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Oral history interview with Dean Fleming, 2013 August 6 and 7

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Dean Fleming on August 6-7, 2013. The interview took place in Libre, Colo., and was conducted by Elissa Auther for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Stoddard-Fleischman History of Rocky Mountain Area Artists project.

Dean Fleming has reviewed the transcript. Many of his corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ELISSA AUTHER: This is Elissa Auther talking to Dean Fleming at Libre, near Gardner, Colorado, in the Huerfano Valley. It's August 6, 2013.

Dean, when were you born, and where were you born?

DEAN FLEMING: I was born on October 1st, 1933, in Santa Monica, California. And the early years of my life were spent mostly at the beach, learning to surf and learning to play in the water.

My mother was a wonderful renaissance lady. She was in theater, and she'd been in many big plays. And she also played the classical violin and sang, and she was a poet, and she painted. So she did definitely contribute to my feeling that it was available. [Laughs.]

My father, on the other hand, was an engineer at Douglas Aircraft Company. And he became a significant factor in the company for many, many years and designed some very great airplanes. But he was an engineer, and he wasn't even vaguely subjective about anything. [Laughs.] My mother was almost a hundred percent subjective. So I had this nice balance.

And the other thing that was interesting was my father's family was all from England, from Devonshire. And even though they had moved to Hollywood, and they were part of the whole British scene in California, they didn't actually let go of any of the British—so, for example, my grandfather had this great radio, and he just listened to the BBC. He would not listen to any American broadcast whatsoever—they were just lying and they weren't very smart. So he had this whole British thing, which I found pretty interesting as a kid. We went to the cricket matches every Sunday, and we went to the soccer matches. I marched in the parades with my kilts, in a Scotch outfit with the bagpipes and—so that was kind of neat. I liked the exoticness of that in California. It had nothing to do with surfing.

Meanwhile, my mother's family, my grandmother had a boarding house in Venice. It was in the '30s, and she was probably the most spiritual person I ever met in my whole life. She was so neat, she had filled up her house with all these kind of refugees from the Dust Bowl and from the privations of the '30s. It was really a rough time. She often wouldn't collect rent from these various people because they didn't have it. She fed them, and that was her whole trip. That was a very different kind of down home Venice Beach scene in high contrast to the British in Beverly Hills. That was my upbringing.

My mother was classically trained. In our house we had many fine art books of Rembrandt and Rafael and Michelangelo. And I would look at these books as a child, but I didn't connect to them even a little bit. As I got more into thinking of devoting my life to painting, I thought this is not something I'm going to do. [Laughs.] I mean, okay it was already done in the sixteenth century, but it was not the ideal art to me.

And basically, what was most influential was the comic books. Every Sunday I'd avidly read the Sunday funnies and get all these different comic books. The first art that I did was very young, probably 3 or 4 years old—I can't remember now how old I was, but I can only remember doing that drawing from the time I was able to hold a pencil.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you copied—you tried to copy or you made your own?

DEAN FLEMING: No, no, no. I didn't copy anything ever in my entire life. [Laughs.] That didn't seem like—necessary either. If I wanted to be a commercial cartoonist, it would have been very wise to learn how to do that, but I just very little tampered with that idea.

And the cartooning was the joy of my life. It had to do with having a piece of paper, a piece of cardboard,

whatever it was, in front of me and putting something on there that would change the universe. The illusion of that was so significant that it stayed with me my whole life. And I think that that rapport with just myself, alone, and that piece of paper, whatever it was, and my crayons—that was a different world, a meditative world.

And the first studio that I ever had, I was probably 11 years old, but it was under the stairway in this old house that we had. Nobody wanted that space, so I cleaned it out, put a light bulb and a table and a chair, and that was it. Nobody could come in there. You couldn't get two people in there anyway, but they didn't come in. This was where I could have that relationship that was hugely vital to me.

ELISSA AUTHER: That's where you did your cartooning?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes. I had a comic strip that I did regularly. It had all these adventures. So as I got older, as I got into high school, the cartoons which I did for the school paper and the yearbook and for posters, for people who were running for things, and campaigns and so forth, I did all this cartooning. But the idea being a cartoonist, a commercial cartoonist, just never really came up. And meanwhile, neither did it come up that I should do something funny. [Laughs.] I just thought, "Fine art is over there, and this is what I'm doing over here, and I'm not even really doing that in the sense of that being my profession." I was kind of keeping it at a distance.

During the Second World War, my father was vice president of Douglas in Washington, D.C., and his job was mainly to sell planes to the allies and to the Air Force and the Army and the Navy. He was very busy that way. And I just want to put a plug in for Smithsonian because that was, by far, the most significant place that I could go as a child was the Smithsonian. And now, at this point in my life, I've been very involved in Native American activity, but my first real look at it was in the Smithsonian, where they had these dioramas where the figures were maybe two inches tall, and it would be this whole Indian village with the teepees and the little fire and the horses going in the river and it was so incredible for me as a 8-year-old kid, 9-year-old that liked looking at this. And I loved it. I loved it. I could spend hours and hours. So my mother said, "Oh, I'll be back in an hour." [Laughs.] I wouldn't have moved very far. [They laugh.]

ELISSA AUTHER: How many years did you live in Washington, D.C.?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, during the war, four years.

Actually, my father was not happy there. He was not a politician, and it was super-political job. All these people that were working for him were trying to get rid of him because they wanted the job. [Laughs.] He hadn't had that kind of thing; as an engineer, you'd call the best minds you've got, and you all work on the project together, and you throw out your ideas. And in the politics of Washington, that was the last thing you're going to do, telling anybody what you really were up to. [Laughs.] I saw my family was really falling apart there. It was very unfortunate.

But I just kept cartooning the whole time. I was very fascinated by comic books and Plastic Man. And with—all these kind of characters that were mainstream, like Superman and Batman seemed really dumb to me.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you liked Plastic Man.

DEAN FLEMING: I liked Plastic Man a lot. [Laughs.]

ELISSA AUTHER: Were there any others?

DEAN FLEMING: *The Spirit*. *The Spirit* was such great drawing. And I could just look at those for hours and hours. Even during the Second World War, some friends and I [… –DF] put all our comic books [together –DF], and we said it's a lending library, then all of the kids would come and take the books and bring them back […–DF].

ELISSA AUTHER: So it sounds like the dioramas that you were looking at, they had a similar immersive quality to them that you liked—to the comic books.

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, very much so. It was like yourself alone with this image, and you could explore it. Those things were put there for people to delve into. I remember spending hours and hours and hours. Each one of the dioramas was a different tribe. I saw how they lived, what they ate, it was so well-done. It was fabulous. Of course, I liked the dinosaurs, but I spent most of the time looking at these Indians and learning about them. That knowledge that I got then as a child was significant for the rest of my life. I have always been interested in Native American activity, and I already had this background. I knew about all these tribes and how they lived. And that's pretty neat sidelight.

But then an interesting thing about the Second World War—there I was in Washington, and I did a lot of posters for the school. They would be these Nazis with flames coming out of their mouths and really monstrous Nazis with their swastikas. And then I'd had the Japanese look really bad, with fangs and dive-bombing and—oh, I did

all this. [Laughs.] And as the years went on, I got very fond of Germans and Japanese. [Laughs.] Sorry. I feel so guilty. [Laughs.]

Likewise here—another sidelight—my mother's family were Carsons, and they were all related to Kit Carson. Most of them lived in Denver. When I was very young, like 5 or so, my mother took this Model A that we had, and we drove from L.A. to Denver. I remember Raton Pass as being formidable. It took us two days or something—and a boiling car—[laughs]—to get over Raton Pass.

But Kit Carson was very significant to my mother's family. My grandmother showed me an album of these Daguerreotypes. These were really early photographs. There was this one, she's saying that these were the Carsons. I don't know what they were. It wasn't Kit Carson, but there was some guy, and he's in his top hat and tuxedo, and the woman is in this bridal gown, and just really beautiful. And then all the other people there were in buckskins, and they had, like, these long rifles, and they were all hairy and everything. And I said, "wow, that's really neat." [Laughs.] I really liked that one.

But anyway, we got back to California just after the war in Europe [was] over. My father said, "I'm out of here, I can't do this." So we went to Ocean Park and he began working on the X-3, which was the fastest plane in the world there for a while. He worked on that for10 years and designed the X-3.

But at that time, Venice Beach, Santa Monica and Ocean Park had changed enormously because of the aircraft industry, because the Second World War, people came in from all over the place. And many people were employed that maybe would have had a harder time getting a job, but they could always get a job in aircraft. So there were hundreds of thousands of people who were involved in this way.

Then the thing kind of shut down, so there were massive numbers of unemployed Dust Bowl Okies and black people and Mexicans, and they were all kind of fighting each other. And boy, I hadn't seen that in Washington—it was kind of elegant, you know. And suddenly—[laughs]—here I was with the street and "the Tomato Gang," these guys in unbelievable outfits, and they're beating each other up. And I really didn't understand that. But I kept cartooning. And as I was saying the cartoons became more and more political as I became more conscious of it.

At one point in this junior high school, they let the Japanese out of the camps, out of Needles, and they came flooding into our school. The first thing is—[laughs]—they were all beautiful. And that was weird to me, because I painted all these fangs—there weren't any—[laughs]—fangs or slanted eyes. [Laughs.] "What happened to my Japanese?" But they were all beautiful. They were all brilliant. They had really good schooling. And they were all hugely athletic. And they were small; Japanese were not big people. They didn't play football. But they could do anything. And I was totally amazed.

So I made a bunch of Japanese friends to deal with this whole Black and Mexican and honkie battles that were going on. [Laughs.] And my main friends were Japanese and Jewish kids, Ocean Park had a lot of them. They were always delis along the boardwalk, and we'd get pickles. And oh, it was very wonderful. I really thought that was very exotic, all these Jewish people. And they were kind of disconnected from all this war zone that was going on, and the Japanese were also.

And I didn't know what to do with that. I really liked to play football, so I played football through high school and actually got a scholarship to go to college to play football, which turned out to be absurd.

I was working in a gas station on Pacific Coast Highway at Topanga Canyon. And there were this group called the "Nature Boys." [Laughs.] They lived in Topanga and had long hair and long beards, they were really lean guys that only ate health food and—

ELISSA AUTHER: What year was that?

DEAN FLEMING: In the '40s, probably '46, '47. They had this Jeep and war surplus. Maybe these guys had been in the Army or whatever. But they had dropped out solidly. [Laughs.] They were not related to anything. And they would come down with 10 guys in this little Jeep. And that's when gasoline was 11 cents a gallon, so they'd have a dollar between them all, they'd put together these nickels, and they'd give me this dollar—"fill 'er up," you know.

ELISSA AUTHER: So these were the first back-to-the-landers you ever met.

DEAN FLEMING: Yes. And I thought, this is thrilling. This is really neat.

And at the same time, on Sunset Boulevard, just off the coast highway was the Self-Realization shrine that was Swami Yogananda. And I went there because I thought that was an alternative to this kind of horrible—the war was horrible, and immediately after the war, everybody was trying to pretend that it was really sweet. So that

was the Eisenhower years. And everybody was in pink, and they were all polished up and with a lot of deodorant and—it was like, "this is bad news, man".

ELISSA AUTHER: So wait. Yogananda, he was the Self-Realization Fellowship. Right? OK.

DEAN FLEMING: Yes. Right.

[… –DF]

DEAN FLEMING: And that was where I did my first real paintings [… –DF].

ELISSA AUTHER: And how old were you then?

DEAN FLEMING: Probably 19. I'm jumping it back and forth. But anyway, before that, I was 17 when I went off to college—

ELISSA AUTHER: And what college was that?

DEAN FLEMING: I got a scholarship to play football at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo. And the only subjects that they taught [were animal husbandry and aeronautical engineering, which there were many disasters about –DF]—[laughs]—but the men-only was probably primary. It was just Quonset huts. It used to be a Marine Corps I-don't-know-what. It was so bad. [Laughs.] And they had animal husbandry, which was all the cowboys and ranchers and engineering. And I thought, "Well, I'll take engineering. Everybody in Santa Monica, they all work in aircraft, so I could certainly do what my father had done."

The only adults that I hung out with were [my father's –DF] friends, engineers from Douglas. And then of course, my mother had her friends who were in the theater. I saw those guys, and I went off to Cal Poly.

The Korean War started right at that time, 1950, '51. Everybody was being drafted. I think basically, nobody joined that army; they were all drafted. But anyway, I was aware of it. I always felt like I should be politically astute, so I really paid a lot of attention to what was going on. And so I was aware of Korea. But it didn't have much to do with me at 17 when I played football.

ELISSA AUTHER: So did you end up—you actually did play football there.

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, I went and played football. And I was taking engineering. And it was really stupid. It was not a good school at that time, and hopefully it's better. But it was just really stupid. [Laughs.] They had this parents day, so my dad came up, and he met the head of the department and so forth. And [my dad –DF] took me aside, he said, "I really hate to tell you that, but the head of the department is a guy that I fired for incompetence." [Laughs.] And I said, "oh, great, that'll be great for my grade." [Laughs.] But anyway, he said, "this is not a good school. I mean, if you're going to bother going to college [here –DF], don't—this is not it."

And what I did when I was there was, besides surfing all the time down in Avila Beach, I also hung out with the cowboys, because I really was fascinated by artificial inseminations and other things they were doing—[laughs]—and feeding all the pigs prunes. And, "Oh, that's pretty neat." Meanwhile, in the engineering department, they were rebuilding '30s airplanes, biplanes. It's, like, I don't know what this would equip you to do.

Anyway, at one point, the coach said, "I want all of you to join the ROTC because otherwise, you're going to get drafted because they're drafting—sending everybody to Korea." So I had this huge fight with him. And I hadn't really come to terms with it, but I realized during that process that I was really alien to any kind of military trip, and I was a pacifist. And maybe it came from the revelation with the Germans and the Japanese that I met; I'm not sure how it went down. But anyway, I told this guy I would never, ever be in any ROTC. When you graduate, you're a lieutenant. "Oh, my, save us from that. I am not going to do that." So I had this battle with him.

And there was another thing that—we were traveling constantly. We played [football –DF] in Hawaii. We played in the east, and we played in Texas. We were always wandering around. So I'd come back to these classes in trigonometry and calculus, and I had no idea what they were doing. So I'd go surfing. It was really a bad time in my life. And so I just stopped.

ELISSA AUTHER: So by 19 you were in Topanga Canyon.

DEAN FLEMING: Well, before that.

[… –DF]

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, it was in—17, 18, 19—no, 15, 16 and 17, I was in that gas station.

ELISSA AUTHER: OK.

DEAN FLEMING: It happened to be a Shell station, too. God help us.

ELISSA AUTHER: So after you quit—so now where were you when you walked out of college?

DEAN FLEMING: So then I was 19, and I just dropped out of football. And I said, "I can't do any of this I don't care about." One thing my father did that was very brilliant—the engineers had put together this questionnaire for student engineers, and you just answer it yes or no. It was a long, long questionnaire. And so he said, "Do this and see, you know, what your feelings are." So I did this test. [… –DF] Said, "You know, maybe an artist, maybe you live in the country." I said, "Sounds good." [Laughs.]

Anyway—and so I still was battling all the way through that first year of college about fine art and cartooning, and I'd made a few little attempts to get into cartooning on a remunerative level. But it just didn't happen. And I was battling. And the battle wasn't with anybody else; it was only with myself. I said, "I'm never going to do Rembrandts. I don't care what you say." [Laughs.] "This is not what I'm going to do in this lifetime. And therefore, I can't be a fine artist." I was not even conscious at that time of Rothko and Still and Motherwell and de Kooning and these great guys that I only learned about later.

But anyway, so not only did I get drafted, but the minute I got in there, I thought, "Oh, shit "—because I couldn't get out of it because I was in fantastic physical shape, 230 pounds, and I was huge with a thick neck, [was –DF] really fast. And I was in college, so I couldn't have been nuts either. [Laughs.] I was obviously passing my grades in classes. And so I didn't even try. And I didn't even know that you could step back from that. I had no idea, it was a time of major ignorance.

So I went into the Army. And the next thing I knew, I was in Korea. It was majorly disastrous because up 'til then it was kind of like in the movies or something like we're playing at being in the Army or something. But as we got closer to the line, we're going up on this train. The train got strafed by airplanes, and we jumped out and [hide –DF] in the ditch. And I went, "This isn't a movie, man. This is real. You better figure it out."

I've always had really bad eyes, so in the Army, I was in what they called a C profile, which meant to them in their little offices that if you were a C profile, you couldn't be in the infantry. So I thought, "Well, that's good, anyway. There's something good about it." And they said, "You could be in the mechanics school, or you can be in the cook school at Fort Ord in Monterey." And I thought, "I'm not going to be in a cook school." I really had an aversion to cooking. So I thought I'd be a mechanic. [Laughs.]

There was so much chaos, so much disorganized thing that, what I did was, in the morning, I'd go to the paint shop, and I'd get these different paints, and I'd go and paint the tanks with camouflage. And nobody ever, ever asked me, "Why did you—who sent you? Are you in charge?" I'd just be painting, mostly the dents and other place where it needed more paint. [Laughs.] So I didn't learn anything about mechanics either. I mean, it was such a disaster. I don't know what I thought. I was going to squirrel my way through the whole thing. And suddenly here I was on the front line.

They had the camp just five miles away from the front line. They were dispersing the people that were coming in. And so every day there was this bulletin board with all these names listed and the numbers, your MOS. So I thought, "Well, I'll look for "mechanic." So I didn't read all the names, there's too many names, and I just was reading, and they were all infantry. So that was going on for two, three days. [Laughs.] And this friend of mine from the mechanics, he said, "They made us all infantrymen." And I said, "I'm not going to do it."

The first minute on the rifle range I had my ears blown out. So I got tinnitus, and I couldn't hear anything fora couple of weeks. And then there was this screaming, howling which I've had my entire life. And I said, "I will never fire anything for these guys again." And they were sending me up to kill Chinese and North Koreans and—I'm not going to do it. I don't even know these guys. They're not my enemy. I felt very bad, not patriotic or not even close to anything that was happening around me.

The first thing I saw in the Army was that there was huge amounts of racism. I mean, it was staggering. And even people that I knew that seemed like decent people would have these terrible, terrible attitudes about each other. So I was hanging with the black guys, and I was hanging out with the Indians—[laughs]—just because I couldn't stand these cracker guys. I don't know, the whole of America was crackers, it seemed like.

Anyway, I went kind of nuts. I hid, and I spent like a month hiding out in Korea, in the caves. I wouldn't fight anybody. I destroyed my weapon. These are things that if they had been known at the time, they probably would have shot me, or at least put me off in prison somewhere. But I couldn't do it. I really physically couldn't do it. I had no gun. I wasn't going to shoot it at somebody. Couldn't hit a target anyway. My ears were ringing. I just wanted to hide. And that got really scary, in terms of "They're going to find me someday." And look, every day there were these lists, people going off. Friends of mine from the mechanic school, were killed within a week

of being there. They had no idea what was going on. Boom, got blown up.

So this went on and it was scary. I would come into the camp to eat, sometimes take a shower, and then I'd go back to my cave. That was no easy thing. There was guards and all that. So I had to sneak around at nighttime. The only other people in these caves were prostitutes—[laughs]—which was kind of interesting in a lot of ways. But they weren't real tempting, these girls. Oh my God, it was funky, funky. I don't know what kind of diseases, but I just was in a different cave. So never mind, they were not used to Americans doing anything that perverse or weird or anything. [Laughs.]

