun of everybody in our—so politically incorrect on purpose, I don't know how—but you know, I guess that was just very edgy at that time. But that was a show that was an attempt at Leo to do something very edgy and—[laughs]—it really—it backfired.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It didn't work.

DIANNE BLELL: But Leo was—really did some things. Greene Street, he had Robert Longo, he did a lot of stuff with other galleries, like with Metro and—when they didn't have space, they went to Greene Street. He partnered with them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he was always trying—

DIANNE BLELL: He wasn't particularly interested in being—going outside his milieu. He was really happy with Rosenquist and Lichtenstein and Ruscha and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, half a dozen artists like that and you're basically done; you don't really need to—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But what was his own taste? What was your sense of Leo Castelli's own taste?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, they say Leo didn't really collect that much, although he had some wonderful work. It wasn't like—not to the degree that Ileana did. He wasn't edgy like Ileana. He wasn't really that conceptual. You know, he had Bruce Nauman. He had Lawrence Wiener. I think the work he had—ooh, Warhol—in his apartment, I can't remember. I was up there a few times. I was up there a few times, not very much. I went to visit him at the end there, and I went to visit him to pick him up to take him to Keith Sonnier's wedding; I had a drink there beforehand. Another time—I think I was there three or four times. I think he had a cocktail up there once. And I can't remember the work I saw. Mostly it was very spare, and there was a kind of that type of Pennsylvania Dutch furniture, very very Plain People kind of—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Shaker?

DIANNE BLELL: Shaker. Toiny's taste was Shaker so there was Shaker pieces there. And he kept it like that after Toiny died. It was very spare. I think there was a Jasper Johns there and maybe a Castelli, and—not a Castelli, I mean a Warhol. I'm trying to remember the work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I guess I was asking, what was your sense of his taste, his own taste. Like, you described how you would offer him works to exhibit and he would say, no, no, no, no, and then finally he responded to the urns. But what do you think informed his eye? If you were to talk about Leo Castelli's eye, how would you—

DIANNE BLELL: In terms of what he showed, I mean, that's quite a range. So I don't think it was particularly figurative, although he showed Garouste for a while. But that was—and I never really got into Garouste's work. The eyes were empty and there were these big sort of classical drawings. I never really quite—I should have liked Garouste, actually. [Laughs.] I mean—come to think of it. But to me, I just kind of thought that they were—I don't know, they didn't reach out and grab you, you couldn't become a part of them. I didn't find them gripping my gut. I felt like they were outside of himself because those eyes were circles like—they were like Annie—I couldn't get past the Little Orphan Annie empty eyes. [They laugh.] Well, they were.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: That drove me crazy. All this Mannerism and all this Rococo, all this beautiful drawing, and then—zero eyes. And so, it just—I felt like I—but other than that, if I really try to recall it, think about it, there isn't that much figurative work in there. And my work, being figurative, I really don't know—[laughs]—I don't know if Leo—I mean, I wonder if he really liked my work. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I think a lot of people, scholars, people who are going to be having a look at this transcript in the future, in 10 years, in a hundred years, will be trying, you know, to penetrate sort of the, you know, the mystery of the Castelli eye.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I basically—I think that it would be said—it should be said that you had to have an inroad into something. You had to have your own focus. You had to have a focus. I mean, I showed him that one work, that one work with the—it just wasn't enough. I wanted to make an installation out of that one work. He didn't buy that. That one that was at Berkeley. To me, that was like enough. And it wasn't till he really saw that—the urn and then I was getting into the figurative things, and I stayed in this mythological—

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DIANNE BLELL: It's—yeah, it has complex questions.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the construction of the set, all of the revisions to the set, all of the styling of the models and the props, the lighting—

DIANNE BLELL: The effort. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The endless Polaroids to sort of try to—

DIANNE BLELL: And now what happens in Photoshop—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

DIANNE BLELL: —is that I just keep refining, refining; I'll go down and I'll go, "You know, this trim needs to be more"—and I will go out to the ribbon store and I will go—and I'll buy 18 different kinds of expensive things. And then I'll put the piece of paisley bead on the scanner and scan that. Then I'll scan another piece of a trim or something.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: And then I'll distort it and twist it, and then I'll make the paisley longer. And then I'll recolor it.