Finally, I went in one day, and took a shower. And I was coming out of the shower, and there was this little Korean guy. And he said, "Are you Dean Fleming?" And I thought, "Uh-oh, CIA." I don't what I thought. "I'm finished now." And I said, "Why do you need me?" He said, "Yo, the chaplain wants to see you." And I don't know how that guy got there or how he knew I was in there. I didn't sign up with anybody. Nobody knew where I was. So I never did understand that. So I said, well, that's a start, anyway. Keep me from being shot.

So I went to see this guy. And this is too perverse to believe, but he was a Christian Scientist. And my grandmother in Venice Beach was a Christian Scientist. So I had been raised on that. The Episcopal church of England with one family and the Christian Science, and they didn't even agree about anything. I was not real fond of Christianity. I thought, "These guys really messed up."

But he said, "Oh, Yes, you're the first Christian Scientist to come through here." And I said, "Well, I'm not a Christian Scientist." He said, "Yes, it says right here, your grandmother, your mother." I said, "I don't know what forms I must have filled out. I can't remember that." But I remember, it said, "religious preference," and I said "nothing." But anyway, he said, "No, no, you're a Christian Scientist." I said, "Well, I did go to Sunday school." [Laughs.] And he said, "That's it. That's it."

Anyway, the way Christian Science works, you can't be a chaplain in an Army right off. There aren't any priests or anything in Christian Science. There are what they call readers, and the guys can read Mary Baker Eddy, but that's about it. And they change regularly, so nobody would get hung up doing that one. And so this guy had been in theology school in Boston. And when he graduated, they made him a lieutenant, just the stuff I was afraid of. And they sent him to Korea.

And he says, "So lieutenant"—he said, "what is your job?" He said, "I got to be chaplain, because what else? I'm not going to kill anybody." [Laughs.] So we were these two buddies, not going to kill anybody. So then he said, "Well, I'll take care of everything. Don't worry"—I said, "I've been in this cave for a month." I was, like, kind of ragged. He said, "Don't worry about it. We got you covered."

I [started –DF] driving his jeep. We [drove –DF] up to the front line for him to give services, and bombs [were –DF] going off, they're blowing up the jeep. [Laughs.] Oh, my God. I said, "I might have been better off being in the infantry." [Laughs.] Oh, God. Anyway, this went on for a while with this guy.

And then he came to me, and he was stricken. He said, "I should have been out of the Army two months ago." And I said, "Well, what—you don't know when you're supposed to be out of the Army? What the hell?" He said, "Yes." He said, "I got to go home, my wife ran off with my best friend"—[laughs] [… –DF]. So he took off. I was without anything, with no job. I wasn't getting any income anyway, nothing on this.

ELISSA AUTHER: But they still hadn't found you out.

DEAN FLEMING: No. I mean, I'd been with this guy, I thought—well, he did the paperwork but he didn't do anything. So I'd been there like six—no, four, five months. It was a long time. And it was weird. It was very strange business because in a way, I had this job being the driver for this chaplain, except there wasn't one. [Laughs.] And I didn't have a Jeep, either. I would've driven that around. But it was very awkward.

And meanwhile, I was still drawing, drawing the whole time. That was the only safety, the only sanctity I had in my life was those times when I would just be alone and with just a piece of paper. And they weren't profound drawings. You know, at that time my favorite guy was Bill Mauldin, who did cartoons of Army guys in the Second World War, sad-sack kind of guys. [… –DF] They were really good drawings. I loved that guy. So they were kind of Bill Mauldin-looking items.

And then, [miraculous timing –DF], the truce was signed. And then it was very strange because I got shipped to base camp. They were pulling people off the front line. And nobody was at all concerned—[laughs]—about me ever. As far as I could tell, they didn't know where I'd gone or where'd I'd been. It was so weird.

And by that time I had a group of friends, and they were all drafted characters. There was a[n] entomologist that worked for the Smithsonian, and he sent all these Korean bugs to them. [… –DF] I was very pleased to know this guy. And he was a brilliant, brilliant guy. We'd walk in the country, and he'd, "Look at this, look at these things."

[Laughs.] And then he would ship them off.

Another one of my friends was University of Chicago. He was a political guy. And he would get this stack of newspapers from all over the world every week. And I would be reading up. Wanted to know what's happening in the world. I thought that was very thrilling. And another one of my friends was a poet, and he was brilliant. He was teaching at Muncie, Indiana. He was a literature major and a poet.

So all of these guys were highly educated, and I wasn't. I'd had my years surfing—[laughs]—and dodging everything. So I said, "Boy, when I get out of here, I'm going to go to school. I'm going to learn everything there is to learn." I was so into it.

ELISSA AUTHER: Where did you end up?

DEAN FLEMING: By the time I got out of there, I was a major Beatnik, and I really hated America. The last job I had there was being the cartoonist for the medical section in Seoul, 8th Army headquarters. And they wanted posters of preventive disease, like how to avoid different diseases. [Laughs.]

I would draw these guys that were really funky. These colonels, they'd say, "You can't have—we can't print something like that." They'd say, "Is that a true picture, or isn't?" And they knew it was. They knew I was telling the truth. And their posters were always these fake stenciled characters. So that was my last shot.

And I had many trips to Japan because there really wasn't enough work for me to do, and I was a pain in the ass to them. I'd be reading *Red Star Over China*. They'd say, "Why don't you just leave?" And I'd say, "I know what, I could go to Japan." So they sent me to Japan. They didn't send me; they let me go, have leave.

There I met some really wonderful people. It was a mystery to me how the Japanese could be so friendly to me and forgiving. [… –DF] They never did believe that I was in the Army, which was what I wanted. But they just didn't. I would borrow all kinds of ill-fitting civilian clothes and wear them. And so they thought, "This has got to be a merchant marine or something."

I met some calligraphers. I got really very much influenced by Japanese calligraphy, which I feel like I'm still very directly related to. There was a quality of the Japanese work from Hokusai, for example, this kind of cartoon, but it's also very beautiful. And I thought, "So it doesn't have to be like Rembrandt, right?" [Laughs.] It could be something else. If it has that content—Hokusai had that 55 views of Mount Fuji, and each one of them was this brilliant composition. And the figures were outlined cartoon happy-looking, goofy-looking characters, sometime—monks—sweeping, they'd be just goofy. And I thought, "I loved them." That was the first real influence. I thought, "As soon as I get out of the Army, I'm not going to have anything to do with America. [… –DF] I'm going to only do exactly what I want to do. I'm not going to listen anybody or talk myself into anything."

At that time, there was the G.I. Bill, which thank God for it. It's a very wonderful thing. But at that time the only countries—the only places you could go outside of the United States to get the G.I. Bill was the Sorbonne, in France, in Paris, and Mexico City College in Mexico City. And I think, "Well, I got to go to Mexico City. I'm not going to do this French thing." I knew enough history by that time to know how Paris had been the center of all Western art for a while, and now it's moving. And by that time it was already getting into New York, you know, and being—and it was changing. And I just thought—anyway, I loved Mexico. I'd been going to Mexico since I was a little kid. My father and I would go surfing down in Ensenada.

So I went to Mexico City and had many epiphanies there in terms of the art. It was so incredibly significant to me. But I was basically ignorant of the whole process of art in America or anywhere as far as that goes. I had certain knowledge but not really. And so the very first paintings that I did down there were kind of like social realism. I thought, "I got to move from my political cartoons into something that was awfully similar to political cartoon, on canvas with oil paint." [Laughs.] They were truly awful.

And here I was. I got 110 bucks a month G.I. Bill, and I only spent about 30 of it. I was living with these Aztecs in a little pension in the middle of the city. I spent all of my time with the poor Indians. That was just it. There was a class system in Mexico, and gringos were automatically in the upper class, and I had nothing to do with that. So my Aztec friends called me Trotsky– [laughs]—because this guy is not a tourist; got to be a Russian communist. That's good. That'll do it. So I'm wandering around in the ghettos as Trotsky and paintings these paintings. And I painted like crazy. I never even thought to slow down and do a better job or anything like that. [Laughs.] I was cranking them out.

So I had the G.I. Bill, and I was studying political science, mostly, because I wanted to find out what is motivating people to kill each other so much? I mean, it's just constant, all my life, people are killing each other, killing each other. What the hell? And they hate each other's races. Like, what is that? I had no background in that. I didn't understand that even a little bit.

And so anyway, I took an art course. And the guy who was the head of the department was a really handsome, beautiful kind of Superman-looking guy. [Laughs.] And he had been doing these pieces [… –DF] of wood with a lot of nails in them. There was a style in the '40s or '50s that people would do these nail things. And so I didn't think he qualified as the head of anything. But finally, he didn't say anything to me. He just—he wouldn't relate to me. But I kept going at the class, and I kept cranking out these paintings.

So finally, he said, "Well, everybody, bring in their work for the semester"—or quarters, they were quarters. So I brought in, like, 50 paintings. They were all truly bad. They were so bad. Oh, God help us. And I put them out. They didn't even have room to put them all. And he said, "You know, I look at this, and you don't know enough about art for me to talk to you." And I thought that's weird; I went to him because I didn't know enough about art, he was going to tell me about it. But he wouldn't even talk to me. So I immediately stopped taking art classes. That seemed like a real waste of time.

I went to Teotihuacan, and in there they were just excavating. Now it's like a big tourist place, but at the time I was there [the pyramids –DF] were covered with dirt. And they were digging in there, the anthropologists, archeologists. [… –DF] they were cleaning in the basements of these pyramids; there were incredible murals. And in them were cartoons, characters, the Aztecs, and they would talk with swirlies coming out of their mouths. [… –DF] I did paint like that for a while—[laughs] I didn't want to know what they were saying. I wanted to know what I was doing. So I'd have my own curlies. It was not copying them by any means.

After a while, I would just work, and it'd fill up my room. I mean, it was jammed with paintings. And I met this guy. He was an American guy, and he was actually from San Francisco. He'd gone to the Art Institute. And he was a founding member of the Six Gallery. So he said, "You got the G.I. Bill, you should go to the art school in San Francisco. You know, you're not studying here, and you're not getting anywhere." [Laughs.] He said, "You know, these paintings kind of suck." And so I thought about that a lot. And he said, "When you go up there, ask somebody where is the Six Gallery, and go over and see it. It's a really neat gallery." So I said, "Well, that's all wonderful."

And so I decided to do that. And it was hard for me because I hated the United States, but I thought, "Well, maybe—you know, maybe art." And then I kept thinking artists were these effete people that were really down—[laughs]—that could do anything they wanted to. They wore berets and had cigarette holders. I don't know, I had all these cartoon ideas of what artists were. And I said, "That's not who I'm going to be. I'm not going to do that in this lifetime. Sorry."

So I went all the way up to San Francisco. And that was a highlight of my life because the first day I found Chesnut Street, I went to the school. And when I came in there, there was a patio and a fountain. And there were these two guys sitting at the fountain, and they were playing bongo drums. [Laughs.] And they had—huaraches—and beards. And I said, "Wow, these look like my bros." [Laughs.]

So I went up, introduced myself. And they were all very friendly. And I said, "Well, John Ryan sent me." They said, "Oh, Yes, John. Now he's down there in Mexico. How's he doing?" And I said, "OK." So then they said, "Well"—then I said, "You know, he told me to go to the Six Gallery." And they said, "Oh, yes, yes. We're just on our way there. We're members, right?" And it was Leo Valledor and Peter Forakis.

ELISSA AUTHER: What was the first name?

DEAN FLEMING: Leo Valledor, and he was a Filipino guy. And Peter Forakis was a Greek from coal mines in Wyoming. And so these guys were ideal for my thinking [Laughs.] They were not just run-of-the-line Americans—or anything. [Laughs.]

So we went off to the Six Gallery. And there was a bunch of people there, and they were all cleaning up and getting ready for the next show. So I just grabbed a broom, and I was helping—cleaning and that was nice. And we finished, we got some beer, and we're sitting there. And I said, "This is really, really neat, you know. How do you become a member?" And they said, "Oh, you're already a member." That's weird. They haven't seen my paintings, my breaking chains or anything. [Laughs.] But nevertheless, they—it was all about temperament. That's what they taught me. That's all temperament. You don't have to paint anything or do anything. You just have the right attitude.

So—and the first show there was Fred Martin, who was also a teacher I think at Cal or something. [Laughs.] But there were these little paintings of penises, hundreds and hundreds, a little—perfect little vignettes of penises on the table, in the landscape, surfing and all this—[shit, man?], what am I worried about?—[laughs]—I'm too much of a cartoonist. Gee, man. So I had a good time in the school [… –DF].

One of the consistent things amongst my teachers there, there was a Bay Area Figurative School with Diebenkorn and David Park and Elmer Bischoff. And they were all very vehemently into the Bay Area figurative… whatever, you know? And I thought it looked awfully bourgeois to me. These guys are just painting people sitting

on their porch with the sunshine. You know, I thought that's not going to make it. The world is burning me up, so many problems.

And so anyway, at that time, probably '56, I started painting abstractly. And then I got vehement about it's got to be that. The first paintings I did would be like Aztec Gods, Huitzilopochtli. Then I just goofed with it until it was very abstract, so you couldn't see any kind of figure or scene in there. I showed at the Six Gallery. And we had regular poetry readings and music sessions there. [… –DF] There was virtually no art profession there. There were few galleries—I think there was one gallery downtown in a department store where they did velvet—with the matador or something—no, not going to do that.

And then there was the Six Gallery [… –DF]. Mainly—I would say, 99 percent run by students at the art school. And so I showed there, even—you know, nobody seemed to care whether these were good paintings. I thought they were good paintings. But anyway, I had my first show there in '57.

ELISSA AUTHER: So the first show was abstract work, or these –

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, it was these—

ELISSA AUTHER: OK.

DEAN FLEMING: Huitzilopochtli in motion, I remember that. [Laughs] These were motion because you couldn't really tell what was going on. But I was using similar colors that I had gotten from Tamayo and Diego Rivera and Siqueiros. Orozco was my favorite guy of all. They were all telling true stories about the '30s.

[Laughs]—So brought in all my—whatever paintings, I forget what I brought, to show Elmer Bischoff because he wanted to see what class I should be in. And he said, you know, we don't do this sort of thing here. [Laughs.] "I said, that's okay man. I'm not—I'm not, you know, dedicated to this chain breaking. He said, you know, that's social realism from the '30s. So I had to go and, you know, check out social realism.

But I didn't know—I was staggeringly innocent of anything. But right away, I knew I didn't want to do those Bay Area Figurative. Everybody was doing them and they were always with light coming in. I was like, "Holy shit, why would they all be copying each other?" It seems so perverse to me.

And in the abstract work, there was just whatever came out. And I didn't know what was going on, and I didn't know what it was, I didn't know when to stop. I didn't know when to start. There were just cigarette butts and elbows and, oh man, tar and house paint, you know, mashing all this stuff together.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you study the abstract expressionist while you were there?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, there was a major influence from New York, but it was weird because it was Art News and they'd had these reviews in the back of the book. And they'd have a little photograph like that of a black and white—de Kooning, honest to God. And we'd all be like, "Wow, what is it? You know…"—because we weren't seeing it.

It was funny. It was very obscure in the mid-'50s, unbelievable. And one of my teachers was Frank Lobdell who was, I think, a really brilliant abstract painter, but I would hesitate to call him an abstract expressionist because he was also really into cartooning, but not funny. These cartoons, I mean, they'd be outlines around some kind of shape, but they were really heavy-duty.

I thought the real beatniks were all these guys that had been in the Second World War and they came out and they hated everything. The atom bomb had changed their lives and they were not going to put up with shit, you know? So they were totally my own heart. And at that time, there was—a lot of the students were ex-Army or whatever from the Korean War, my age.

And so there was a lot of G.I. Bill and there was a lot of kind of slightly more mature, you know what I mean? There were kids coming in there, but mainly we were guys that had already put a couple years into life and death before we ever got to that place. That was a powerful quality to it. I had friends of all different kinds there. I was always interested in that. There were the Filipino guys were down in the ghetto here, some Chinese guys were my friends, the Japanese—they had Japantown. Everybody was kind of separate.

And so these were my friends. I just really was not comfortable with whitey America, even though I was this blonde surfer guy. I think I was trying very hard to not be this blonde surfer guy. When I started painting seriously, I just left Malibu. I left my board, I left—put it all aside. I said, Van Gogh wouldn't have been caught dead surfing. There's got to be something very much more meaningful.

So basically from that time on I lived in the ghettos, Mexico City, San Francisco. I lived in total skid row scene down there, and New York the same. I mean, it was cheap. For one thing it's an economic thing. But also it was

kind of racial and kind of like I wasn't interested in rich people at all. And so then—

ELISSA AUTHER: When did you graduate from the Art Institute?

DEAN FLEMING: I got a BFA in '58 and then I got an MFA in '59. And this was the very interesting thing: they didn't have a graduate program at the art school until '59. And I was only going to school because I got the G.I. Bill, I didn't have to have a job and I could live off it. Then I found out that there was a California G.I. Bill for one year. And so when they started this master's thing I said, "Hey, I got to do that."

And that was way, way the best. That was absolutely the best because they wanted everybody to go out into their studio. And I'd had a studio for years by then, down on Mission Street. And so the idea of only seeing other artists that were my teachers, they were other artists and they would come to the loft and look at the paintings. And it wasn't different than real life No more school trip. And so that was really wonderful.

Because they'd never done it before, these guys that were teaching there, we all kind of made it up together. We made some movies and did the movie of the *Myth of Sisyphus*, you knowhow you push this boulder and have it roll over you on Mount Tamalpais– we did the actual event. [Laughs.] Anyway, it was pretty interesting time.

But one thing they all had in common—they were all fighting each other—these figuratives and abstract expression—but all of them in San Francisco said New York is evil and it's a center and you're going to sell out and you'll be nowhere. [… –DF] These other buddies of theirs [in New York –DF] they thought, oh, were just terrible. And I thought, boy that sounds really neat. [Laughs.] Off to New York.

ELISSA AUTHER: So there's rivalry, jealousy, fear—

DEAN FLEMING: Fear, you know, like they weren't going to be professional. So they were all teachers. And at that time, the only thing you could do that was relative to your art was to teach. And I did teach there. I really had a good time teaching there because I was just young. I was almost the same age as my students.

ELISSA AUTHER: These were undergraduates? Or you worked with graduate students?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, I worked with graduates and I worked with the undergraduate—all different. But they were painting classes and we just would do things. I'd just yell them and then if they had a complaint about the faculty or something I was with them, you know what I mean? I was also on the wrong side of whatever the politics were going to be. The obvious thing would have been to act like a faculty, but I couldn't do it.

So I was—you know, I'd come in there with my paint clothes and they said, well, that's not, you know. Get out of here. What do you know about painting?

ELISSA AUTHER: [Laughs.] Were your paintings well-received by the faculty?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes. By that time I was really a hot shot. I showed regularly in San Francisco.

ELISSA AUTHER: At the Six Gallery? Or by that time had other galleries—

DEAN FLEMING: The Six Gallery and then the Batman Gallery got very famous. And as a group, we showed work in the Cellar Jazz Club. And that was just an anecdote but it was in the basement and it was painted matte black and there were only a couple of light bulbs in the thing. And then we put these back paintings in there which would kind of disappear. And then you look around, everybody's listening to jazz, they all had shades on. [Laughs.]

ELISSA AUTHER: So they couldn't see anything, huh?

DEAN FLEMING: [Laughs.] Yes. So I'd take my paintings home after a month or so and I'd—they'd be an inch thick in just scuz, smoke and puke and everything. I'd be scrubbing it with a brush. And I bartended for a while in The Place, which was on upper Grant Avenue, which was the poetry bar, and that was really fun. And they had the poetry readings there every week. And there'd be all these poets. I liked that. And I put my paintings in that place. And I had them in a laundromat that I really liked, that—

[END OF TRACK.]