And then I'll go get a border from something else, from another picture. And I'll just take it and then I'll repeat it 85 times and I'll finally get a strip like this that I can add to a border around the doorway so I can repeat that strip. I mean, It's obsessive. I think it's like obsessiveness.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But that's like—

DIANNE BLELL: Maybe obsessiveness.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —special effects in movies, in a way.

DIANNE BLELL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's what you were saying before.

DIANNE BLELL: I take to the nth degree when in fact you really don't have to. And what I'm trying to do right now is to try to instill gravitas and import into something without having to do it without all this bloody detail because—– I could get into detail for the rest of my life; I don't feel like building another set right now. I just don't have the energy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you ever pondered the idea of using the garden as a set?

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I am. That's what I'm doing right now. I'm running around the garden looking at it and thinking "I've got to do something about this. How can I photograph this garden?" I've got to make a big print out of that big—that's my shot I've got to make." And I thought, "How can I put people in this place?"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You could light it at night, too, if you wanted control of the lighting.

DIANNE BLELL: All kinds of—really, all kinds of stuff.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: So I'm trying to figure out —I mean, that is a nice shot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Beautiful. I think—

DIANNE BLELL: It's says Gordon Grant took it, but it's my shot. It was done—my tripod, with an identical camera and identical lens. And I had it set up and I said, "Here's your shot." [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it's your garden, darn it.

DIANNE BLELL: He said, "You're right." [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's your garden. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: They said they want a vast one; I said "Okay." I said "You zoom it to this for the narrow one." And I said, "And then you just open it up wide for this one."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's a great imagery because it's a lot of space and a lot of data at the same time.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. So I mean, I could just plant people in something like this. For me it's a bit 3-D. [Laughs.] I like flat; I like fake perspective, so I have to figure that out. And I'm obsessed with the fact the Mughal gardens are—will stack things up —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: —you know, in a vertical plane.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Will they do that kind of child's perspective, that the—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that the bottom is the front and top is the back of the space.

DIANNE BLELL: And that's what I used to love when I had to sort of do my sets here. And I have a little angel here and I would have the back—I would force the perspective and have it teeny back there, and I would have the front of the seat like really down low, and so it look high and—oh, my God. It was really—but I mean, I love the simultaneity of events, too, in that sort of medieval, Gothic, kind of thing—they do that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the other culture where one sees a lot of that is Japan—

DIANNE BLELL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —with the screens, with the *Genji Monogatari* and other epic tales being told across an eightfold screen. Episodically, that's what you're talking about, right? The different episodes all within the same frame.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I love that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes. Well, see—

DIANNE BLELL: I love that. That's my favorite thing. I've loved it since I was a child.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's when painting was a time-based medium. When all paintings were moving pictures; they moved us through the space.

DIANNE BLELL: And I like when they violate boundaries, like in the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: —when, you know—and when you see—and I did that with the trees here. And the little roots. And I mean, it is like—this is sort of funny how—there's history here and there's history here and there's this—well, I don't know. I've got to figure it out. I want to use what I've got. And I've got to add something to it, and I have these—I just can't figure out whether to use figures or not, or what to add in or what not to add in.

I'm—it's very interesting. I don't know what lies before me. [They laugh.] Definitely something with a garden; definitely something—all week, I was—and I had a dream in the middle of—and not only that, some of my furnishings in my own house, in this crazy house—I don't know if you saw this. Maybe you saw it, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We've saw "House and Garden," which is here.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, that's actually "Hamptons Cottages and Gardens;" this is "House and Garden."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, okay.

DIANNE BLELL: My garden was just begun, but it was too immature to photograph. The garden has to be mature before I can shoot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is March 1997.

DIANNE BLELL: My garden wasn't—so the garden took 10 years to—this garden's 10 years old. The garden's only two years old in 2000. It was just begun; it was about a year and a half old. So now it's about 12 years old, my garden.

So it took about 10 years for the garden to mature. But I would say, about the house, five years, five years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I love the blue cottage here.

DIANNE BLELL: And that's including the initiation of the landscape. It's not anymore; it's now re-shingled. But they'll weather. I mean, that actually—it's kind of brown; I don't even know why that photographed gray, but it did. [They laugh.] That's the way they printed it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a nice sort of a gazebo or—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, look at her little waist. [Laughs.] Talk about a wasp waist; it's a stem.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, there you go. There you go.

DIANNE BLELL: Maybe I should put her in the work. [Laughs.] Look at her little slipper.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Your Katie Keene drawing from age 12—

DIANNE BLELL: Look at my little slipper.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. Attention to detail.

DIANNE BLELL: Look at her thumbs. Two thumbs. Katie Keene. My sister found me out; I can't believe it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes, this is terrific. Lovely spacing.

DIANNE BLELL: Now, there's wonderful art there. Oh, you can see it in the other picture; I think it's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Here.

DIANNE BLELL: It's just glutted with art. There's not a place to hang anything around here anymore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You were saying, though, that you prefer windows to walls.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well no, I like—I love art. I want art. But I mean, I've got to have a lot of window space, and I just—oh, that's nice. Just saw a terrific chair. [Laughs.] I lost two chairs and a beautiful table here, darn it.

My studio was in New York, too. Here's another incarnation, when I was working on this project. And this was another set. It's a little faded. That's one of my kitties on the next page.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I see. Here's another shot of that cottage.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And now it's a different—now it's remodeled all over again.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wonderful. So you want to now synthesize the garden with the studio and—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I'd like to—I definitely—I photographed this garden all along the way, but I want to add some two-dimensionality to it. I mean, I don't know; I—for me to just—I could try printing this—a shot. I mean, for me, just print this—Erica Lennard does this. And other people. And I just kind of feel like, well—I have hundreds and thousands of pictures of my garden and details and flowers and roses, close-up, and irises—like what's-her-name in Santa Fe. I mean—[laughs].

I'm trying to think, "What do I do with these? Should I just cut out—should I just stack all—I mean, do I just go through only garden, just make a body of work that's all garden. I mean—but it's going to be so real; it's going to be different than my work.

So I want to flatten it out, somehow—[laughs]—in a strange way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think if you could combine lovers who never met, you should—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —be able to do the same with plant material.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Introduce a tree from Africa to a bush from Long Island. [They laugh.]

DIANNE BLELL: I've got trees from Africa—trees that the giraffe[s] eat, and that sort of thing. [Laughs.] [Plain ?] tree? [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the whole issue of gender, though—over and over again, you've alluded to the fact that the Castelli gallery was really sort of male-dominated except for the girlfriends and the—

DIANNE BLELL: The people that worked there, it was girl-dominated.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Right. But they were also sort of women warriors at the gate, trying to keep all of the interlopers out, and—

DIANNE BLELL: And the guys did installation, that sort of thing. And then he had a guy gallery manager for a while. But that was actually—that was still under the girls—Morgan Spangle. He actually took over after Susan and Patty were let go. He went to Barbara and was rehired. Morgan did a tricky kind of thing, and the girls never forgave him for that. And then she fired Morgan.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you said you're still in touch with a number of the people from the gallery.

DIANNE BLELL: I'm closely in touch with Patty and Susan, Mimi Thompson, and Debbie Taylor. And Dorothy Spears, I just love Dorothy Spears and each of them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what are they doing—

DIANNE BLELL: Dorothy Spears even recognized my email. She said, "Oh I saw your email." She said, " I just

love it." It's Di-Di. And the reason it's Di-Di is because that's what Leo called me. And I wanted—because that's my nickname. It's my nickname in San Francisco for my husband and Herb Caen and a number of people. Only some people call me Di-Di. They have to want to, or—you know, as nicknames are. They just—you can fall into place with a person who says it automatically or—you are that. And—but so it's sort of a subterranean nickname.

But Leo, who's been calling me Di-Di—I don't know—and Laura called me Di-Di, and I loved the way he would say Di-Di. And so when I got to have an email, I didn't want that name—I didn't want it to die. [Laughs.] Di-Di to die.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You didn't want Di-Di to die.

DIANNE BLELL: No, and Dorothy [Spears] picked up on it right away. I said—[gasps]—"You got it. You got it. Nobody gets it." She said, "Oh, I know, I can hear Leo say it every time I type it." [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sweet.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Yes. Yes. He was very generous, and—Leo could be "mechant". I mean, he could be a bad boy, there's no doubt about it, and he could be very superficial and go for the trite, in some situations. There's been a lot of stories, like, about—or—[laughs]—there's some people he just never seemed to ever recognize, like David White worked there, and David said, he just can't stand it, "Leo just never recognizes me.". Because he just never—I don't know why, I don't know what it is. But you know, because he went on to work with Rauschenberg, and it just drove David to distraction. Made him so angry with Leo. So—[laughs]—he was uncomfortable.