DEAN FLEMING: [In progress]—I liked the people. I was also showing at the San Francisco Museum, the Oakland museum and I'd get prizes—

MS. ARTHER: At SFMOMA?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes and Richmond and Oakland and I don't know a couple of these and that I was just a hot shot

guy doing sculpture, I kept getting sculpture prizes. But the paintings were decent, kind of abstract expressionist, but they really weren't very much like anybody else's.

MS. ARTHER: What was different about them?

DEAN FLEMING: I think de Kooning was constantly trying to find form and was basically a figurative painter. So he was trying to find that figure in there. I was not. If it began to look too much like a landscape, I'd change it. If a figure showed up, I'd change it. These things happen. I'll tell you, because I've spent a life like that. Somewhere in there early on I got this idea that, just do one painting at a time and have it related to what you're doing so that you're making a stream so you can explore it enough and a thousand different ways. It wasn't like I was making these huge jumps. But there was a pretty big jump when I moved to New York.

MS. ARTHER: Before we get to New York, just out of curiosity, did you see Allen Ginsberg at the Six Gallery preform *Howl*?

DEAN FLEMING: Yeah. And uh, that's all I knew. I knew Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, I kind of knew Kerouac, but he was such a terrible drunk. He was hard to get close to. I think that people who had known him at Columbia, kind of could reach him but he was pretty out there. But those guys had a huge influence. They were all New Yorkers landed in San Francisco. Sometimes that would happen with the artists, a bunch of artist would come from New York and they would just turn it all around, they would just say "Oh what a hick town!" No, no! San Francisco is a big city!

MS. ARTHER: Did any of those artists stand out to you as

DEAN FLEMING: The people I studied?

MS. ARTHER: What were they influential, like the ones who visited from New York City?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, not so much directly, no. But for example Herman Cherry came and David Slivka and these guys were kind of like maybe second string abstract expressionists. And they were teaching at Cal. Oh here if comes. [Laughs]. They were just observing all kind of things and they said about my painting they said it looks like biological specimens. All my paintings were different, for one thing. Some of them looked like biological specimens, some didn't. But anyway, one of my friends at that time was Radar Wenneslan who was a Norwegian doctor in North Beach and he used to take care of all these different artists and take paintings for helping them out physically. So he did that for me, and then I went to New York. When I came back, this is just a little aside, but when I came back there to see him, he was gone. And the paintings were all gone. And he had about 20 of my big paintings. You know, 8-foot things, I don't know what, and he took them all down to Oslo. And now Oslo, Norway, has the biggest collection of San Francisco Beatnik art from the 50's [laughs] in the world! Oslo! Okay! [They laugh.] Jay Defeo, famous for the work they did at that time. They're all over there in Oslo. But anyway.

MS. ARTHER: When did you leave for New York?

DEAN FLEMING: '61. I had a show at the Batman and then I thought I could just keep- I got offered a teaching job at San Francisco State and I taught for a couple of years at the art school. But they have a policy which I think was good actually, which is to keep people moving, no one gets to stay there for more than five years. And Bichoff and Lobdell were running the thing. They really weren't totally happy with me because I wasn't the disciple of either one of them. They kind of felt like I was turning my students against them. [Laughs.] I was kind of like, always trying to revolute, I was never able to just leave it alone. And be professional.

But the Batman gallery, the reason I thought of that cellar bar was because the Batman Gallery, Bruce Conner had painted it matte black. And I have these black paintings. So it kind of looked like they're all Beatniks. So there are probably classic Beatnik paintings because that time in my loft was actually in Haight Ashbury. But there was nobody around at that time, nobody, 1961-1960. And when I came back there in 1966, it was Haight Ashbury and it was like 20 million people all over the place. Like wow I could have stuck around it wouldn't have been so lonely. [Laughs.]

So I went to New York in '59.

[END OF TRACK.]

DEAN FLEMING: [In progress]—throw in another anecdote.

ELISSA AUTHER: OK.

DEAN FLEMING: So here I was in Korea, hating it and everything. I had this really good girlfriend through high school, and she was a journalism student at Santa Barbara and she wrote this long story. She said, "This is not a true story. Just read it." It was about this girl who runs off with this guy who's studying philosophy and lives in a tree house in Santa Barbara—[laughs]—and he reads her poetry every night. I thought, oh my god, I can't compete with that one. I knew it was a true story. So I got home and I went to see her, and she was with this guy, and it was Mark di Suvero. This was like 1954.

ELISSA AUTHER: Wait. Where did you meet this girl?

DEAN FLEMING: In high school.

ELISSA AUTHER: In high school, OK.

DEAN FLEMING: Santa Monica High School.

ELISSA AUTHER: OK.

DEAN FLEMING: So I'd been with her for, like, you know, four years sort of. I mean, the two years in Korea didn't even count. I got in a huge fight with this guy. And he was studying philosophy and I was studying political science. So we weren't artists at that moment. We weren't copping to it. But we fought—oh, my god. And he's a brilliant character so it was a hard fight. And this is going on and the girl is there, and I thought, god, if it weren't for this girl I probably would really like this guy. [Laughs.] That's what—but I couldn't like him; I could only hate him. And I saw her and him; that was it, so I went to Mexico and didn't look back.

And then when I got to the art school, after I was there just really briefly—there was a studio in the school where Manuel Neri, the sculptor and painter, was—and also Joan Brown—had this place, and Peter Forakis. And Peter said, "You can have some space in the studio." So I went in there. So one day I was painting away and Manuel was painting, and in the door comes Mark Di Suvero.

I said, "Manuel, do you know this guy? If you let him in here he's going to take your girlfriend." And he said, "Oh, no, that's my buddy Mark. He's studying sculpture with Pete Voulkos over at Cal." And here I was painting. And he said, "What are you doing here?" "I'm painting." "You're supposed to be studying political science. We need revolutionaries in political science." I said, "We need revolution—we need philosophers; what are you doing?" So that was kind of curious. So then—he became a good friend. And then he moved to New York and he had this terrible accident there.

And so when I got to New York in '59—I was staying down on Second Avenue and Sixth Street, the Ukrainian ghetto—that was mind-blowing. I'd never seen anything like that in my life, New York City. And they'd have these huge buildings full of poor people spilling out on the street. And Chuck Ginnever was one of my buddies, and so Chuck and Peter took me down to see Mark. And Mark was pretty mangled up at that time. But he was down on Front Street, and he had figured out how to make stuff with pulleys and hoists and things because he was in a wheelchair. He was pretty paralyzed, but his arms were really strong. He could do all this stuff. He was making pretty interesting work at that time.

And there was a guy—there was a neighbor in the building next door, and he said, "Yes, you can come over here. You want a loft? Come over here." He said, "You've got to come to New York." So I went back because I was teaching and I liked it. I wanted to teach in San Francisco at that time. It was very significant. But as soon as that job was over I said, "I'm going to New York for good." So I went in '61, and I got the loft next door to Mark in the fish market.

And that was a very far-out time and the fish market was really—they'd come in at 3:00 in the morning with these boatloads of fish. And they often brought them in in wooden crates. And after the fish had been in them you couldn't reuse them. They were really funky. So they'd stack them up against the building and light it on fire. And then the flames—I was on the third floor and these flames are coming—[laughs]. I thought, hey, people are here. But it was illegal to be there so you couldn't really make too much of the fact that this guy had—so there was this rotting fish and these seagulls diving and all these old buildings that had steel shutters. I remember the wind would blow and the shutters would slam. I thought, this is like Medieval Europe, man. This is really weird. My god. [Laughs.]

And I had this girlfriend. She was okay, a painter and everything, but I said, "You know, I don't really want to live with you." So she said, "Okay." So she got a room downstairs at this building. And she went in there to just paint it white and start painting paintings, you know? But there was this huge telephone cable—it was this big around—and they came from the airshaft up and they through the window and then they kind of draped through the room and out the transom into this office, right?

So this was the entire crab fleet of the Atlantic, plus it was the entire mafia. Anyway, she wasn't concerned about

any of that. She cut the cable off and threw it out the window. [Laughs.] And she's painting away. So these guys come storming—they were bad-ass mafia dudes. They came in; they're going to kill her. But she's just, I want to paint it white, you know? Oh, man. So they came to me, they said, "You've got to get out of here right now."

And the landlord, he said, "We've got a bunch of buildings. You can have any building you want. Just leave." It was 35 bucks a month, right? So I got on my bicycle. I only had a bicycle then. I wandered around looking at these buildings, found this really neat place down in the produce market, which was much, much bigger and finer and altogether better than what I had in the fish market next to Mark. They tore that whole neighborhood down to make the World Trade Center—bad karma. [Laughs.]

So I was down there. And it was similar because at 3:00 in the morning all the trucks would come in with these vegetables. Then you could go down in the street and you could get as many vegetables as you wanted. And then all these weird insects would fly through the window and hang out in my loft. It was so far up. Then there were all these kind of Skid Row guys, which I was used to by that time, that were unloading all these trucks. And then the trucks would leave and there would just be these guys. I would go down and drink port with them around their little 55-gallon drum. I thought, really, the difference between me and them is 35 bucks a month. I've got it and I'm going to continue having it, because that looked bad out there. [Laughs.]

ELISSA AUTHER: Were there any other artists in the produce area, or you—

DEAN FLEMING: Well, yes. It was all illegal at that time to be anywhere. You could rent a place and have it for a loft, but at nighttime everybody downtown left. There was Wall Street, there was all that, but they all went somewhere else. So you'd walk around at night totally dark, and then there would be a light bulb and it's an artist up there on the fifth floor? [Laughs.] Walk another block, there would be another little light bulb somewhere and you'd know somebody is in there working away.

So I had this whole building of five floors that were empty, 35 bucks a month. And,so friends came from—first Leo Valledor came with his wife, and I said, "Come on in there, 35 bucks." So he moved in. And then Frosty Myers and Tamara came from the art school, and they were like a couple years behind me. Then I was a—you know how art schools are. I was really heroic to everybody at that point. [Laughs.] That's the thing that grabbed them. You know, it's really silly. But anyway, he came. He had this adulation for me. I said, "Yes, yes, come down."

So we filled it up. On the top floor there had been a fire so the roof was burned and it was all screwed up, and the landlord was never going to fix anything. So it got really popular, that place. That building got really popular and people were coming by pretty often. And it was a deal where you put your keys in a sock and throw it out the window and then they could open the door. And there was no lights in the hallway. It was a really funky and desperate sort of place, but people kept coming all the time.

And then we were playing music together, which we'd started at Mark's. We were just playing a keyboard—not a keyboard but a soundboard from a piano, banging on it and banging on a sculpture. And so we kind of evolved that. And I went out and got a saxophone, because I played the saxophone when I was a kid. And then other people went out and got trumpets and a sax and a bass and drum set. Wow, we were really going. But nobody wanted to have that whole setup in their loft, so I said, "Well, let's put it upstairs."

So we cleaned up this thing. And then one of our buddies there that was a neighbor of Mark's was Robert Grosvenor, who was an heir to the Grosvenor—the National Geographic, you know? Anyway, he had—his training had been with nautical engineering, and so the first sculpture that he made was awfully similar. But what he did is he made this fabulous stainless steel kind of scoop that was under the holes in the roof, and then made this trough and it went out of the window, so when it rained—[laughs]—and then after that he started doing a lot of pieces like that. [Laughs.] I think that really turned him on, that drain.

But we put our work up there and then we started bringing in all kinds of other friends. And as it turned out, and as it worked for Park Place, we really had our hand on that pulse, because we brought in probably a hundred artists that became quite successful eventually, you know, that nobody was showing and that we knew were really good and really significant. And so we'd have these shows of maybe 30 people or so upstairs.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did the building have a name by that point, like when you had—

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, we called it Park Place Gallery because it was on Park Place. It was 79 Park Place was the actual address. And so we just said, "Well, this is the Park Place Gallery," because we'd had shows at Mark's place on Front Street and at Peter's place up in the meat market, and this was the Park Place one.

And so it's so perverse about New York City—I just have to love it—but all these different collectors and critics and historians and everything thought we were having fun and not letting them be part of it, because it was such a trip to see the show and you'd have to go up five floors in the dark with the rats jumping, shit happening.

Every once in a while we'd put up a light bulb but not many. [Laughs.] And then these shows were brilliant. They were really significant, really wonderful artists. And there were many, many of them.

ELISSA AUTHER: Can you remember the year of the first show?

DEAN FLEMING: '62.

So that was going on, but meanwhile it was intense poverty. Chuck had a truck and we took turns driving the truck and delivering art from studios to museums or galleries, whatever. And that was significant to have that truck because we could do everything. After work, if you needed a couch or desk or something, just go and find it and toss it in the truck, take it out. So the truck was handy in many different ways, plus it was an income. But we took turns, so each of us worked like two days a week, so it wasn't really enough to get luxurious or have money to buy anything and you'd just barely pay the rent, 35 bucks.

So that was going on. And meanwhile civil rights was happening. I got together with Patsy Krebs, who is a really, I think, brilliant painter to this very day. She and I took this trip down to—in the South to plug into the civil rights movement, and that was far out. That was like '63, the summer of '63.

When I got back from that, there was this friend from San Francisco that had got a teaching job at Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, and he said, "There's an opening and you could—you should have it. You should get out of here and get some money," because he'd known me a long time and I never did have a penny. I was always so incredibly broke. But I just wanted to paint; I didn't really want to get a job or anything. And driving a truck was curious. I met many, many famous artists with that job and I saw many of the classic galleries and museums and all that, and I was able to find my own head, what I wanted to do, that or nothing, or what. It was really very significant.

ELISSA AUTHER: Before we get ahead of ourselves, were you still painting in an abstract style?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, and I went through lots of changes in New York at that time. And I think that the influence I had mostly at that time was Al Held, who was one of the guys that they said had gone to New York and sold out, but I thought his paintings were wonderful. He was painting with pigment and RHOPLEX, making his own paint, because his paints were really thick. I wasn't interested in that, but anyway he unloaded massive amounts of pigment and RHOPLEX on me when I was at Park Place and so I started really using that a lot.

ELISSA AUTHER: So it wasn't necessarily the way he used paint, but there was something else about this style that intrigued you?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, it was not abstract expressionism, and my problem with that was that I could know how to be expressionistic but I was still struggling with the significance of it, like beyond the sheer dance and glory of the paint and color. I didn't know what it really was or what I was doing in it or what was happening there. And it's not that Al had suddenly a huge amount of subject matter, but he was not an abstract expressionist, and he was doing these huge, huge paintings, very thick paint.

And, you know, I'm going to have to close the door here.

ELISSA AUTHER: OK. I'm going to stop this for a second.

[Audio Break.]

ELISSA AUTHER: So we were talking about Al Held, what exactly it was about his painting that intrigued you in relation to—or in opposition to abstract expressionism.

DEAN FLEMING: It was actually a pretty interesting time in New York at that time because it was transitioning away from de Kooning and Kline and Rothko and these guys, and Al sort of indicated a possible change. I'd never actually ever even found it interesting to copy another artist or even get close to their style, but what does happen when you paint a lot is that you're going to sometimes be parallel with a whole variety of different characters over a lifetime. And I don't think I was actually very parallel to Al Held or anything. I'm just trying to answer your question with some kind of intelligence.

But what happened in my own painting was that it got less free and kind of more "hard-edge", what they called "hard-edge." I was also really fascinated by the fourth dimension and P.D. Ouspensky and some of these characters that had influence. The Cubists were trying to find a different space and I felt like Al was doing that. He'd had the thickness of the paintings was distracting to me, but the great sweeps and great arcs and defiant kind of spaces were really interesting to me.

That's what my own painting was going in that direction. These were not even vaguely Cubist but some of the shapes were kind of like that. They were many different colors and many different shapes, and sometimes the

color would appear to be diving underneath something but then it would be over something over here. And so it was this complex of space, and that to me had a four-dimensional content.

At that same time this guy came up from Carnegie Tech and saw the work and said, "OK, I want you to teach painting at Carnegie Tech." So I packed it up with Patsy and we went to Pittsburgh. I still had this kind of ghetto, funky thing, and it still was directly related to economics but there was another quality to it. At Carnegie Tech there were many different schools there and there was an area where the professors lived and had their trees or whatever, and there were all these different class system kind of things.

So I went straight to the ghetto, as always. [Laughs.] I went to the south side and I lived in this ghetto scene with Yugoslavian steel workers across the street—on East Carson Street across from this big steel mill, J&L Steel. It was very foreign because it got cold in Pittsburgh, and the snow and ice would build up and then these red-hot ingots would go by on the rails and would melt everything. [Laughs.] And "whoosh," it would go by, and then the ice would build up again. It was a pretty interesting area.

It was interesting to me at Carnegie Tech. The design department and the architect department were way more significant than the art department, which was pretty small and pretty pathetic. And the guy, the new director, wanted me to teach there, and my buddy to teach there, because he really wanted to resurrect it and have it be significant.

The architecture department was all these German guys from the Ulm school in Germany, which was actually the offspring of the Bauhaus, and they were pretty interesting characters to me. The design department were some guys from Yale that had been students of Joseph Albers, who was also a Bauhaus-type guy. So here was this whole other way of looking at the fourth dimension and the grids and geometry. I brought out all these tools that I'd used when I went to Cal Poly, all these engineering, drafting—these straight edges and these that weren't—[laughs]—really fun. I thought, wow I'm getting old now—straight.

So I went through lots of changes there. It didn't take long to realize that I didn't want to stay there. They wanted me to stay and I just really didn't want to be a teacher. It's so typical; the administration was just at war all the time, and the faculty were these guys that had been teaching painting for 30 years that hadn't painted for 30 years either, and the new policy with the new director was that everybody that was teaching there would have a show. So I got there, and a couple other people that were just starting, and we had this big show. And it was really fun and it was—

ELISSA AUTHER: What year was that?

DEAN FLEMING: '63. And so that was good. Then the next month one of the instructors came up to me, one of the professors—I don't know what he was—he said, "You know, I haven't quite gotten my show ready yet. Do you have any other work?" And I said, "Oh, Yes." [Laughs.] I showed him what I did that month.

So then the following month [another –DF] guy said, "You seem to have a lot of stuff. Do you mind taking my month?" So I was showing the whole year there. It was ridiculous. I got to know these guys. They were not good people. They were teaching the students stuff that really wasn't useful or meaningful or even artistic. I was like, "who are they and how do they have the audacity to do that?" I said, "Well, they all have tenure and they're not going anywhere." It was depressing to me.

So it was the same damn thing I'd done in art school. I was hanging out with the students thinking, "how can we undermine this all?" [Laughs.] And one of my students, one of my very best students, was Linda. She was like 17, and she was just really bright and really knew what—I said, "We're going to paint the fourth dimension." The kids just looked at me like I was a complete madman, except for Linda. And she, whatever I'd say, "Let's do it like this," she'd do a really good example. She was really good.

Then it got very cold in Pittsburgh—I remember that—and we thought we should take the money that I saved, which was 90 percent of what I was getting, and go somewhere warm. [Laughs.] At that time Patsy was reading *The Alexandria Quartet*. She said, "Let's go to Alexandria." That's really not real hip. But anyway, we got on a Yugoslavian freighter, and it turns out that's a typical beatnik thing to do but I didn't know it at the time. I don't know; we just moved through these things.

We got on this Yugoslavian freighter and went to Tangier, and then hitchhiked from Tangier to Cairo. It took three months out in the Sahara Desert in the middle of the summer. I'm going to have a show in Austin at the Blanton Museum this February, of the paintings that I did in the Sahara Desert, which they didn't know themselves that they would ever be seen by anyone– but anyway, very interesting; lots of adventures there.