But it's funny. I loved Toiny, too. Not Toiny. I mean Ileana. I loved Ileana. Adored her. I thought she was like the holy lama of the art world. [Laughs.] She had such containment. Did you ever meet her?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Pardon?

DIANNE BLELL: Have you met her? Talked to her?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I never—I must have met her, I think, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, she was the most cryptic, like a Dalai Lama.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't think I ever did meet her, actually. I was not in New York—

DIANNE BLELL: Well, she had a—you know, she was portly, like a Venetian woman, in one of those sort of box dresses. [Laughs.] Uniforms.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. One of those Carpaccio—

DIANNE BLELL: She had a smooth—[laughs]—yes. Smooth face. She wore that wig and everything. She didn't have a line in her face. And she was in a wheelchair towards the end. One of the last conversations—I would always go over and sit with her and bore her to tears, I'm sure, because she never talked much. She would always just say one fine—[inaudible]. She'd let you do all the talking.

But she would get a kick out of it. She liked to have people around who liked chit-chatting and saying funny things and stuff like that. And she used to invite me to stuff because she thought I was fun. [Laughs.] So I went over to talk to her and we were talking about—oh, I don't know, another girl was chatting away with her and talking about makeup and face and—and then I said, "You know, Ileana, you haven't got—your face looks so smooth and you just—you're so unlined, you haven't got one wrinkle." And the other girl said, "It's true"—she's French—"It's true, you don't wrinkle," you know? And I said, "But you know why, Ileana? I said, look at me, how expressive I am. I'm always like this. I have—I'm totally—my face is all lined up and everything." I said, "But you, when you react to something, all you do is go"—[she raises her eyebrows slightly with a slight smile]. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The inscrutable—

DIANNE BLELL: I said, that's why you don't have any lines. [Laughs.] She does. Just—

That was like, wonderful, if you got that from Ileana. It was like, wow. [Claps hands.]

Not Toiny, Ileana [sic].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Beauty secrets, never smile, never wrinkle.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, she was an absolute what do you call it, a—from the Mona Lisa. She was a true Mona Lisa.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Inscrutable or mysterious.

DIANNE BLELL: She was a real Mona Lisa.

Of course, my favorite painting is right next to it, to the right, that *Madonna of the Rocks*. Don't you love that?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, what I—

DIANNE BLELL: One of the most beautiful faces in art history.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —I find astonishing is that you can go to the Louvre and you can see this herd of people clustered around this Plexiglas box, and a few feet to the left, behind nothing, is this much better painting, in my opinion.

DIANNE BLELL: Which one's to the left?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The *Madonna of the Rocks*, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, I thought it was to the right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or it's to the right, or—but it's next to it.

DIANNE BLELL: Or—yes, I know! And the little thing of flower that's growing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There's no obstacle—

DIANNE BLELL: You get to know that painting so well, because—[laughs] it's so intimate when you're there! I know!

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you've got to regard *La Gioconda,* peering through the distorting tissue of an inch of Plexiglas. Well, that's branding, isn't it. The painting that's been cut down, stolen, badly restored, and now it's the most famous painting in the world.

DIANNE BLELL: Did they re-restore it to what—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't know. I read years ago an article about how the composition was actually much larger and it was cut out of the frame once or twice and—I'm sure I could retrieve the articles.

DIANNE BLELL: Well, I had to cut my—that big scene from the *Circus*—not *Circus Animals*' but from the *Pursuit of Love*, I had to cut that out from the—oh here's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, great.

DIANNE BLELL: I'm surprised I had so few of these things. This is from *Desire for the Intimate Deity* too. Is there one of Luis there too? This is very green, this is not good. Ugh, it's so green. But see, I stole the water in this one from that. I remade this. I stole this land from them. I put these trees in there from like—I took sections of this tree out and put them in there, on trunks that were painted in there. I cut the trunks out and then reversed them and put them all over here. The temple I inserted in there. I just had to do that because I had to get more mileage. I completely fabricated that set.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, now you know what to do with your garden. If you can do it with a virtual garden, you should be able to do it with a real one.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, I suppose. I'm lost. I guess I just have to concentrate and look at it and look at it and look at it and look at it and look at it.