I had not only had this feeling that each painting should blend to the next but that I should paint every day no matter what, no matter where. When we were in the cities, like in Tangier, we'd get a rooftop and then I could paint up on a rooftop because I surely couldn't paint down in the ghetto streets of Casbah with all the stuff going

on. So I'd be up there where people couldn't even see me and I'd be doing this thing.

So I was doing some really heavy-duty kind of grid/color phenomena at Carnegie Tech, and when I got to North Africa I saw something very major about the Muslim faith, that they were not allowed to paint or draw figures or anything representational. So this means that they—the huge energy and creativity of these characters was put into the geometry. I was seeing better geometry on the bathroom floor than what I was painting. [Laughs.] I said, "There's got to be something different about what I'm doing besides these bathrooms and the ceilings." There was tile work everywhere, and these were all grids and some of them were extremely 4-D as far as I was concerned, just turning the space inside out. So I thought, I've got to do something other than that.

And it was an interesting time to spend months with Bedouin out in tents and everything. Each day at the end of the day, before the sun went down, I would do a little painting in my little sketchbooks, and I also wrote a lot at that time. What it was, was the same feeling that I had as a little kid, like sudden meditation. Whatever the world was, whatever kind of stuff I'd been through, I'd have this time of just me and this blank piece of paper. There was a joy, and it was definitely a way of reading the experiences that I was having. I would apply them to this situation. It wasn't a picture of people that I'd met or anything; it was just about those grids and about the color and sometimes taking the color right off to the landscapes, the moonrise or something. I mean, it was pretty phenomenal.

So we got to Alexandria, and of course it had nothing to do with The Alexandria Quartet. At least the part that we did, that's not happening. [Laughs.] We were down in the ghetto, as always. I was kind of milking the money scene, so we were not spending money much, just a little falafel or something on the street. And so at that time I said, "What I want to do is go to India." I wanted to be spiritual in India. That was my thought, you know. I was really off the wall. So we said, okay. [… –DF]

Cairo is really an amazing city. Cairo was fantastic. But after three months in the desert we were not ready to be in the most crazy city I'd ever seen in my life, all the shit happening. Oh, my god. So we moved to Port Said. There were these freighters going through the Suez Canal. We thought, we'll just hop on a freighter, go to Bombay, you know?

So the first freighter comes along, some Polish shit, and they said, no, they were going down to Mozambique. And I said, "I really don't want to do that. I want to go to India." So we were there, and then boat after boat—finally one of the shipping guys that I talked to said, "You know, you're not going to get any boats to India at this time of year because it's the monsoon season and they don't cross the Indian Ocean. They're going to be going down the coast of Africa if you want to do that one." And I said, "No, no, no, no."

Meanwhile I'd done enough of these little paintings that there were a couple that I really wanted to do large, because usually I'm always painting like 6- or 8-foot paintings. Little things were hard for me. I didn't have a studio, so painting on my lap was all very charming but I really wanted to do them larger. And so we really stewed about it and I said, "Well, let's go to Greece, because that's right over there."

I had some really funny times in Egypt. I got a Nasser bicycle, was riding all over the place, but Egypt was rough. Actually North Africa was rough. Like we'd be followed around by hordes of kids and then the men would be really affectionate with me but they didn't know what to do with Patsy. And their women were stashed. She said, "Oh, I'd like to go in the kitchen and see how they're cooking." "No, no, you can't do"—you know? So she was really isolated. I said, "We've got to go somewhere where you can at least be a woman." Cairo it was possible. People weren't all, you know, one-eyes.

On the way across—like in Algeria I got together with these guys that were called the Wolves of Oran and they had fought the French for years and finally were liberated. These were really strong, young, brilliant guys that studied at Oxford or whatever, but there were no women. I said, "How are you going to have a revolution if you've only got half the people?" And that was something they couldn't answer, something Muslims should—they weren't religious people. These were revolutionaries and their women were stashed.

My best buddy in that whole thing, his wife was like 14. He'd just gone out to the Bedouins and grabbed this little girl to have his children. So there's not a big genetic understanding—[laughs]—you know, because she was totally illiterate and she was not going to learn anything from this guy. She was going to be scrubbing the kids and making food. I mean, Patsy took exception to this. Anyway, okay, we're going to go to Greece.

We had this really phenomenal experience. There was this freighter and it was funky. There were huge storms in the Mediterranean. All of these people on that thing, they were all puking and everything was really rough. [They laugh.] I remember they served this spinach in a bowl of olive oil. So the spinach was kind of going like that, and it looked bad, kind of blackish, this oil. And everybody is puking. I felt good. I love to be on the sea. I've always been a sailor all my life so I loved it.

And I'd be downing this grease with the spinach. I was out on the deck and it was a little bit calmer, where we're

getting closer to Greece, and I met this guy who was from Zimbabwe, which was Southern Rhodesia, actually. He was a Greek but he was born and raised in Southern Rhodesia so he didn't know anything about Greece, but he said, "I'm coming home. I'm coming to see my native land." [… –DF] It was just the two of us, looking out. We could see Crete coming up and there was Minotaurs dancing around. It was fantastic.

One of the sailors came over. He couldn't speak English; he spoke only Greek. He was just a regular-looking sailor. And he said, "Can I help you guys?" And this one guy said—well in Greek he could speak to him. He said, "I'm coming home to my homeland." And he told him what island his family was from. The guy said, "Yes, Yes, and what about you?" And he said, "Oh, this guy—this American guy is an artist." And the guy brightened up. He said, "Oh, yes, I'm a painter too."

So I explained to him that what I wanted was the cheapest, most remote ghetto situation. It's not Athens and it's not Piraeus, none of that. I just want to paint and I want to have a beautiful place. He said, "You should go to Lesbos." And Lesbos was as far away from Athens as you could get on those islands. It was way out there. It was like five miles off the Turkish coast. He was an amazing character. He said, "Okay, here's"—and he drew this thing. He said, "Here's where we'll come in, and then you get on the dock and you walk down here like a couple of blocks, and then there's this ferry boat that will take you over to Lesbos. You don't even have to see Piraeus or any of it."

That was really neat. We did that. We got on the boat and went over to Mytilene. We got off at the dock there and there was—Greek guys were unloading this freighter, and this guy came over and he starts speaking English only from Korea and the Army. Honest to god, he didn't know any English except these swear words and weird combinations, Pidgin, that Americans said with Koreans and Greeks and Turks and whoever it was. So that's all he's speaking, and I said, "Why are you finding me? I was in Korea." He said, "Oh, yes, 45th Infantry. Yes, right." [Laughs.] So here was my Korean buddy, and he was the cook in the Greek army. I mean, it was unbelievable. He said, "Just come home with me." We went to this ghetto scene and it was really poor. And he kept us there, and then I said, "I'm going to find a studio. A really nice, big, open room."

So we started looking around and finally we found this place in Papados which was probably a couple hours anyway from Myteline on a bus in a completely different section up in the hills. The house we got was a 10-room—what appeared to me like a mansion except that it was quite old and run down, but it had paintings on the ceiling and there was a time when this town was very rich, when olive oil was—the only place you could get it was right there. There was a lot of pretty fancy houses that were all run down, but 10 bucks a month. So I said, "Well, I can swing this one." So Patsy had the bottom floor, which had five rooms, and I had the top floor with five. It was an amazing, amazing trip.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you get the paintings done?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes. So I did a bunch of paintings there.

ELISSA AUTHER: And these were the ones that are based on the trip through the Sahara?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, Yes, and they were like 6 by 6 feet. There were no materials. [… –DF] I don't think there was any materials on the whole island. So I went to the carpenter and told him how to make a stretcher bar. And then he just made one and then I restretched, but then I got sheet material from the cloth place, had this white cotton cloth. You've got to make the painting out of that. Then I went to the hardware and got these little cans of different kinds of house paint, and that was it. Now I'm going to have a show of these things in February.

ELISSA AUTHER: How many of them are there?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, Linda's got one in San Francisco. I probably have four or five of them here. Then I have about 50 of those little paintings. So they're all going to be in there.

It was pretty interesting. The town was totally communist, but there weren't any factories so it couldn't be really industrial communist, not like Marxist or anything. There were only olive trees. So if you divided all the olive trees up so each person would get five of them or something, that wasn't going to make it. [Laughs.]

So what happened was that almost everybody was totally unemployed and starving, but if you would buy ouzo at the bar—ouzo is this liquor—you'd get a little glass of ouzo and then they would give you this plate with cheese and feta and tomatoes and sardines and okra and—a little pile of food, and that was it for everybody—men, women, children. They'd get their shot of ouzo for 5 cents and they'd get this meal.

And the bartender knew it. They were all nursing each other along. It was most amazing. For example, at the bottom of this mountain there was the Gulf of Yera, and in that, when the U boats used to hang out, the Nazis—the Greeks really liked all these Nazis. They would take whole villages to Germany to make armaments, you know. So everybody thought they were really cool, and people would send money home, right?

So, anyway, at that point there was some fishing boats and they would net these little sardines. And then you could go down at 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning, same as New York, and you could get these fresh little fish, and it's like 2 cents a pound or something. And then they put all of the fish that was left in a cart and they'd start pulling it up the hill. So if you caught them halfway up the hill you'd pay half as much money, but if they made it to Papados it was free. [Laughs.]

Patsy went out to get some fish and they said, "No, don't pay because, you know, it's been like two hours since they were caught." They're not rotten, you know what I mean? They were good, but she couldn't give them any money. So it really pissed her off because that meant she had to get up at 3:00 and go all the way down so she could pay them. Otherwise they wouldn't take any money. It was an interesting place to live, I'll tell you. Money didn't have anything to do with it. Ouzo had a lot to do with it.

ELISSA AUTHER: So how long were you there?

DEAN FLEMING: I was there for a few months.

ELISSA AUTHER: And then what was the next stop?

DEAN FLEMING: I was there four or five months.

But anyway, they were all communists. So this one time we were at the bar drinking this ouzo, and so I invited the whole bar and bartender and police chief and everybody to come and see the paintings because I had four of them at that point and Patsy had four or five. And they came in and there was no furniture. There was nothing there. We had our sleeping bags on a mat and that was it. And they said, "Ah, we knew you were communists." [Laughs.] They loved it.

They actually loved the paintings because the paintings were universal enough that they could see what was happening. They didn't have to have any training about anything. They might not have thought it was art or anything, but they said, "Hey, look. Look at this. It's going like that. It's going like this." And, "Whoa, look at—there's this other shape in there that's coming out." [Laughs.] And so they were my best fans. I was going to leave all my paintings there with these different bars but then I finally—at the last minute I said, "No, I'll take them home."

And so then it was really nice. We took the ferry boat into Piraeus and then we went over to Brindisi, to Italy. Then we went to Naples and Rome and Florence and saw the great, great art—mind-blowing art experience in Italy. And then we took the train from Genoa to Paris and did the same thing in Paris—mind-blowing. Oh, my god. We had arranged to take a freighter from Bristol, England to New York, a Norwegian freighter, the same underground scene. We'd gotten in touch with them and they said, yes, there was this freighter going from Bristol.

So then we just kept going. I was watching; the money was getting pretty little. It was really hard. Here we were in Paris, and we managed to get a little room, the Left Bank for 3 bucks or something. It was so neat. And you look out the—you know, it's a rooftop thing and you look out and here's these gargoyles spitting and the rain, it was so neat. I thought, wow, Left Bank. And so we saw tons of art. Meanwhile I'm carrying this roll of canvases with all our paintings in it just on my back.

So then we got to England and hung out in London, met some people along the way from London that were artists, and we went to hang out with them [… –DF]. Portobello Road and that whole scene there [… –DF]. And then we went to Bristol to see the boat and they said, "Oh, it's been delayed because they're having a strike in New York." And they said, "It's going to be a couple of weeks." So we quickly went over to Ireland, which is where Patsy's family is from, and we had some great Irish trips, and meanwhile painting every day and writing poetry about it. […. –DF]

We got on this Norwegian freighter and the [captain –DF] said, "Well, you know, we're going to Halifax because New York is having a strike they won't break." So what are we going to do in Halifax in the middle of winter? It was rough. We got out; there was this gale, so for like a week we were sitting off the coast of Ireland just tossing. It was too much of a storm to go back to the dock and we couldn't go forward. We just wallowed there. Unbelievable. We had 40-foot waves—really interesting. You know, I love the sea so it was like, "Far out, man. This is neat."

We got to Halifax and then we took a train to Montreal and then we made it to New York. And I had 3 bucks left. [They laugh.] I really know how to do that kind of thing. So we had a big roll of paintings, and so I think I had a tax refund or something, I had a little bit of money and we got a place on Broome Street. They were tearing down the whole scene down where I'd been at Park Place so that was no longer available. They kicked everybody out and tore that building down.

ELISSA AUTHER: What year was it when you returned to New York?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, it was just '65 just like January or February. I got this loft on Broome Street. We painted it white and got up there, tapped the gas, tapped the lights, tapped the water, got everything for free as it is. Then I put up all of our [paintings –DF] on the wall because I wanted to show my friends. Mark was very excited about that. What had happened since I was gone was people kept coming and saying, "We will pay you guys to take that gallery and make it on the ground floor somewhere. We will give you money to do so."

ELISSA AUTHER: Park Place?

DEAN FLEMING: Park Place Gallery.

ELISSA AUTHER: Yes.

DEAN FLEMING: So Frosty and Mark were the two leading figures in this possible activity, and they weren't really totally convinced, because the crew we had was a disparate bunch of characters and some of them were really good, some of them weren't quite so good, and some of them weren't artists at all, just different friends, jazz people.

They came over and brought a bunch of people to my Broome Street loft to see these paintings, and they got blown away with them because these were actually good pieces, really nice painting. And they said, "This is it. This is the ticket to our next Park Place adventure, those paintings." So bringing them back was hugely significant.

We went out and found an electric store on West Broadway that now must be $20 billion a second for that. It was a hundred bucks a month. We had 10 members, so that was 10 bucks apiece, so we could swing it. It was like a 2,000-foot space on the ground floor on West Broadway. It was like, duh. We wanted it there because that's where the artists were. They were all around what they later called SoHo. They were all downtown there, and the galleries were all uptown—Madison Avenue and 57th Street.

They were all small, and all of the artists that we had did big things. Mark did this—he ended up only working outside. And also Bob Grosvenor—huge pieces. To have them inside was like a big challenge and kind of fun. We broke through the floor a few times, busted up the ceiling a few times. Grosvenor would be cantilevering these things off of the ceiling. A ceiling isn't made of a whole lot, you know? [Laughs.] Crunch.

He had one piece that was at the Loeb Student Center, NYU. It was like a library on the ground floor, all glass. And then there was a balcony and then some other parts of the building. And so he had a piece that was coming down out of the sky into this balcony, and then he made another piece that came down and went across and up. So if you stood outside it looked like that thing—was piercing the ceiling. It was completely psychedelic, unbelievable.

ELISSA AUTHER: So this was a cooperative gallery. Was there—was this the first in New York or was there a precedent that you were following?

DEAN FLEMING: Oh, no, not at all. I mean, in the abstract expressionists' time there was the 10th Street Galleries. 10th Street was very far out, and St. Mark's Place, but they were teeny little spaces. They'd be10-by-10 feet or something. People were painting smaller and they had even less money.

ELISSA AUTHER: In SoHo, were you the first?

DEAN FLEMING: We were the first ones in SoHo and we were the biggest gallery in New York for a while. Now you look at Chelsea, they're like 10 times the size, but what are they? [Laughs.] But anyway, that's a whole different subject. We were the first one. And because we were able to do it economically we weren't into the commerce the way that the galleries had to be uptown. They were paying enormous rents and they had to sell a lot.

At that time pop art was coming in, so Warhol and all that. And my favorite guy at that time was Frank Stella, who was doing geometric things—quite different than I ever did but he looked fresh and he didn't look like he was doing Coke bottles. This was very offensive. After years and years of de Kooning and these guys that were really serious painters, suddenly they're cranking out these silkscreens and making billions, and it's like no, no, no, no.

Lichtenstein—I knew these guys well, but he was doing these copies of B comic books. So first of all, I'm a comic aficionado. I didn't want to see no B comic book, and especially I didn't want to see them blown up—bam, blap, blap, blap, you know. The guy's making billions. It's like, what happened? America, you're doomed, you know? I was a beatnik; I didn't want to see that shit. God, it really pissed me off. But Stella was good, and there were many good painters at that time.

We were free and we could do anything. Each month we'd [exhibit –DF] one painter and one sculptor who were members, and then on the third month we would all go out separately and find other artists that we thought ought to be in these group shows, which were like what we had done originally. They were mind-blowing. And we had everything that came—and we didn't have any pop art. We had a lot of minimal art Brice Marden and these guys, and Smithson and we had all kinds of different people that eventually became very significant.

It was really fun. We were putting each other on too, saying, "Oh, let's not make this gallery look like you could name it." And so the critics were going completely bonkers, like who are these people and what do they represent, because they depend on labels. They depend on being able to define you. The more they define you, the more they get rid of you. So if you're completely defined, you're obsolete.

I thought, well, they're not going to be able to do that with us and I really made sure we weren't. [… –DF] We did some events in East Hampton and Woodstock and other places in the country where I would do cartoon happenings where I'd take a roll of 3-foot-wide canvas and stretch it maybe like a hundred yards and make like—put black lines so they were squares. And then all different kinds of people would come and paint on them and then other people would come and paint over them and into them and around them, and I would rush around writing balloons that say weird things about whatever was there.

And so these paintings were impossible to reproduce or even to know except they were taking this huge expression of hundreds of people. The biggest one we did was right next to the Met in Central Park, 200 yards long, and we figured probably 2,500 people worked on that painting during the course of the day. And we were recorded for television from helicopters. So there was pornography. There was radical political stuff. There was clumsy house painting. And there was all this shit, and people just would paint into it and over it and around it.

ELISSA AUTHER: Was that like 1966, '67?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, '66.

ELISSA AUTHER: '66.

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, it was fabulous. They wanted us to work for the park department. They said, "You guys could do this in every park in New York." And so Phyllis Yanpolsky, who was Peter Forakis' wife, she took it over. I think she did that for years. But I never wanted to do anything that was professional or get paid for it or anything. It was a very funky attitude as far as living in capitalist America but I've gotten away with it, I swear. [Laughs.]

So anyway, this was going on. The shows were wonderful. It was very exciting. But what we had done is we got a group of backers who were art collectors mostly, different people, and what they were doing was paying. They would put money into the budget and they would get a painting from each of us. The nice thing about it was that most of them took the [paintings and put them in museums –DF] somewhere, because they contributed, like Patrick Lanan. These were famous collector people.

[… –DF] Virginia Dwan, who had at a gallery in L.A.—and she was Princess Kondradieff, which was, getting pretty icky, and she's living in the Dakota. She brought in these friends of hers to be part of it. And it was Clint Murchison, who was the guy that put LBJ in office and perhaps had something to do with offing Kennedy. The guy was just a total slob. And he was a quadrillionaire.—

He and Giberson, these two guys, they were chewing tobacco in the gallery and spitting on our floor. They had, like, $5,000 suits on and these beautiful blonde wives that were half their age. And they were cracker fucks—cracker fucks. Giberson actually told me, he said, "You want to know the secret to how we made millions? We salted the wells," which means if an oil well ran dry, they would put oil from some other well there and sell it for a billion dollars and it would be dry. That's the way these guys did it and that's the way they did politics with LBJ.