I don't know if I'm interested in any of these sort of like little reviews, or—I suppose I should—I don't know how I'm going to get all of this together and send a package of this to—it's going to take me months to send something like this. Maybe in September I can do it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, whatever you'd like me to take I can send.

DIANNE BLELL: Uh huh. [Affirmative.] Well, I have to look through and see what I can spare. Because, I mean, some of this stuff I have one or two announcements and that's it. Oh, I didn't know if you wanted to look at—on the left, just some of the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right now—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, that's a show I was in in London. These two pieces were in there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right now, the archives is moving its office in New York to a new location and so they probably are not going to—

DIANNE BLELL: So they bought the archives from Barbara, didn't they? From Castelli Foundation?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm unsure of the arrangements made between the Archives of American Art and the gallery. I think that—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, it's the foundation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or the foundation.

DIANNE BLELL: A friend of mine, Betsy of Bomb Magazine—Betsy Sussler said that the Smithsonian Archives of American Art bought the Castelli archives.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They may have. They may have.

DIANNE BLELL: Because I said, I don't know how they found little old me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or they may have—

DIANNE BLELL: She said she thinks that they bought the archives and are going through the Castelli artists. I said, well, I said, "I thought Barbara expunged me from the records." She said, "Well, evidently, not totally."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, they may have. I don't know if they did the purchase outright, or a donor was able to purchase it for them. I'm not sure of the details. I'm sure I could find out. I am supposed to interview another Castelli artist in the fall, Barbara Bloom.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh. But did she show downtown? Or did she show up with Castelli? She's a good photographer. Yes. Really good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

DIANNE BLELL: But I don't remember any of her shows at Castelli downtown.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, she's out of town at the moment, she won't be—

DIANNE BLELL: She—oh, you know who else he showed was that funny little girl who does the raisins all over everything, very spooky with the hangers, and all the babies, and she—wild girl. I met her once at Philip Lamont Printing Place, and she was just this little, simple, plain, and I said, "Whoa, what's going on your brain? Look at you." I said, "You never know." [Laughs.] You know who she is, oh, she teaches, she does, like, one piece every three years; I mean, like me, she builds, like these sets of these huge rooms—like she'll reenact the room. And then they'll be babies, baby dolls all over the ceilings, and there'll be an older couple, and they'll be covered in raisins, or hangers, and—I mean, it's really spooky stuff.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's always the quiet ones you have to look out for.

DIANNE BLELL: She's very quiet I think, in a wool pleat skirt on, glazer— [Laughs.] I can't believe this is you. You're scary. [Laughs.] She's very good. She was very—I don't know—[off mic]—paintings, pictures in one of his shows.

Oh, let me see this. She's kind of disappeared. Oh, this piece, did you see that piece on the wall over there? This is called "Girl Going Nowhere Fast," and it was after Muybridge. [They laugh.] Isn't that a riot?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It is.

DIANNE BLELL: They published five out of nine. Oh, I thought she was in this show.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Roller skates and a party dress.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Roller skates were the big deal then. Did you—you got my bio, right?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: And did you read the catalog? What did you think of the catalog?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I liked it very much. I had also retrieved that article online.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh yes, you showed that to me. I've got to get that online too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'll email you the link.

DIANNE BLELL: There was a nice little thing in the New Yorker from the Christian thing. And then this was online too, this was at hamptons.com, did a story—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think that's the article.

DIANNE BLELL: Hamptons.com?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think so.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, that's the one. I thought you said it was—oh, that's not Holden Luntz, J.Z. Holden's her pen name.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, Okay. All right. Yes, no I—now I'm remembering. Okay, J.Z. Holden. That's a—that's a—she's a writer out there; she does stuff online. Now, this was one of the first computer shows ever, this series—I don't know if you want to look at that. It's before there was Photoshop, and I had a working grant with Applied Graphics Technologies, and I worked on the Quantel Graphic Paintbox—I think I mentioned that. Did I mention that last time?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't think so.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, it was a room—the computer room was the size of the whole area over there. We were in a room about that size with one big monitor and a stylus pad, with a technician, and there was no Photoshop then. It was just being developed. This was in—I started in 2000—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was even earlier than that.