It was terrifying because these were the guys that were running the country. I thought, the only people that we can sell art to—and I saw Mark was doing most of that, selling his sculpture—were armaments manufacturers and oil rip-offs, and they're all evil fuckers. Even Patrick Lanan, he was a ghetto Irish guy from Chicago but he made his money during the Depression by stocks and bonds manipulation. He bought everything for 2 cents and sold it for 20 million [dollars].

I kept calling him on it but by this time he was a fancy guy—Palm Springs, Palm Beach and these guys were such a pain in the ass. And they all, without exception, had beautiful young wives who loved art and loved artists and loved us because we were crazy bohemians and would chase them around. [Laughs.] And they had these dumb-ass husbands that just happened to have several billion dollars.

Anyway, between the truck driving and the actual participating, I started showing in the Guggenheim and the Whitney, and it was like, I don't really think I want to do this with my life. Meanwhile, the Vietnam War was

happening and we were protesting it heavy. We went on every march and we had concerts and plays and different forms, just stop, stop, stop, stop the nukes and stop the war, stop this and that.

And there was a peace march in '67 that was forming in Central Park South. The police had made this whole thing—there were police solidly all the way down Fifth Avenue and over to the U.N. building. We were allowed to do that and that was it. So, okay, I'm walking along, and then I saw quite a few people were running down Seventh Avenue, away from the cops. I didn't even think about it; I joined them, and there were like thousands. We were doing that with a million people in this so there must have been at least 100,000 people that went down Seventh Avenue.

That was extremely far-out because we were stopping the traffic and there were no cops. The cops were over on Fifth Avenue. [Laughs.] So we were stopping everything. People were cheering and throwing flowers out of the window. I remember we got down to Times Square and there were all these movie stars that were throwing the flowers, and "go peace." We went down through Times Square and then we went down 42nd Street, and—

[END OF TRACK.]

DEAN FLEMING: [In progress]—at one point—I think were on Sixth Avenue and 42nd there was cars were backed up for as far as you could see, but there was an ambulance with the siren going—[laughs]—and there was no way he was going to get through. And even if he did, he couldn't, but if he had, there were people, and they were solid. He wasn't going to get through there. And I said, "Somebody's dying on our behalf right here." [Laughs.] And they were going a little farther, and somebody's throwing bricks through the Bank of America window. [Laughs.] And I thought, "Fuck these guys"—[laughs].

Anyway, I had an epiphany right at that time, and it was like, okay, you're going to just give up the art, selling to all these armament dealers, and pick up an Uzi and start fighting, because this has gotten too extreme, or you can live life exactly the way you want to, which is not New York City. And I thought, "Well, where is it? What do I mean?" I had no—I was just plugging along, painting.

In 1966 I went with Steve Reich, the composer, and John Baldwin, who was one of our members. We got this Mustang, drive-away. We're driving it to L.A. because we were just having a show at Virginia Dwan's gallery in L.A.

First of all, it's a kind of crazy mix, but my friend in Santa Fe was Max Finstein, who was a poet, who had lived for years in a houseboat in San Francisco, and I'd known him, and it was good.

Anyway, we're driving along—[laughs]—and Steve said, "I have to go and see my son, but he's living with my ex-wife and Max Finstein." I said, "Max Finstein? Far out, man! Yes, I'd love to go see Max too." [Laughs.] "so you know this guy," I said. "He's fine; don't worry about." Anyway, we got there, and Max was packing up. He said, "You're just in time. We're going to the Sun Dance. Tomorrow morning, at the crack of dawn, we're all going to the Sun Dance."

Max and if I can remember names—Walter Chappell—they had the first head shop [… –DF]—[laughs]—I don't know how they got away with it. It's before things got too illegal, but they had this head shop.

But anyway, "we're going to go up to the Sun Dance, the Ute Indians', in Ignacio." We're just New York guys going to L.A. I said, "Sure, I'd love to do that." I have always been interested in the Native American thing.

We went there, and the hippies that we were with or beatniks or whatever—[laughs]—they were called at that time had teepees, and they had leathers, and they had beads and then—they looked good. The Utes weren't doing it that way. [Laughs.] They had campers and they were looking like cowboys.

But anyway, some of the elders came to our camp, and they said, "Thank you for coming here and making these teepees, because this is the old way, and Ute don't know anything about it, but you guys know about it." And they thanked us.

And there was another thing—[laughs]. I started making these buttons—there were so many buttons happening in the '60s about who to vote for and all that and "Don't pollute" and "No nukes," and I thought, "I'll make some that are just Park Place buttons that are just parallelograms, a very simple geometric thing"—I can actually show you, just because I have some—but anyway, then you can wear this and it could say things as you want it to. [Laughs.] Certainly it could be against the war.

But anyway, so I had a bunch of these, and every month I would make a different set, and we'd put them [in –DF] bowls at the entranceway of Park Place. And people would take them by handfuls, and they scattered. It was really fun, and it was free. It was part of the deal. So I had bags full of them going to L.A., you know.

We go to the Ute Sun Dance, and I gave a bunch of them to the kids. Then the elders came over and they said, "Not only teepees, but you made these buttons for the Sun Dance." They said, "These are Ute colors."

I said, "Of course they're Ute colors." [Laughs.] There's four directions. That's it. That's all there is, the primaries. I didn't get into that I was making them in New York or anything for this disco or for the Rolling Stones. But never mind all that. [Laughs.]

So anyway, there were things happened at that Sun Dance—I had no idea what it really was. And the drums started playing. "Oh," I said, "that drum is calling." So I went on in there. It was an enclosure, except for the east—you'd come in and the drum was right there. And the supporters would sit in that end, and then the dancers were on the other end.

So I wasn't sure that I could justifiably go in there, being not Ute. But it was cool. It was okay. I went in and then I couldn't leave. The drum went 24 hours, and those dancers are supposed to dance. They not only didn't have any food or water, but they were supposed to dance 24 hours a day for four days. Of course they couldn't do it. They would collapse. And they did collapse. A lot of different things happened. But that drum was like unbelievable.

And things began to change, and I didn't know that it was a dance. I thought [they were –DF] going to—dance around or something. [Laughs.] That had nothing to do with it. It was so magic. There was like magic things happening all around, not hallucinations but major things—storms churning, things happening.

The very last day, 1:00 in the day, I looked up at the tree, and around the sun—it was directly above—was this perfect rainbow. But there were no clouds, and it wasn't a rainbow. It wasn't soft. It was hard-edged, like Kenneth Noland.

ELISSA AUTHER: Yes.

DEAN FLEMING: And I—[laughs]—so I said to this guy, this old Ute next to me, I said, "Look at that! Look at that!" And he looks up. He says, "It's supposed to do that." Okay, whatever.

So I went back home and I told my buddies—I said, "Something's happening out there that's much greater than your art profession. Much, much greater. I'm serious."

They said, "Oh, you take too much acid," whatever. They thought I was a complete fool.

But the group had a show in Denver in 1967. One of our backers was Vera List, who was very strong and a collector of sculpture. She was a friend of Mark's and she just put money in.

Her daughter was the head of the whole art establishment—Friends of Contemporary Art is what it's called—if they're still around—but she was doing the same in Denver. Vera said, "You've got to show these guys. This is really fun."

ELISSA AUTHER: Do you remember the location for this?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, absolutely. It was called Lincoln Towers. It was across the street from the Capitol on Lincoln.

ELISSA AUTHER: Oh, I know where that is.

DEAN FLEMING: It was an unfinished building. It was completely unfinished. But the bottom floor was kind of finished. And it was all glass. It was like maybe the showroom for Chryslers or something. I don't know what. But they said, "You guys can have this space." And it was so neat, because you could see the whole show from the street. It was just fabulous.

At that time there was a bunch of artists and then a bunch of poets and a huge amount of theater people. Denver has a super theater. We still have a hundred theater buddies, and I just love these people. They come down here regularly just to get away from it all. We go up to see their plays all the time.

Anyway, they had all showed up to help us with this show. They thought it's interesting. Here come the New York artists.

And so then after the show, we were there a week, and we showed Stan Brakhage's films, and we played music, and we gave talks, and we had the show, and they had the opening. And then they took us around to see all the good architecture that was happening in the area—and that was really neat—and treated us like princes. There's no doubt about it.

Everybody had their plane tickets. They said, "OK, back to New York." And I said, "Hey, they have all these mountains over here. Don't you even want to see these mountains or anything?"

And I already had the Ute Indian thing in the back of my head. And they said, "Oh, no, that's—you know, who needs it?"

So I went by myself up to Evergreen, and then I went just straight out, away, and I don't know exactly where it was, but it was wild. There were no houses. It was definitely wild. And I found this kind of mountaintop where the coyotes would come and shit. It was like covered with coyote shit. I just sat down there, and then these ponderosas were there. There was a really deep canyon. I could see the other side of—and I was just sitting there, and I thought, "God, this is so neat."

This is the hard part, but the ponderosas said, "Stay here," and I heard them. I'd already had this scene with the Indians—[laughs]—so I was not into not believing something that was happening. They said, "Stay here." And I said, "Listen, you guys, I'm an artist. I've got to be in New York." They said, "You can be an artist right here"—[laughs]—like that. They're just fooling, around these trees. Now I'm going to tell people about the tree. They're never going to believe that one.

So I went down and back to New York, and I'm looking around, and meanwhile I've always followed my painting, whatever it wanted to do. So what was happening was that they were big geometric paintings, and then they got simpler and simpler, and finally it was just a parallelogram. And then, suddenly, not like a huge contemplation, but I made separate panels, so the parallelogram is one thing, and then I would separate them by an inch or so on the wall. So you'd see that the wall was actually part of this painting. And then this kept evolving, and meanwhile the other thing we were working on was Art in the Cities, and mostly it had to do with putting sculpture in a park, but what I did was I would paint just a blank wall on a building and paint it red, and then on the next block I'd paint another red, and if you stood in this one certain place at West Broadway, they would look like a continuous thing.

And then if that were so, then this [painting that –DF] was a block away would be up there with this other [painting –DF]. [Laughs.] They were paintings because you couldn't see them except at one exact spot in the middle of the intersection—[laughs] at Houston and West Broadway [laughs]—and I was doing stuff like that, which was almost totally impossible.

Then I'd run into these landlords that would say, "I don't want you to paint in my building; they'll raise my taxes." [Laughs.] So—"but that's just going to be red." "No, we don't want that." [Laughs.]

So meanwhile, the paintings were getting into these panels. Then I got turned on by Lichtenstein, which was the only time, but he'd done this thing at Castelli's. It was a porcelainized steel sculpture—bam. It wasn't that, but the porcelainized steel was very interesting, and I thought if I made these paintings in porcelainized steel, I could put them outdoors. So I had designed a series of subway entrances and unusual public, you know, building spaces, and I could put [the paintings –DF] on a wall. It would be itself, free art was the idea of it.

So I [started –DF] doing these porcelainized steel things and putting them on walls, and that just got to be more and more so, and I needed to be where there was physical space other than a city, because the city, you can't imagine how many permits. To paint a wall one color, you'd need 500, and you got to pay off the Mafia and the different cops, and I mean, it's unbelievable—weird shit. [Laughs]—I don't want to do this.

So I moved out to this commune in Woodstock, called Group 212, and it was supposed to be an arts school, and so I was brought there as a teacher. And it was a pretty interesting place, because there was no real separation between teachers and artists and students and bums and all—everybody was just there, but it was out in the country.

The first piece I did out there [were –DF] panels that were on the other side of this pond or lake. It was a pretty good size, maybe 300 yards across. This was on the other bank, and it was several different simple geometric shapes that were [primary colors –DF].

The thing about it [was –DF] that they would double themselves by their reflection in the lake, and they were also made of this same exact thing where the brighter colors were in the distance and the deeper colors were in the foreground. And the brighter colors would optically come up, like that—even over the lake—[laughs]—and these other ones would be back—so the trees, everything was getting turned inside out and reflecting, and it was just very psychedelic.

I would take people out in these canoes to see that art. But you could only see all of the pieces from one place because of the trees and bushes. If you moved over 6 feet, it would cover a bunch of them. I put a big X on the ground. I said, "That's what makes them paintings. They can only be seen from one place." And if they were sculpture, you could walk all the way around but these were flat panels of color.

Already it was hard to go back to town. So I gave up my loft and we closed the gallery.

Oh, but I was going to say one of the reasons was that people like Mark—to give a piece to like six different backers—he can't do that every year. That's nuts.

So he got them to buy the materials, but that wasn't quite enough, either. [Laughs.] And you know, it was different. I could go ahead and give them six paintings a year. It was like nothing to me. I did a hundred, you know. But six big sculptures for him was impossible. And that was true of all of the sculptors. Frosty was doing stuff that was being fabricated and was very expensive, and he was getting these backers to pay for that, but then once that was done, he wasn't going to give them one of those things. It would cost a fortune.

ELISSA AUTHER: So what year did the gallery close?

DEAN FLEMING: '67.

And we continued to show together. We showed at MIT in '68. And I think the museum at Atlanta

ELISSA AUTHER: The [Holly ?]?

DEAN FLEMING:—different places for a couple years after that, and Frosty and Mark and Grosvenor, they were still able to organize that. But when I left, it was kind of a blow to the whole scene, because my thought was that Libre would be part of Park Place and that we could, when somebody wanted rest, they could come here and I could go and be in their loft, and we'd just trade around and continue exhibiting and selling and keeping alive.

But as it turned out, few people came—actually, five people came from our group after all. But mainly they didn't, and mainly they were saying, "You're just going to stop painting and it's all finished." And I said, "No way, no way."

I remember the Navajo. The Navajo have these songs—the beauty in front of me, the beauty behind me, the beauty all a round. I thought, "That's what I want to do in this lifetime. I want to have that. And I will not stop painting. I don't care who does what." I've painted everything in the world here, over 45 years now.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you leave from Woodstock straight back to Colorado?

DEAN FLEMING: It was not back.

DEAN FLEMING: So I—by that time, Linda had—[laughs]—well, when I came back from Europe, I went to pick up stuff that I'd left in Pittsburgh, and Linda came on—I went to the school and she came. She said, "You know, I've been here for two years, and this sucks beyond belief. There aren't any sculptors here. They say women can't do anything. What am I going to do?"

And I said, "My best friend is the head of the sculpture department in San Francisco at the art institute"—and I had personally had really good experiences there, and I really love this guy Al Light and "go study with him."

So she said, "Okay." And meanwhile—[laughs]—other things had happened. She came from a poor family. Her father was real vehement, women can't paint or do anything; go get a job at Penney's or something. The guy was awful. He really was truly awful to her. She'd bring home a beautiful painting and he'd throw it in the closet. I mean he just was an unhappy guy.

The only way she could get away from home was if she married somebody. She was just a kid, 18 or something. She had a buddy in school who was in the same boat, whose family was totally screwed, so they got married. So they didn't have any money; they were just students, and they were really scuffling.

So they went to the soup kitchen, and there was this young guy serving them the soup, and they went there and they got their free soup with all these homeless people. They were up against it; there's no doubt about it. Anyway, this guy that was serving them turned out to be Rick Klein, who was the guy that bought Libre. I mean just to get it all woven nice. We already had Max Finstein [laughs].

ELISSA AUTHER: Where was Max living when you went to visit him? I just want to clarify that.

DEAN FLEMING: Canyon Road in Santa Fe.

ELISSA AUTHER: In Santa Fe, Okay.

DEAN FLEMING: Then Linda went to the art school, and this guy, my buddy, Al Light, turned out to be one of the—staggering chauvinist asshole. So instead of really looking at her and how good she was, who was a lot better than him, he says, "Oh, women can't do anything." So she walked. And she left a husband and everything

and came to New York. She said she really wanted to get rich and famous quick. And she thought—geez, I was the only guy she knew there. [Laughs.]

Meanwhile, I had a wonderful friend who was the editor of *Mademoiselle* Magazine, doing all these articles about up-and-coming young artists, ta-da, ta-da, you know. But here comes little Linda. And she was—really exceptional. There was no question in my mind. And she came there.

And so I said, "Well, we can get you a loft on the Bowery somewhere." It was the cheapest place I know. So we went over and there was this little funky place for 30 bucks a month or something. It was all skid row. It was scary shit, man. There were always drunks. Maybe not so scary, because they weren't real capable of anything. [They laugh.] But anyway, there you go, New York City. And I went back and I was having my life.

Anyway, she—I don't know [how many of these ?] girlfriends that screw up like this, but she painted the place white, everything was fine, and then she went and the front door was locked, and it was locked from the outside. And I don't even know how you do that, but anyway, she couldn't open from the inside. She had to leave, the place was fresh-painted.

So she looks through the mail slot. Now, in New York there are not a whole lot of mail slots, but this had a mail slot, and there was some guy's back—some drug guy passed out on the door. The guy had no idea about nothing. [Laughs.] It was the most amazing event.

Anyway, she got the guy to wake up. She said, "I'm in here and you have to let me out. I'm going to send you the key, and you have to open the door." She didn't know, you couldn't see the guy. And he's like, "Whoa, what?" [Laughs.] So it was a nice guy. He managed to turn around, take the key, open the lock, and she got out and gave him a big hug. He says, "Wow. Far out." Passed the key. She said, "I'm never going back there; you can't get out of there! You can go in, but you can't get out." [Laughs.]

So I said, "Well, just stay here with me; you'll be fine here." I thought she was such a little kid, and here she was trying to be in New York. I looked at her and I said, "Ticket outta here." That's what I saw. If I went with her, we could do it, but if I went by myself, it would have been a disaster because I get weird by myself. So I'll go with her; she's neat, red hair and everything.

The last show at Park Place was a group show, and she did this huge piece that covered a whole wall. It was way, way the best piece in that show by a long shot, and there were famous artists in there by the dozen. But this was unbelievable. It was like these shapes that also implied a kind of possible shifting, but they were box-shaped things. And she painted them matte white so that if you looked at it at one point, they'd just disappear on the wall, but the sides, she painted orange, so that the light coming down would reflect that orange on the white wall. The orange was just light. It was like a Jim Turrell, only it was also like parallelograms. It was a fantastic piece.

She was ready to stay in New York. She was up there with Frank Stella, for God's sake.

But anyway, I said, got to go to—I told her about the trees and everything, they were calling. And she was just my student at Carnegie Tech. Well, she wasn't my student at that point. We were lovers. But she was willing to listen to me. I think as the years go on, maybe she wouldn't have. But anyway, she said, "Okay, whatever." We were going. I said, "This is part of Park Place." So I did one of my cartoon things in Woodstock and then we took off.

And we stopped—the main artist that was really a friend was Angelo DiBenetto. I don't know if you would have heard of him. He did Burns Park. He's got a piece there at Burns Park. Angelo was an elder artist of the town, and he was really good and he was a good person. He had a huge mill building up in Central City. It was all gold mines. And this was a huge building. So for his studio and his living, which he'd only fixed up like a fifth or something of the whole space, so he said, "You can have anything else you want." It was almost like the Park Place trip. So Linda and I moved in on the top floor. It was kind of going up a hill. But we were up on top, so we never even hardly saw him.

So we're looking for land, and we didn't have a cent. It was amazing. And we knew Stan Brakhage, who was in Rollinsville. So we started out by looking for school buildings that were consolidated and abandoned, and there were some great ones. There were some really neat ones all over the place, big two-story, three-story, solid brick old buildings that were empty and getting vandalized and they weren't getting anywhere.

So then I thought, in order to—I got to talk to the school board or whoever thinks they own these things. And that was mistake number one because I kind of looked kind of freakish. Angelo gave me a suit which was with silver threads in it. It was fucked up. I sort of looked like Mafia. And it didn't fit. So I go to the school board geeked out. I would have been better off with my Levi's– and act like a rancher or something. Shit. I had no idea. I got some tie that didn't match, it was really funny. [Laughs.]