DIANNE BLELL: Because 1989 was the show, and I worked on that project for four years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I had a neighbor who worked for NFL Films, and they had a studio in southern New Jersey. I lived in Philadelphia, and I went over there one night after hours with her, and she said—

DIANNE BLELL: What year?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is like, 1986, '87—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes, well 1985, I started drawing for this project, and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it was amazing, because you would go into this room, and it was just—all these electronics, and there was a little pad, a little tiny monitor, and a stylus, and now all of the stuff that was in that room is now in the iPad.

DIANNE BLELL: I know. And I mean, I would just scan my drawings in like that and put them together, but I mean, you'd just, you'd put them in a scanner in another room. And, like, the room—the computer produced these things called digital originals. This is what we got. This is what we printed—it's here, what I printed from.

These are dupes. [Groans.]

This is something—I didn't know if you might be curious about this. This is something I wrote from my alumni. And you just can look at these, just hold them up in the air and just look at them.

Because I had to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, this is terrific. Could I have this? And—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Yes. And then I also have another—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'll send it along.

DIANNE BLELL: —I have another essay that I wrote. And I don't know where it is. Let me see. It was from the talk I was going to give at Holden Luntz Gallery. But I didn't really put it out in—

It was a lecture about—ah, here we go. Well, I don't know. God, I wish I weren't so disorganized.

Maybe it's in here.

How am I ever going to get organized? Do you know somebody that is good at putting stuff into a filing system? I've got to hire somebody to help me do this one day.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I think probably so, yes.

DIANNE BLELL: I mean, this is pathetic. I can work alongside of him because nobody can do this by himself. [Laughs.] But it's getting to the point where it's serious, it's a problem. I mean, I can't find things anymore.– stuff, I go and get it, I mess it up more.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We're actually approaching the end of the disc here.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, all right. Oh, Okay. So do you have another—more questions?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I was just going to—

DIANNE BLELL: I wanted to give you this, but I can't find it.

It might be over there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I wanted to pose perhaps one or two final questions.

DIANNE BLELL: Okay. All right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But I'll wait for you to return.

DIANNE BLELL: All right, here is a picture of some of the sets.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh.

DIANNE BLELL: And, I mean, kind of, not all of them. I can show you at the end.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow. Terrific.

So a conversation like ours could probably continue for hours and days. And you're clearly a very lively conversationalist.

DIANNE BLELL: [Laughs.] Oh, dear.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Great fun.

DIANNE BLELL: That's polite. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Great, great fun. Oh, I've been accused of worse, I'm sure. But I think that it's been a great pleasure talking to you. And I was just wondering if there was anything you cared to add or anything you wanted to say to the transcript that would kind of tie all of this together or just to say wait for the next interview for an update.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, you're going to do an update? [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, we never—that would be—all would live long enough, it's always possible.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. Yes. Yes. Well, maybe I'll be further into a new series or something like that, and maybe it'll speak for itself. [Laughs.] Maybe it will tie all these things together.

I don't know. I just—I'm a person of many interests. And—[laughs]—and it's a little fracturing. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, here is the thing I'd like to ask you. I think that a lot of young artists probably feel pressured to try to direct themselves in one path, to affect a purpose and say, "This is what I should do if I want to be successful" and try to calculate some kind of a path to a claim, money, wealth, riches—the love—*The Roar of the Greasepaint—The Smell of the Crowd*. And you seem to have just really, in a lot of ways, followed your bliss, and—

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, oh! My favorite phrase, and—my mask of God, and my favorite—I love Joseph Campbell. [Laughs.] I wish I did. I think—I feel I suffer from the lack of business acumen within—[laughs]—without—

[laughs]—and the artist within. I mean, I constantly think—[sighs]—I feel guilty if I'm gardening sometimes too much, and I feel like I should be making art.

Actually, that makes me the least guilty, I have to tell you. Housework, managing the house makes me very guilty. [Laughs.] I don't know if it's guilt or what, but it tortures me—although my house is a work of art too. I made all the sconces. I had them welded together. I can't help but make things. And I don't know if I'm a control freak or I just—I always think, you know—I mean I go out looking for stuff.

If I see something I love, I want it and I address it and I admit it. And I welcome it, I embrace it, I give it credit. I say, "Make me one," or "You're the best, I will employ you or it." Most of the time you go out looking for stuff and it's just so lackluster. And I go, "Well, what, I have to buy a sconce? I have to buy a thing that looks like that? I'll just make one." [Laughs.] Why do I have to buy something so prosaic? [Laughs.]