And the school boards say, "Oh, no. No, we're going to rent out this, we're not going to sell it." I said, "It's going down. I could fix it. You can call it a historic monument, do whatever you want. But they thought this was going to be trouble, this guy, for some reason. I couldn't get with them.

So one of Angelo's buddies was this guy Charlie Vigil, who was a lawyer in Denver, and he came from Trinidad. And he was part of the Vigil family that had these huge land grants given by the king of Spain, the Maxwell Vigil. They had most of northern New Mexico and a lot of southern Colorado. That whole area, unbelievable, millions of acres.

And he said, "I'm one of the last of the Vigils," which is obviously not true. There are still—millions—somewhere. [Laughs.] But anyway, he said, "You know, you're looking for land up here around Boulder and Nederland." He said, "You're never going to find it; you're never going to afford it; you don't even want to be here. These are all crackers up here. What you want to do is you want to go down to Las Animas or Huerfano." He said, "You'll be happier down there." And so he said, "I've got a house on Highway 12. There's a house on a bridge."

You know that place? Have you ever been down there?

ELISSA AUTHER: Hmm mmm. [Negative] I haven't been down there.

DEAN FLEMING: [… –DF] We go down there, get this free house. A small adobe, and his brother used to walk across every day to go to school across this bridge over the North Fork of the Purgatory River, and the house was on the other side. It was down by the Purgatory River, right there. And so the first thing was "Vigil" is "vigil" in English. So we were in vigil in purgatory looking for libre. I thought, that's got to mean something. [Laughs.] […–DF]

We didn't have a lot of room, so we were doing our work outside. And I was doing these panels, up the creek, and reflecting, and changing space, and Linda was doing her sculpture. The people that lived around there—it wasn't very many people, but a few really old Spanish families lived there, and they came by and they were very friendly to us. Nobody had been in that house for years. And they were very friendly.

And they said, "Boy, you guys must be from Drop City." And I could not believe this, because in 1965, we were fixing up this place on West Broadway and I was up on the scaffolding. I was painting, far away from the door. And a bunch of people were working, and they said, "Hey, Dean, there's these guys at the door that you have to meet." And I said, "Well, I'm as far away as I can get. Why me?" "Yes, these are guys you want to meet from Drop City."

So, you know, I could take that—believe that. You know, I came down. And I had just done a comic book called *The Blown Mind*. [Laughs.] That was distributed all over New York, *The Blown Mind*, it was weird. [Laughs.] These guys had a bunch of comic books under their arm. I said, "Oh, yes, that's why I should see these guys." They were scruffy. They didn't look to me like they were interesting or like New Yorkers or nothing. They said, "Yes, we're from Drop City." And I thought, oh, good luck, drop what, you know? But they showed me—the comic book was good. So we traded comic books. I gave them a bunch of buttons. They said, "Well, next time you're in Trinidad, come and see us." And I thought, it's a small day in hell when I'll ever see these guys again. […–DF]

So here are these Spanish people, these old people in black, they're saying, "Oh, you must be from Drop City." I thought, that's what those guys at the door—I said, "Why would you say that? Where is this Drop City" "Oh, just over there in Trinidad." I go, holy shit that is something. I had no idea. [The droppers –DF] told me they had some Polaroids that were out of focus that showed these domes. I thought, that's nothing, you know, I'm not going there. [Laughs.]

Well, there's another thing. One of our members was Bernie Kirschenbaum, who was a student of Bucky Fuller, and in his month of the show, he had built dome models. […–DF] They were four, five, six feet, but they were models. And they were all different ones. And I'll never forget that show for as long as I live. I said, I could do that. I could make one of those, and that would be the way I'd want to live.

[…–DF]

ELISSA AUTHER: What year was that, that he did that exhibition of the domes?

DEAN FLEMING: Oh, probably '66, '65, maybe. He had a show with Tamara, who was Frosty's wife, who was a member.

So, immediately we went to find Drop City. It was kind of even worse than I thought. But right away I met Clark and he was one of the guys—Bernofsky and Clark Richert, and they had *The Being Bag*. So I said, "How're you doing, Clark?" He said, "Oh, Yes, I knew you guys would show up here eventually." [Laughs.] The chances are extremely slim; I'm not kidding you. I could have been in Tahiti, for God's sake. But there I was in Trinidad. And

they had domes. And they had a 40-foot dome, which is exactly this one.

And I said, "What do I need to know to build this?" And he said, "Well, there's only five lengths of strut," and he wrote it on a napkin and then we went and built this thing. I had only built stretcher bars before, when it came to this item. It was really hard. It was really hard.

Linda was extremely pregnant. We didn't have any electricity, so I was putting in the pilings and the floor with a hammer and a saw and that was it. I'm not kidding. I was strong, really strong, no questions asked.

And anyway, she found an electric pole down on Turkey Creek and set up a radial arm saw and she was cutting these lengths. Here this blade was coming to a quarter of an inch from the big, pregnant belly—that sounds nuts. That sounds really scary and nuts, but that's the way we were doing it at the time. [Laughs.] She knew she couldn't be hammering and lifting logs, so she could do this cutting, which she did till the last possible second before that baby was born.

But I was going to tell you the [story –DF] of Drop City.

ELISSA AUTHER: You know what? Let's stop here and start with Drop City in the next—

[END OF TRACK.]

ELISSA AUTHER: This is Elissa Auther speaking with Dean Fleming at Libre, near Gardner, Colorado, on August 7th, 2013. Dean, we left off with you talking about the construction of the first dome here at Libre.

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, I wanted to say that not only did I get the measurements of the structure, of a 40-foot dome, geodesic dome, but I also got a lot of the politics from Drop City. And it was an interesting phenomenon because probably most of what I got from there was things not to do. [Laughs.] For example, they had this policy that everybody was welcome, and just come in and put your keys and your clothes on the table, and everybody could have them, [… –DF]—I don't think that's meant to survive. I think that's too difficult and that people will go crazy. And of course they did.

But they had a policy that I really loved for Libre, for the foundation of Libre. That was that it was based on the Indian council. That is a situation where all the people who were involved sit in the circle together, and whatever the issue is, everybody must speak, and everybody is equal, so you don't have a boss and you don't have a faction that's running everything or a democracy, even, where the majority rules; it's definitely based on unanimous decision for everything. Here we've been here 45 years, and we've gotten away with that, that idea, which is extremely difficult, and I don't suggest it—[laughs]—necessarily as a solution for anything because it's really hard to get everybody to agree. [Laughs.] At least you know then that if you're terribly against something, you can say it, and it will be respected, and it won't just be overridden by the majority.

So it takes diplomacy and compromise, and these are conditions that people might try to avoid, especially in their homes, but we also had a situation where the homes and the land belongs to the community and [they don't –DF] belong to the individual, so individuals are not really allowed to sell their homes or rent them or play any games without the approval of the entire community. For a long time we had this idea that the community could only be people who lived here, but as time has gone on, many people who were original members or members of long standing and they do work somewhere else, then it expanded.

More recently we were thinking about our children that were born here and raised here and never felt that they weren't part of this situation. They were scattered all over the place, but they do have a voice now, and it's been most gratifying to me that the kids like the original premise almost more than the people who [are –DF] here. [Laughs.] They really are in favor of it; let's keep it like that. It means that ownership and insurance and mortgages and all the things that are part of the capitalist society are not in this community and can't be. At one point one of the people had done some improvements to their house, and they wanted to insure their house, or maybe they just wanted a mortgage. I forget. [Laughs]—The county said all of the houses have to be approved in order for one of the houses to be granted insurance. And so—[laughs]—in a sense, they really couldn't insure their house either.

So what it means, that if somebody really has to leave and they're not going to come back, then it's up to the community who's going to live in there. Sometimes it has happened many different people apply, so we had a rule that members would have the first choice. In the case of Sybilla, she moved to New York, and then she wanted to come back, but she didn't want to be with her husband, and there was another house that was empty, and there were about six people that wanted that house, but she took preference because she was a member and we wanted her to be here. She's been in that house for a long time now, so it worked out okay I think people need to feel comfortable with all of their neighbors here, and I can't say that we've been a hundred percent successful with that. It's not that you're obliged to love everybody—[laughs]—[it has to do with you having –DF] the experience in your lifetime, of surrendering whatever you think you need. If you want to go [buy somewhere

else –DF], you're quite welcome to do it, but if you're here, you have to listen to the other people. It's an obligation.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you and Linda were the founding members [of Libre].

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, and this guy Peter Rabbit, who was a poet from Black Mountain, actually. He'd been all over the place, but he lived at Drop City when we got here in '67, and he was like 30 years old, and they didn't trust him. [Laughs.] This guy would get up really early in the morning and make pancakes for everybody, and they said, well, that's what their mother did. [Laughs.] So they didn't like that. And he was old guy at 30. So he kept hanging out with us—[inaudible]—and I asked him—I said, "How come you spend more time up here than you spend at Drop City?" And he said, "Well, they don't really like me; I'm too old and I have too much energy for that community." So, he joined us. "Well, this is what we're doing," and he joined us.

I feel very strongly that we couldn't have done it without him because he was the guy that knew Rick Klein that had money, that we could finally buy the land. He was at New Buffalo in Arroyo Hondo, and so after a certain time we were looking around, we thought, we'd better get our economics together because Peter had nothing and we had nothing to speak of. And so we went down to New Buffalo, and we spent hours just talking about all kinds of things with Rick—[laughs]—and I think he probably knew why we were there. But anyway, finally it's really late at night; everybody wanted to go to bed. He said, "I'll tell you, you guys find the land, and I'll pay for it, okay?" And he went to bed. [They laugh.] So we're driving back to Colorado, and I thought, what does that mean? Does that mean thousands of acres or one acre, or what's this guy going to pay—[laughs]—he just said, "you find it, I'll pay for it."

So we looked and looked for a year, and then when we finally found this place. It was by far the best piece aesthetically, and it was also the cheapest at $35 an acre. It was incredibly cheap. So we got 360 acres, which was $12,000. We told this to Rick, and he sent a check up. What they were doing in New Buffalo at that time, they were building all their houses out of adobe. So here was this check for 12,000 bucks that was covered with adobe. [Laughs.] And I took it to the bank, and they said, "We don't want this." They said, "Come on, this is what you call money?" [They laugh.] "This is—no, no." So we're trying to scrape the adobe off. [Laughs.] Anyway, it was a good check.

At the same time, Tony Magar was a member of the Park Place group, and he was teaching up in Denver, and he was planning to come to be a member of Libre. So he got together with Angelo DiBenetto, and they formed Burns Park, which was a park in Denver on Colorado Boulevard and Alameda. They got this company called Duraply to give us all the materials that we needed to build things. There were many different artists there. There were many of our friends from New York and members of Park Place, and then there were also several of the artists in Denver that were part of that. And because we'd been given this plywood, which was really special weatherproof kind of plywood, everybody built what you might think of as box shapes; they used the plywood as a skin for structures that were built underneath that.

That had a governing effect on what the forms of the sculpture were. They were most like Park Place feeling. There were some cantilevered things, and there was all kinds of [work –DF]. I personally built a 16-foot cube, but it was just the four corners of the cube, and at a diagonal, so as you're driving by on Colorado Boulevard, this piece would look like it was turning. I thought of it as the four graces. It would turn as you drove by. This was something I learned as a child in L.A. when you drove by the orange groves, and we'd see all those lines of trees, and they would move as you're driving by. That was most fascinating to me, so I ended up doing something like that at Burns Park.

ELISSA AUTHER: okay, so that was in Burns Park. Do you know the name of the sculpture? Was it an untitled piece or—

DEAN FLEMING: My piece?

ELISSA AUTHER: Yes.

DEAN FLEMING: I called it *The Magic Cube*. And it was there for many years. Unfortunately, a lot of the things didn't last. This piece was built with an 8-by-8pine into the ground, into cement, and then the corners were cantilevered. So it was putting a lot of stress on that. And as the years went on, people got involved graffitiing it and so forth—[they laugh]—kicking it and having campfires, and all different things happened. When I was in Vigil, I built a model for it, and it was DayGlo orange on the inside and then matte black on the outside. So actually, you couldn't even see the corner of the cube. Then I had put blacklights lighting up this thing so it really looked like an ember at nighttime if there were no other lights. Of course in the city, there's no place like that. Not only that, but I was pretty sure somebody would just take those blacklights and run for it. [Laughs.] So that didn't get to be in the final piece.

ELISSA AUTHER: What year was the piece installed in Burns Park?

DEAN FLEMING: '68.

ELISSA AUTHER: '68, okay.

DEAN FLEMING: The money for Tony's piece and my piece was put into the pot at Libre, and we build the first three houses with that from Burns Park, so it was all beautifully knit together. We didn't have any money, and Rick bought the land, and we didn't have any money, but Burns Park paid for the houses, which were actually pretty simple and inexpensive. Nevertheless, we were able to build three houses with that income. And then we still didn't have any money—[laughs]—but we had a house and a beautiful view, and life was good. The first couple years were very consumed with building, and we took turns working on each other's house because none of us were actual carpenters or builders, and so we were winging it, and we took turns.

[… –DF] When all these [members –DF] would show up at somebody's house with their hammers and their blank minds—[laughs]—then whoever it was would tell them what to do. So when everybody came to my house, I had to be very aware. I had to have all the materials, I had to do the tools, and I had to know exactly what to tell them to do. Otherwise, they'd just stand around. We got the three houses done, and it was very wonderful, that period of time. Because we hadn't had a studio in Vigil and because this was not yet capable of being a studio here, I kept working outside.

I was doing geometric shapes in the landscape, but it was an interesting period of time. They were all the same as the previous ones, like the paintings that only could be seen from one spot. The last piece I did was to be seen from the porch of my dome in exactly one place, and it was like a dotted line across the meadow, down the road and then up on that knoll over there and up to the top of the knoll. These were squares of magenta, DayGlo. [Laughs.] They were very bright and very not natural. The ones in the distance were quite bigger than the ones at the front, so that they would have—they'd be relatively the same size as you were looking at it, and there was this great sweep. Other people at Libre at that time started complaining. They said, "We didn't come all the way out to the country to, you know…"—so I understood that. [Laughs.] I really did. At the same time, we finally were able to work inside. During the winter, it was extremely important not to have the only thing you're doing outside.

Then in 1970, I was invited to California, to this meeting of NASA scientists and engineers, and they were doing a symposium on habitability. Basically, what they were talking about was how to make a space capsule habitable and how to make it warmer or whatever. [Laughs] They felt you needed to keep somebody from not going completely crazy. That was a long time ago. It was a really interesting group of characters. They had worked together with artists, Robert Irwin and Larry Bell in Venice, California. The whole symposium was going to take place in Robert Irwin's studio, in his loft. He had this big warehouse kind of space, and he'd just gotten it, so he didn't have his own stuff in there. It was just a big, big, empty room. It was really fabulous. He made it so that he was working to fix the place, and each day it would be different.

On the last day of the symposium, there was this one big wall that was made. When you analyze it, it was made out of these huge cardboard columns that were used for big buildings. This was the footings. They were along this wall, and I think most thought there was a permanent wall. It looked this white, and it was the same as everything else. [They laugh.] But he had put this rod through the whole thing so that on the last day he turned them so that it was suddenly open and you were looking through these holes at the next wall but it turned out that there was an alleyway behind the place, and there were all these homeless people. [Laughs.] So they came in and ate the lunch—[laughs]—which was very elegant very fine lunch. Jim Turrell's wife would play the cello, it was so amazing.

The process was to get everybody more relaxed because there were many, many engineers who were used to going to symposiums, and they were in their suits and ties, and they were uptight, and they came in climbing over all this rubble to start with. There were these chairs and a podium and so forth, and they were twitching around, and they were reading papers to each other. Then the next day the chairs were all gone, and there were just some cushions on the floor […–DF]—they got to sit on the floor. And pretty soon, by the third day they were in their shorts and T-shirts—[laughs]—and having a better time of it. They had made these groups of separated people.

There were probably a couple hundred people involved in this. And so they divide them up into groups of eight or 10 people who would, in the afternoon, discuss all kinds of different things to try to just kind of brainstorm the idea of habitability and meaning. So there were people who were working in the ghettos, the social workers. There were engineers that only worked on jet engines. […There –DF] were artists of different kinds, there were dancers, there were poets, and there were radical politicians and right-wing politicians—[laughs]—which had these groups, and then they'd say, well, you don't have to stay in Robert Irwin's loft, so what are you going to do? So we all went down to the beach, and Venice Beach was all full of these bums and junkies—[laughs]—that would come and join us. […–DF] I don't know how informative it was in the long run, but everybody that was uptight got relaxed.

There was another quality to it, which was that about just three or four blocks away was where I grew up and also where a Japanese friend was living, and I stayed with him. He said as soon as the symposium was over, he was going to go to Japan. He had to renew his papers. [… –DF] I walked down the boardwalk, and there it was my home. It was very amazing for me in 1970 to go through that. At one part of the symposium, I showed slides, and the slides were all about where Libre was at that time, mostly the buildings. It showed the different domes, and we had zomes. We had a variety of different kinds of houses that were being constructed, plus I talked about the basis for the community and the movement that was going on in the United States at that time in 1970. It was major. It was all over the place. Even here in the valley, we had seven different communities going on in the '70s. So it was a lot, a lot of people.

It was interesting because the guys that had put together the symposium were engineers, but they also were studying Zen Buddhism, and they were meditating, and they had their whole scene happening in Santa Monica. Somebody in the group asked me is this phenomena, these communities, is this happening anywhere else in the world? And I said, "Oh, yes, it's happening in Japan [… –DF]," because now [Nanao –DF] Sakaki came here because Gary Snyder sent him. He told me the whole story of what was going on in Japan. So after I got through talking and showing these slides, [they –DF] said, "Well, we've got to send somebody to Japan to check that out." And I said, "Whoa, that's curious." [… –DF] It should be you. [Laughs.] So I said, "Well, okay." So they gave me all this money in this grant to go and study the communes in Japan.

That was a major experience for me because I had been in Japan repeatedly when I was in Korea in the '50s, so there 20 years later I was going back again. But this time it was different. I had a list of the communes and where they were, and then I had also another list from my friend in Santa Monica that had all these artists. So my trip to Japan was like one day I'd spend with the artists, sitting with them, whatever, and then the next day in one of the communes. In Japan, it was so extremely different than here that it was very interesting. In Japan, they never even heard of hippies or communes or anything else, but they did have a tradition of Basho walking from one end to the other and reciting poetry. [Laughs.] So this is what the Buzoku were doing.

Buzoku is an unusual word—it means "tribes," but it really means old tribes, like you might say of Native Americans here or even the Ainu in Hokkaido [… –DF]. They made communes one day hitchhike distance from each other. [Laughs.] I mean, we can't do things like that. [Laughs.] One-day hitchhike—whatever. The only people ever hitchhiking were characters that were in the Buzoku, and they had long beards and long hair. The women were just very simply attired. They looked like Basho. They looked like they were ready to go cross-country. The other quality that was extremely different than this country was that the same people went to all of these different places. So there might have been just a few permanent residents, but mainly everybody just kept moving around.

Only Japanese would think this way, but they went to Hokkaido in the far north in the winter when it was 20 feet in the snow—[laughs]—and then they'd go south to Suwanose Island, which was toward Okinawa, where the hurricane and the typhoons would come regularly and where it was exceedingly hot, and it was an active volcano. So we're living on the side of this erupting volcano—[laughs]—very interesting thing. Because of this experience Linda came, and our little daughter Lia came, and we met there, and she had gathered money just from friends around, and no—we didn't have very much, but anyway, we managed to travel around a lot during that time. It put a huge change into my art. For one thing, I didn't have a studio once again, so I was just working in my books, my sketchbooks, and doing things that would evolve into larger works when I got back here.

Anyway, we saw so many things and did so many things, and I was very interested in the four elements. In Japan, they have the fifth element, which is the Akasha, which is the void, which is Mu, actually. [… –DF] Each of the elements is composed of a different shape, and then at the top it's almost like this flamelike thing that's Mu. That was an additional idea to me with my four-dimensional thinking. It was to concentrate on this emptiness. [Laughs.] So in a way, that's getting pretty far away from the art profession. [Laughs.] But that's what I was doing at that time. That really stayed with me for a long time, even after I got back.

ELISSA AUTHER: You mean the focus on the void or the emptiness?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, what they could possibly mean. We are humans, and it has to be an invention because where would it be? [… –DF] It's a very Zen thing. It's kind of wonderful to me.

ELISSA AUTHER: So how did that work itself out in your art? What did it look like?

DEAN FLEMING: For that time, I was doing a calligraphy. It was really the same attitude that I've had about any other art. I wasn't like trying to—learn Japanese calligraphy; I was learning how to move the brush around. At one point, we went to Eiheji, which is [the center –DF] of Zen Buddhism on the Japan Sea. They had this huge hall. It was such a wonderful place, this huge hall with tatami mats and nothing in it at all. And the ceiling was made of big beams that formed a grid, and inside of each of the grid, there was a square, and different famous

artists over hundreds and hundreds of years would be given a square to paint. This was like the Sistine Chapel, only Zen, you know? [Laughs.] It was the best people, the most fantastic images. And then there was one screen in the room.

They love their screens. It was gold leaf, the whole screen, and it had a [horizontal –DF] line splat across it, which probably meant something, but I'd never seen anything so beautiful in my life. It was this big black sumi-e thing that was done by a brush like that, just running across the screen, across this gold. There was an artist friend that took me there. I said, "You know, that's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life in terms of painting. It's so simple, and it's so beautiful, and I'm going to pass out." And he said, "Oh, that's good. That's a friend of mine who did that." [Laughs.] Because I thought it's got to be 12th century or something. [Laughs.] But anyway—no, it's a friend of his. So we went to meet this guy, and one of the features that they had in Japan still—it's a very old, old tradition, but if artists met—they have these little—kind of little boards with little gold trim around it, and they make something wonderful for each other, and they trade them.

So it was easy for me, as a cartoonist, to make this kind of cartoon of myself, which was very like the guardian deities that they have, these fierce-looking guys—[laughs]—that only a gaijin, only a gringo could look like that. It doesn't look like a Japanese. Then I'd have this guy diving in with these wings coming out of his head. Actually, everybody really liked those things. [Laughs.] [… –DF] I got from this man this incredible, brilliant calligrapher—he was actually a National Treasure in Japan. He was probably in his 80s by the time I saw him. We went to his studio, and it was a big, big place, and it was all tatami mats. And in the center of the room was his work table. And everything was totally immaculate and very far out, except for his paint block, and he had all these brushes stuck in it mashed up really funky-looking. [Laughs.] I said, "Wow! It looks like an abstract expressionist."

So he said, "What would you like me to paint?" I said, "You've got to paint Mu for me. I want to see the kanji of Mu." And I thought, I am really going to watch this guy with an eagle eye and find out how you make it. And in the calligraphy, there's stroke one, two, three, four, five, six, that kind of feeling. So I thought, well, I'll see how he does it. So he mashes these things—[laughs]—in this spot, and he goes, "Kabluah!" and there it was. And I thought, that's fabulous. I didn't learn anything at all—[laughs]—except the wonderment of this guy, because it wasn't calligraphy. […–DF] I swear he just went "Blurge," and there it was. [Laughs.] It was like next to God. So I had many experiences like that.

When I got back, I was still really interested in the five elements. This was a long way from the geometry that I'd been practicing in New York and Pittsburgh and North Africa. It was all gone. Once I started taking down these geometric items that were scattered around in the landscape, then it was not possible to continue that particular line of painting because I had gotten to the point when I was doing in panels in New York where I used a spray gun because I really didn't want to have any sign of who touched it with what, no brushstrokes and no fingerprints. With this spray gun, it was very liberating. These panels that I would make would just be very pure.

Actually, adding to my epiphany in New York, I was there on the fifth floor. Across the street was a sweatshop with all these Chinese ladies that were making sheets or something, and I was painting these panels, like "they got me. New York has got my soul. I can't get out of this one." [Laughs.] When I first got here, I built a little dome to be a spray booth and had a fan in there, and that was it. It was not a livable space. Then I thought, what I am doing with all this machinery; I just want to paint. I just got back to brushes. [Laughs.] Then the brushes became meaningful, and I started doing this calligraphy stuff. So in this long time, there are many forms that I went through, but basically, they were each following the next, and sometimes they would just fade out on me. Whole years of research and work would just suddenly change into something else.

Usually I would have the freedom and the willingness to go on with that and not fight it. There were changes that I think that if I had been more professionally successful in New York, for example, it would have been very hard to make those kind of major changes without being thrown out completely. [Laughs.] Actually, I did experience that because I continued to show in New York, and I would show something, and the gallery person would advertise it, and things would happen, and then I'd show up a year later with a completely different set of items, and they said, "Well, wait a minute now, we're doing this other thing." "You do whatever you want; this is what I'm doing." So that kind of freedom to change and to investigate a hundred different things was extremely important.

ELISSA AUTHER: What was their reaction to the calligraphy-inspired work?

DEAN FLEMING: I actually had a show with Max Hutchinson in New York and also in Houston, Texas, of these pieces. It was good. I didn't get rich and famous or anything, but basically I was not paying attention to what was going on in America or in New York or—[laughs]—so these things would just come in out of the blue, and it was lucky if I found somebody that was even going to look at it.

New York was going through major changes. Even in the '60s, they were saying painting is dead, it's all going to be video or happenings or some kind of other thing. I thought, well, I feel personally very related to the cave

painters that had a frayed stick, and they'd paint you a buffalo, and it would be perfect. These are the guys I related to. From that time to the present, painting with a brush on a cloth is like—is still going on. As the years go on, I feel even more isolated with that attitude, but I just don't see it as being something that would go away any more than singing a song would go away. It's very direct, and all of these other things are not direct, and they may express somebody or be a major aesthetic concern, but it's not the same thing. I've said this over and over, that that relationship I had as a child with that paper—nothing else. There was nothing else.

I still think that way—[laughs]—and I still want that relationship. There's no way I can get to do that with a keyboard or whatever screens and different strange things. [… –DF] I always felt avant-garde, but now I feel like this weird Luddite—[they laugh]—that doesn't want to related to how America is going. I just can't do that. It's just not interesting to me and seems kind of spooky in a way how much time spend glued to their screens.

Just to give you this chronology, we're moving out of the '70s. Poverty was always a major feature here, and we did everything in the world to try to make money short of getting a job—[they laugh]—[… –DF]. The idea was so appalling. I was asked to teach in different places here in the university, but I generally didn't do it unless it would be like a one-night lecture or something like that. I just couldn't see how I could do that and live here, a long way from anyplace. Certainly I wasn't going to go to the university in Pueblo or Colorado Springs or Denver, which were the places that were calling.

A lot of people who would come here originally ended up having to leave because they really needed some kind of income. [Laughs.] Here in this valley in the communities, the main thing we had was tree planting. So everybody'd go out and they'd plant trees, in the spring, and it was extremely hard work. You had to hoedad and put this tree in there and tamp it down, make sure that's going to live, and come back the next year and replace ones that didn't live, a very hard job. But there was, for us, a huge amount of money involved.

It was also done in a communal way, so that if one person planted a thousand trees in one day and another planted a hundred trees, they got the same pay. We just took whatever was earned and divided it up equally. That was extremely far out to me. I thought that's good thinking. If a person just wasn't doing the work or couldn't or something, they were not in there, but if some people were just slower or they worked more carefully or something like that, and some people were just gangbusters. They just—boom, boom, boom. [They laugh.] It's like, whoa. I could never get anywhere near a thousand a day. What Linda and I did for years, we would go to New York and then just take anything, often like just hanging sheetrock or doing some kind of carpentry for an income and then painting. And we did exchange with different artists, stayed in places, mostly Mark di Suvero's place down on Front Street. So I just kept going back to the same place again, [… –DF] and allowing for many changes in the art.

But finally, we're thinking, the interesting [places to us always were –DF] either New York or San Francisco, so we alternated them. And at one point we went out to San Francisco, and I got a teaching job at Mills College, and there was a possibility of staying there, and they also had an opening for sculpture, so we got Linda in there. We were both working, and it was good. We had a studio down in East Oakland that belonged to Pete Voulkos, West Coast Macaroni Factory. It was this great industrial building that he had divided up into lofts, and they were ample and inexpensive [… –DF]. I remembered I had the bottom floor, which is a cement floor, and it just opened out to this parking lot for the macaroni factory.

By that time my little son Luz was born. I guess by '80 he was 6 years old, but got him a pair of roller skates, and I—myself, painted with roller skates because walking on cement is hard. You do that all day long. [Laughs.] It's not good for you. But the roller skates were okay. [Laughs.] And then we'd suddenly just go out in the street and down all over East Oakland, which actually was all black and was a ghetto, and a lot of people were afraid to go there. But we're skating down there, never even considered that it wasn't perfect.

An interesting sidelight, it was time for Luz to go to school, and we looked around, and the public school in Oakland was a terrifying place. It was all boarded up, the bottom floor, and then graffitied and chopped and machine gunned. And I said, "I'm not going to send my little kid to that place." [Laughs.] So we looked around. We couldn't figure out what we're going to do with the guy. Finally Linda came up with this idea, I'm going to go to the Black Panthers office and talk to them about it. [Laughs.] So she did. And she said, "I've got this guy. He's white. He wants to go to school, but boy, that public school looks like a disaster." So they said, "Oh, well, he should go to Sister Clara Muhammad School in the mosque." It was a black Muslim place, and it was actually Walid Mohammad. When I was first in New York in the '50s, I would go up to 125th Street and listen to these black Muslim guys, including Malcolm X, on the corners and just preaching. I was involved in a group that was a Muslim group from Indonesia.

This is all sidelight, but I knew about the Muslim religion, and I was very interested in what these guys were saying. But they were followers of Elijah Muhammad in Chicago, who was a very strong racist. He said whitey's the devil and do it this way. So it was not something for me or about me. But his son said, "There will be no racial mention in our practices." He had been to Mecca, as Malcolm X had gone to Mecca, and he found, oh, no,

the Muslim religion is everybody; it's not just black people in Chicago. This was a huge, meaningful revelation. But when I took Luz in there, it was all black for sure. [Laughs.] There were some very light blacks and some very dark blacks and everything in between. So they got Luz, they said, "Put your arm down there," and then they all put their arms out to see who was blackest and who wasn't. [Laughs.]

But the kids were young, and they weren't racially motivated, and everybody got along really well. The only thing that was [difficult –DF] was that they were mostly rich kids, prosperous Oakland kids, and often they came to school in little suits. [Laughs.] And Luz didn't have any little suits. I had a '48 Chevy at that time. It was pretty funky, and I'd drive Luz over to school and looked like some kind of Dust Bowl characters. These people would come in in big Cadillacs and these beautiful kids. Oh, my God. But it was a religious school, and it was very much interested in there being no conflict, no fights in the courtyard or racial trips, none of that, and it was very emphatic about that. It was a very neat place for Luz to go to school as a kid because he got a rapport with a completely different race that has lasted him very well all his life. Now he lives in Bed-Stuy, and he's the only whitey in 10 blocks. These are all friends, and these are all people that are supportive, and it's like he's serving a kind of function like that. [… –DF]

ELISSA AUTHER: What year did he go to that school?

DEAN FLEMING: Trying to think—we were there like '78, '79 and '80, '81.

ELISSA AUTHER: So you were—

DEAN FLEMING: I would really have to look that up. [Laughs.]

ELISSA AUTHER: But the whole time you were teaching at Mills?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, I only taught there for a year, and Linda only taught there for a year. We could have stayed. We could have applied. For a year I worked jackhammering cement in the Dutch Boy lead factory—[laughs]—which sounds bad. We were turning it into a loft for artists. That was also in East Oakland. That was something else entirely. We loaded up on lead. Then I got the teaching thing, and I thought I could stay there. That was pretty interesting. I would bicycle from down where the macaroni factory is - I'd bicycle up to Mills College because it was kind of elegant and very unlike the ghetto. [Laughs.] I'd go through all these changes as I went up. I'd pull into the place, and here'd be the Kronos Quartet playing out on the lawn. [Laughs.] Nobody's even listening, and whoa! [Laughs.]

ELISSA AUTHER: So was your work still related to the work that emerged out of the Japan trip, or had it changed?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, yes, it had changed a lot. The calligraphy went on for years, but it kept evolving. By the time I got to Mills College, I was doing these things that were like just a huge wall of paint, really thick. I was still working with acrylics, but they had this chemical that you could put in there that would fatten it up, and you had another chemical that would dry this mass. So I would make huge blobs of [paint –DF] in buckets and then pour them out. I had a Japanese rake, bamboo rake, and I would rake the paint. Basically, the idea was that it would look like one stroke; it wouldn't look like a whole lot of different things, but it would be one stroke, it would be made of many different colors, so maybe the final thing would appear black. Then as you look at it, different lights, it would pick up. It was almost like the oil slick. You'd see these rainbows and greens and other colors that were mixed into it. Then I would have a second feature on this canvas that would be some high contrast to that.

In many ways, that relates to things I'm doing now, except they were vertical and not horizontal. Now I've got these two characters like that, but these were like a larger figure on top and a kind of calligraphic thing on the bottom. That varied a lot. Some of them were just circles of the primary colors, red, yellow and blue. That kept evolving. The things were evolving constantly, so they didn't really stay in any particular area. The show that I had at the college, at Mills College, when I first got there was almost all of this big stroke with something very fundamental at the bottom. I think the best piece that I did at the macaroni factory had so many colors in this thick paint that it was impossible to tell where it was or what color it was. [Laughs.] It was just constantly changing. Then it was bare canvas, and then at the bottom I had a rectangle of white, matte white on this cloth-colored ground. And then there was this thing above it that was just completely full of information. I hadn't really honestly thought about this before, but these really had a lot to do with what I'm doing now. [Laughs.] Only thing, I'd turn horizontal. Maybe I'm just getting older now. [Laughs.] But these were all vertical.

Then when I got back to here, there's an influence going on in this land that I've experienced many, many times, and it's mystical, and it maybe doesn't happen to everybody, but it's a feeling about the people that were here before, before the Spanish, before the whiteys, anybody else came here. Greenhorn was a Comanche chief, and the Comanches lived in these caves. If you go right up here close to Libre where the Dakota shale is, there are caves in there, and there you'll find spear points and arrowheads, and there are places where you could see in the sandstone where they'd sharpened their instruments. I'm thinking that Comanches lived in these caves. They were newcomers. I mean, they were maybe 200, 300 years ago. So before that, there was something else,

and before that, and before that, and there was this feeling like that.

So what happened in my paintings was instead of being these combinations of many different colors making a kind of a black, I started using the earth here, and I started using pigment from rocks that are 300 million years old, and if you open them up, it's ochre color. I did a bunch of paintings with this ochre, and I did a bunch of paintings with adobe, the dirt, and a bunch of paintings with the white sand from this cave where the Indians lived. So they begin to change, in that sense. They changed from squares to circles, and they were still being raked with this bamboo rake, which was almost like Zen gardening, my feeling about it at the time. It was calligraphy, but it wasn't like brushstrokes. I always was involved in those two characters so that you would have —at any time [… –DF] two spaces on the same canvas. This is the illusion that to me seemed inherent in the use of canvas like that and the two-dimensional surface.

Then I thought, well, okay, I've done my years in San Francisco, and I've got to do some more time in New York, and in probably '81 or '82 I moved to Redhook in Brooklyn and had a loft there. That was an interesting time. My neighbors were Puerto Rican, and they were listening to salsa all the time, and so I had the salsa on the radio. I loved the music, and I was listening to it all the time. So I call this series of paintings that I did there Salsa paintings. And they were geometric, but they were very feely done in terms of the brushstroke. They were not hard-edged the way I had done in the '60s. And there was a lot of variation in that they were mostly very diagonal, very active formally, and they seemed to be piling up diagonals and then creating a light in the center, a yellow that was glowing in this whole activity.

That went on for about three years. I'd live here for six months, and then I'd live back there. And my friend Brendt Berger that has the museum, we were building galleries up on 57th Street. As carpenter, we'd build the whole thing and sheetrock and paint it and just transform these industrial spaces, some of them in SoHo and some of them in 57th Street and some of them on 23rd Street. We did a whole variety of things. After I'd been there about three years doing that and then coming home and going back and keeping my storefront in Redhook, I was on the subway at 7:30 in the morning with my saw, bashing into everybody—[laughs]—my hammers and stuff. I said, "I'm not an artist in New York; I'm a carpenter in Brooklyn. I got to get out of here." [Laughs.] I said, no matter how much money, which was a lot to me at that time, it wasn't going to be enough, maybe 3,000 [dollars]. It wasn't going to be enough; I got to get out of here; I'm never going to be able to save it.

So I came home. That's when I went through one of the major changes of my whole painting life because right away these diagonals, these Salsa series, became more organic and more squishy, and they were doing [a funny thing of being … –DF] random abstraction that reminded me of work that I was doing in the '50s of vaguely abstract expressionist and this kind of unknown. It was very uncomfortable to be that. To know so little about what I was doing. [Laughs.] But anyway, I thought, just paint, shut up, keep painting, and then this death's head appeared in this huge complex of color and paint. I thought, that's ridiculous; I don't want to have anything to do with that. [Laughs.] So I painted it out, and I was painting away and not knowing and feeling anxiety about it. And this head came up again, differently. It wasn't the same one. It just appeared there and said, that looks terribly like a face; that looks like a face that's trying to get into this canvas.

Then I really went through some struggle because I had painted abstractly for 30 years straight, and I had lots of attitudes. It was not going to be pop art; it is not going to be abstract—it's not going to do this and that, and it's not going to represent anything. Partly that was motivated by the Muslim thing that I was into, and it was also motivated by some kind of early input of abstract painters who were telling me, "Oh, yes, this is the way to go." Anyway, I realized that whatever the attitudes were, they were only mine, and nobody was looking, and nobody gave a damn. [Laughs.] Here I was living in this place called Libre, and I was not being free. I was being uptight about this face in there—[laughs]—just painted in there. I thought, I don't want a painting of a face in my storeroom. It didn't matter. [Laughs.] You didn't want a painting of this bad-looking Salsa series either. So I went ahead and painted it in. Little blob of paint here and there to just let that face appear.

Then I thought, yes, that's what I have to do now. That was a [big –DF] change from 30 years of hard labor. All of the abstract paintings had some relationship to each other, calligraphy and free and spontaneous and free jazz kind of feeling and even Native American kind of feeling in some of them. They were all connected. All of a sudden here I was doing these faces. So I just followed them. I just said, I don't know what they're doing or where they're going or what, but I just want to follow it.

And another quality which I've spoken of is that I've always felt very strongly politically aware. I never wanted to be isolated that way; I want to know who's doing what and who's killing who. I loved history, but I mainly was interested in contemporary activities. And yes, the Vietnam War had wound down. It was a total disaster. And at this point Reagan and his buddies were doing all this terrible criminal activity, supporting the Contras in Nicaragua, and I had been to Nicaragua. I knew what that was like there, and I thought keeping the people from standing up and having their own government is stagnating—.