So I just—it gets in the way of—I don't know if I consider myself a—I mean, how in the hell did he do it? How did he paint all those things and still be an inventor and scientist and all those things—da Vinci? How did he do it? And I sometimes wonder if I have too many irons in the fire, too many things. But I can't help it. I do enjoy kind of peculiarizing things, as I call it. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You spoke about how, whatever you do, you immerse yourself in it.

DIANNE BLELL: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So maybe—

DIANNE BLELL: Yes. And that's what I did with the garden, went out and got every single book, everything, and I did it to the exclusion of making work for, my God, from—well, the house took over. In 1993 I bought the house. I had my lasat show at Castelli in—'91, '92 kind of thing, at that wildlife thing. And then I think it was '91. And then I started making that project in about '98, about '98. Just the first glimmers of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The "Cupid and Psyche" or the—

DIANNE BLELL: No, the "Desire for the Intimate Deity."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh.

DIANNE BLELL: Didn't even have a title then. I was just pinning up, you know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, the Mughal .

DIANNE BLELL: —Polaroids of the Mughal things, the images that interested me and picking out ones that represented the stages of courtship, and I was just buying all the books. And I started actually doing—shooting rough shots of that one girl, and I was looking for the Krishna. Oh, and we saw him, that's right, and he was pushing the lawn mower around. The garden wasn't really—[laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You saw Luis's [sp] Tutankhamun or—[inaudible]—or something.

DIANNE BLELL: What it—I spent 10 years—I spent 10 years on that project, more than—, almost—my show was in 2008—almost 12 years from the first glimmer. I say—I mean, maybe it was 2008 I started, 2008. I can't really place it. No, 2008 maybe. What year did Leo die? Do you remember what year Leo died?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think it was around '07, '08. I'd have to look it up.

DIANNE BLELL: No, it was way before that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or '03, maybe? I could look it up.

DIANNE BLELL: No, it was before 9/11. Or was it? [Off mic.] [Walking away the microphone to find something.] I have a mental block.

[Pause.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was it 2001?

DIANNE BLELL: 1999.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: '99.

DIANNE BLELL: 1999. Yes. So maybe I started—yes, '98. Okay, '98.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So he was 92 years old.

DIANNE BLELL: I started a project in 1998. That makes sense.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: '98, not in 2008.

DIANNE BLELL: Because I remember I was living in the cottage and I rented out my main house. Yes, I rented out my cottage in '98. So maybe the summer of '97, something like that. Because he came and saw little shoots—little—[inaudible]—just the models. And I hadn't even shot all of them. I reshot half of those, so—it was kind of—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We're about to run out of disc here, so—

DIANNE BLELL: OK. So to add—what, you got a last question? [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, if you were to write something to put in a fortune cookie for someone to find—a young artist to find in a hundred years, what would it be? What would be your advice to a young artist?

DIANNE BLELL: Look within. I think it's really important to look within. You know, you have to express what's out there, too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mmm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DIANNE BLELL: But it has to come out of you. And that's what is unique. You add up all the variables. That is—it's very hard.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you pay attention to the world around you and the world within you and have the courage to do what you care about.

DIANNE BLELL: Your individual stream within that greater thing, the addition of all those peculiarities that we add up to. Individualities, inimitableness. I can't imagine what else. I mean, that has to be, otherwise you're just producing a product that is—to be mass-produced for—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, so—

DIANNE BLELL: —[laughs]– use. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But that courage, and so—

DIANNE BLELL: It takes guts, and it also—it's very hard sometimes to recognize, and you got to—it's hard—I find it very hard—I'm struggling, right now; I'm finding it very hard to find out what my little root is right now because I have so many things—and I have so many individual things—I have my garden, I have my house, I have my studio here. I'm going, "Which place do I work in? Half my work is here. The computer's here, the information's here. I'm out there." I'm trying to find my root all over again. But every time I start a new body of work, I go through it all over again. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, Dianne, thank—

DIANNE BLELL: I think it's torture. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you so much for letting us look within your mind and within your life. It's been great. Thanks so much.

DIANNE BLELL: Oh, okay. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A pleasure.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]