[END OF TRACK.]

DEAN FLEMING: [in progress] — an evil. I thought I should go and I don't know what. I was 50 years old. Well, what am I supposed to be doing down there? But anyway, that's what I thought. So I borrowed money from a bunch of people that had my face paintings.

There was a friend that used to come through here a lot that lived in Mexico. He said, well, you need to stop at my place in Mexico on your way to Nicaragua. So I said, okay, I can do that. He was living in a place on the coast called Yelapa, which was extremely beautiful. It was just an ecstatic place. And he had built his tension structures up on top of this hill. He was looking out over this whole cove and the bay and the whole Pacific. And it was really quite heavenly.

So I was there and I was trying to just feel like what I'm going to do. I'm going to get to Nicaragua and fight against the Contras and God knows what. I did know that I was a pacifist. I did know that I had no rights to grab any kind of weapons. My ears were still ringing from 1952. So that was a consideration. But I thought, well, what I can do—I can be this artist, as I have, and I could help young people or whoever it is to show them how to deal with the paint and how to deal with a wall and paint these murals for the Sandinistas. Oh my God, this was my whole thought.

Then a very unusual, unexpected event happened. A bunch of—like, eight or 10 Nicaraguan doctors showed up in Yelapa on the beach. They were on R&R. They were resting and recuperating from the whole war scene in Managua. They were spending all day and night patching up people who were getting shot by the CIA and by the Hondurans. It was not a good story. Here's some Nicaraguans. So I started talking with these guys. They were very intelligent doctors. They were not just pure Che Guevara people or anything, but they were definitely on the side of the Sandinistas and trying to help keep the country together physically.

I talked to them at length. Finally I got through telling my story, what I wanted to do and all that, and they said, boy, that sounds really good, but why you? And I said, well, because I thought of it and I feel angry. They said, well, first of all, the average age in Nicaragua is 15 at that time. The last thing they want there is a 50-year old gringo that's a pacifist who's going to tell them how to paint murals. He said, they know how to paint murals. They're doing it right now. They don't need advice of Western ideas of paint mixing.

I started getting down and I realized that I had no idea what I was doing. It's a good thing they diverted me, but not completely. I made a friend there who had a car. I said, well, that's the only war you can drive to. So let's get going. And we drove the car from Puerto Vallarta to Mexico City and then Cuernavaca and we're on our way south and the car blew up. It wasn't a very good car anyway, but it blew up, threw a rod. And we didn't have any money to deal with that or fix it. It was not a wonderful car. It was really a piece of junk.

And we were standing there on the highway looking at this steaming thing and I thought, so long Nicaragua. They didn't want me there anyway. So I went back to Yelapa. Then it ended up I stayed there for five years. During that time, I worked through a lot—I mean, I also was here six months of the year. I always came here every year. It wasn't like I gave up on Libre. But I'd spend all winter down there, which was ecstatic and surfing every day. Then here I'd be in the summertime. I could have my gardens and things and be with the community.

Anyway, I went through a huge number of changes with the painting. They were kind of self-portraits, the first skull-like paintings. Then when I got to Mexico I started doing portraits and they were caricatures, they weren't actual people. They were kind of cartoon like and kind of funny in a way. They also had some content to them, beyond just being a laugh or anything. There were no punch lines to these cartoons.

I did these Indians. I did a whole series of different Indians that were in the area. Then when I got back here, I started doing people from all over the world. There were some Africans and some Indonesians and some Vietnamese. I remember doing all these different characters. And I would find either images of them or they would be purely invented. Surely by the time the paintings got done, they were not copies of a photograph or anything like that—a long way from it.

Ouspensky said this in the *Tertium Organum* when I was talking about the fourth dimension—that was 1961 that I read that. He had many ideas—many different ways to define the fourth dimension. He said the people that are going to be closest to understanding what that is are the artists because they know that things come from some mystical place.

Space is relative. You might feel it's like this, might be a little bit like that. So there's a chance in all of that, there's an openness to what that is. He said that artists always, from the beginning of time, have painted their images of God, of the Supreme Being or a supreme something or other. I thought, wow, that's not possible. I hear Warhol's doing Coke bottles and Campbell soup cans. But then I thought, well, actually, that is God to this guy. [Laughs.] Not only him, but most of Americans too.

When I first met Andy, he was silk screening these bowties that were paper, but they were bowties. They were dollars bills.

ELISSA AUTHER: Were they meant to be worn?

DEAN FLEMING: Worn, Yes. He kept handing them out, these bowties that were made of dollar bills. And I thought, that's so sick, I hated that. But anyway—[laughs]—so I started thinking about all the different art that I had ever seen in my life and whether or not that was an analogy. He said it was an analogy because there is no picture. We're talking about Mu here almost. You see all these analogies from all over the world of God—and different periods of time. They're all describing something. And inside of that is the item that you're concerned about—not a being, not something visible.

I took that very personally. I thought, oh my God, now I'm doing these different races. I thought, well, right now in my life at that time, that was God, the human being. The human being in all its different forms would—could be that God. That was a very interesting period of time. Then the pieces kept evolving and evolving.

Then, rather than just portraits, they became figures and the figures were in an environment. That environment was taken from here. It was actually different mountains or different outcroppings or buttes. There would be these figures dancing around them or somehow performing around them. That kept evolving until the figures kind of disappeared and it just became a landscape. That took me years, to get to that point.

I had never really thought to paint this view because, first of all, it seemed extremely beautiful and constantly changing and I thought a lot about Ansel Adams and the photographers that were able to photograph this is a way that was most beautiful and would be objectionable if it were a painting, to me, just that that kind of representation, that kind of detail was not what I was experiencing here.

Because this was an evolving, changing thing and I was very free about how I interpreted the landscape, then it was really basically painting. I use the word paintings. You saw one yesterday that was with those mountains. That was more like it. They were mostly cartoons also.

ELISSA AUTHER: They're fairly abstracted versions of the landscape.

DEAN FLEMING: Very abstract. Mainly paint splats around that would form up and make a mountain or a tree. This went on for about 30 years—many, many changes. There's a lot of sorrow in my life, in the things that I have seen, like the constant warring.

I've seen, since I've been here, since 1968, I saw the skies change. It used to be crystal clear here. It used to be so clear that these Sangre de Cristos would seem like they were as far away as this little butte right here, it would be so clear. It's been a long, long time since it's been that clear. Probably 1990 I started to really see that, that there was a kind of scuz appearing in front of everything.

When I was a kid in California in the '30s, there was a huge amount of pollution. I mean, the oil wells all over Venice. It was really a mess. The San Gabriel Mountains were there and they were beautiful and they were singing and my father and I used to go out over into the deserts and camp. It was just part of my life. I'd see the ocean on one side and the San Gabriel Mountains and the Santa Monica Mountains on the other side.

As time went on, even by the '50s—by 1950, the pollution was so intense that you couldn't see the mountains anymore. When I thought that that could happen here, and the pollution might be coming from Beijing or Seoul or Washington state—I don't know where it's coming from, it's the whole world. I traveled around a lot. And everywhere I went, I'd see that sky has changed, it's changed. We've already polluted the whole Earth. That's just the beginning. We're going to take it way down.

So what happened to the paintings of the mountains was that I couldn't bear to look at them all day every day that same way. I do look at them, but it's quite different when you're painting and you're really watching them. I couldn't see the mountains. I couldn't see the canyons. Just flat.

ELISSA AUTHER: And that's reflected in those paintings?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, so what happened—it was practical, but what I did was start getting closer and closer. And finally, the last of the figurative things that I was doing was the trees and bushes and flowers that were really close to me here, that were still visible that way. That's a really sad story, when you think about it.

I just couldn't bear to be painting these mountains anymore when I couldn't see them. I wasn't going to paint them flat. I wasn't going to paint them like it's always stormy. The times when they should have been crystal clear they were not any longer. Maybe there'd be one day in the whole year that is fairly clear, that a lot of wind is blowing the scuz away. We have power plants going in the Four Corners, that's the biggest polluter in this

area.

Anyway, that's going on [with –DF] the politically conscious and the ecologically conscious. It wasn't like I could ever escape that. But one thing I was really interested in, in living this obscure, isolated kind of lifestyle, was that I shouldn't become ignorant of what was going on in the world. So I subscribed to all these different magazines and newspapers and I was going to steep myself in it, get very depressed. But when I saw it actually happening to my own dear mountains here, it was like, well, that's certainly the beginning of the end.

ELISSA AUTHER: Hmm. Let's stop here because I have to change the—

[END OF TRACK.]

ELISSA AUTHER: Dean, you want to add something?

DEAN FLEMING: So—yes, so we had gotten back from Japan in 1970, and life was going on, painting paintings. Then at one point, my little daughter, who was just short of three years old at that time, when we were in Japan, she was learning to speak Japanese and English at the same time, and she spoke perfect Japanese. She was the interpreter and she was like two years old. [He laughs.] But if I'd say something, people would just stare at me, like, what? She'd say the same thing—and I would hear it; it sounded like the same thing—and they'd say, "oh, yes." And then they'd talk to her. We just had her running the show. [He laughs.] She was a very wonderful, remarkable child. And suddenly, she had a series of events, when she fell into a little spring and died—drowned—happened so fast, never sick in her life, never sick even on that day, and—

ELISSA AUTHER: This happened in Japan?

DEAN FLEMING: No, it happened here on a different property. That was staggeringly devastating. It was so, so hard to deal with. I didn't know what to do. I was living at that time in a retreat house in the back of the land, little place, the art that I was doing was just really small, and I was like going through huge changes. Then she died, and it then intensified that to such an extent that I really went bonkers. I thought what I need to do is just walk south. I'm going to go to Mexico. I didn't have any money; I didn't have any vehicle; I didn't have any hope for a moment. Linda and I had separated.

Anyway, a series of events—I met some guy that was traveling and I traveled with him down through Central America. So we actually spent a lot of time in Mexico, saw my old friends there, a lot of people I knew in Mexico. This was like '71, after she died. Then went to Nicaragua, when Samoza was still there, and it was a very oppressed place. Ninety nine percent of the people were really poor, and then Samoza was this big, fat, horrible person.

I had put everything aside. I felt like I had lost absolutely everything when I lost that little girl. I got to Panama, and I had gone through all these borders, through Mexico and Guatemala and Central America. Every time you'd come to a border, you'd say your name, age, occupation and so forth, and I would put "nada, nada, nada." I had no occupation and I wouldn't just put painter, because at that moment, I wasn't painting.

I got to Panama, and I'm going to go to South America; I'd better start acting differently. I can't just have this death wish that was driving me—I was very reckless, doing a lot of very strange stuff and standing up to the banditos that had their pistols aimed at me. I said, "Go ahead and shoot; I don't give a damn. These are like artificial penises"—and oh my god—[he laughs]—okay, why didn't they shoot me? Then I'd go swimming with the sharks. I'd see these sharks and I'd just swim with them. I was really pushing it. I thought if death was so easy, maybe I should just go into that one.

When I finally got to Panama, I realized I had been through all of these borders and I'd said "nada, nada"—that was not acceptable. I had spent my whole life being an artist, and I was not saying that. I was saying I was nothing. I started painting more seriously. At that time, I had gotten a bunch of paper from a stationary store and some inks, colored inks and [started –DF] painting things on paper. My primary influence at that time was tantric art. The tantric art seemed to me to epitomize that idea that all artists are painting an analogy for God, and that's it. I [didn't –DF] know about anything—I [didn't –DF] have a huge–amount of hope or love—I had been through all this poverty of Central America, oppression of dictatorships and fascism, and I was like, oh man. I found it very, very hard to care about anything.

So these first paintings were like little beans; in the middle of the page, there would be this bean. I would get involved making this. It wasn't actually a bean, but it would be a little—I thought they were like cosmic germs; they were like little things. I thought, as soon as I get to South America, I'm just going to get a studio and start painting. [He laughs.] I didn't have any money, I didn't have nothing. That's beside the point; I'm going to do it.

And I had been traveling with a couple of guys that were on their way to Tierra del Fuego. A lot, a lot of people decided they're going to go to Tierra del Fuego; it's not really that interesting. But that's what they thought. I'm

not going to go anywhere with these guys; I'm going to get out of this car and that's going to be the end of it. I had many experiences. Actually, we took a lumber barge to Ecuador and to Esmeraldas, which was all black; it was very interesting. It was slaves that somehow escaped and then made this little town. At least the part that I saw was all black, and it was like landing in Africa, and here it was in Ecuador. That was pretty neat and I saw some potential there.

But these friends were part of this Indonesian group that I was involved in. It was called Subud, S-U-B-U-D. They said, "There's a Subud group in Quito, and we want you to go up there," because I was the interpreter of that trip. My Spanish isn't all that good, but it was a lot better than theirs, and we wanted to go and meet these people up in Quito.

So we went on up the mountain, out of the jungles and up and up and up, way up into Quito. We got there in the evening, and we just had pulled into the city, we didn't know anything about anything, but we did know the address of this Subud house. And they have a meditation period that happens regularly everywhere in the world—I mean, there's these groups everywhere in the world. I was involved with them in Japan and in Europe and in L.A. and New York, wherever I was, there was the Subud group. So we just pulled in there, and we came running up the stairs to this room and people were just beginning to start this meditation. We just went in there, and not too many people even saw us coming in. And it's a dark room, so nobody actually saw us until after we were through with this meditation, which had the quality, as any good meditation should, that you feel considerably better after you've done it, like something really has happened, something is better. I wouldn't say you were enlightened, but you're heading in that direction anyway, so everybody was very amiable.

And they said, "Oh, who are you guys, where did you come from? What are you doing?" So I announced to my buddies and to these Quito people, I said, "I am a painter and I'm looking for a studio, and that's what I'm going to do." These friends were surprised by that. They knew it, because I said in Esmeraldas that I was going to stay there.

Anyway, one of the people in that group came to me; he said, "I've been made the patrón, or the manager of this hacienda up in the mountains." And he said, "It's right on the equator, 10,000 feet up, and it's surrounded by these 20,000-foot peaks." It was the most amazing thing—[he laughs]—I've ever seen in my life. He said, "This used to be a missionary," and there's all these different kinds of buildings around it that were empty, because they left for Louisiana—[he laughs]—they weren't converting anybody for five years," he said. "Then they left, so you can have any one of those buildings. Then for income, you can work for me at the hacienda. We're just doing Rudolph Steiner farming." And it was totally organic; it was changing everything. The Louisianans had pretty much destroyed the land with all of these chemicals, so we had to bring it all back and plant all kinds of legumes and then plow them under, and it was an interesting process.

Anyway, we went out to this land and then I walked away from his house and the center of the place, down to where the missionaries had been, and there was a church there. On the outside of the church, it was a very primitive mural of Jesus, or what they called El Sembrador, and he was casting seeds. And the seeds were all like my little paintings—[he laughs]—from Panama. I was like, wow, man, so that must be my studio right in there.

So I went in there and it was kind of creepy, in a way. There were all these benches, and on the benches, there were open hymnals and you know, it was like everybody just got up and ran. And they didn't stack the books or straighten anything up. It was like weird. The Indians—it was all Indians there, the Otavalo Indians—and they didn't ever go near that place, or in it, ever, nobody. So here I came, and I just barged in there and said, "Wow, this is a perfect studio." [He laughs.] I took all the benches and Bibles out, put them outside. So these Indians gathered, they said, "Are you a missionary?" And I said, "No, that's not what I'm doing at all."

They said, "Well, are you from the Peace Corps?" [He laughs.] And I said, "No, I'm not from the Peace Corps." So they started to get really relaxed. They brought out some rum and so we started drinking rum. [He laughs.] They said, "Boy, we didn't like those missionaries and we really didn't like the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps would come and they'd design these elaborate irrigation systems, but [we –DF] wouldn't have any money to build them, so they'd leave. They had this piece of paper with a drawing of what they should do." [He laughs.] "And the missionaries," they said, "we never saw them." They were these people from Louisiana that just stayed in the house, and they never even related to any of the Indians. So I didn't know what was going on; I said, "No, I'm a painter. I think this is very beautiful and I just want to paint paintings." You wouldn't believe the splendor. The mountains were all twice as big as all of these. Well, but then it's clouds would be forming and rivers roaring down, there were Incan ruins all around. It was the most amazing place. And they said, "Why would you be here?" And I said, "This is beautiful." And they go, "What's beautiful about it?" [He laughs.] [… –DF]

But I was saving my life, after the death of Lia. I just needed to be as far away from Libre and New York and the art profession and everything else. But my life has always been painting, so I painted every day. I painted pretty much all day, every day. Then I hiked around. I explored the land, which was totally, totally amazing, everything about that. And being 10,000 feet up, the weather was more like San Francisco than it was like if you go down

into the Amazon and you go down into the coast, it's the equator; it's—[he laughs]—it's staggeringly humid and hot. It's almost scary, full of bugs and everything, but up on the mountain, it was all clean and clear.

The Otavalo Indians were people who were so advanced and so beautiful that when the Incans were defeating everybody, they got up into Ecuador and they saw these people and they said, "These people are more advanced than we are." And they just were friends, and they never defeated them. They were almost the only Indian tribes in all of South America that weren't crushed like crazy by the Spaniards or the Portuguese. It was a fantastic crew. And they were these beautiful people; they traveled all over the world. They wear these kind of like Humphrey Bogart-blue hats, and then they have blue ponchos and then they have white pants that are like pedal-pushers, the men, and they wear these little espadrille kind of items. The women are exactly the same, same hats, same poncho, but they wear white skirts with the same golden sandals.

They go all over the world—they make things. They're like incredible craftspeople, they do weavings and jewelry, all kinds of different kinds of weavings and things that they take—and I see them everywhere. There are a bunch of them in Santa Fe, in different stores, and in the flea markets. Then they were in New York City, and I've seen them in Germany, and I've seen them every place, these Otavalos. And they're very confident, and they're beautiful people. They're small, and they—men and women both have long, long black hair that's braided, so they have a kind of pigtail, long hair, beautiful. They are so gorgeous, they're almost unreal humans, the Otavalo.

So they had been making a lot of income from making rugs that were Persian-style knotted rugs, not woven, but knotted. You would take three strands of wool, maybe even three different colors, there's an infinite variation. But then you take three of them and you knot them around two of the vertical strands, and so you do a whole row, and then you pound it down with a comb that goes between them and make it really, really hard. So then when it's done, it's a pile rug that's probably over an inch thick, and it's just the ends of all of these little knots coming up. It's quite, quite amazing.

This one friend who was trying to help us with what we were doing, with this Subud adventure of this hacienda, said, "There's a lot of unemployed Otavalo that know how to do this work." But whoever was backing it went away, and the whole thing collapsed, and they have the capacity to do it, but they don't have designers. They don't have people who can make the images that they would weave, and they don't have the money for the materials or anything.

So we went into the town, and we met these people around the plaza, just sitting around. And they were unemployed [… –DF], they said, "That's the guy you want to see. He's the best weaver in this whole place." And so we started talking to him and we said, "We want to make a business of this, make these rugs." So in the end, I did 24 different images that they worked on, and they were drawn on graph paper that was like a centimeter square, and each centimeter represented a knot. And so you know, I would do these sheets that were 9 by 12 feet. I did all kinds of different things—

ELISSA AUTHER: Were they related to your earlier geometric paintings or were they more painterly?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, you wouldn't say they were painterly, because they were definitely rugs. But the first ones I did were very much calligraphy, and I think the very first one I did was like "Ohm;" I did this whole "Ohm" thing in the middle of this carpet. And they had—it was lamb's wool, and it could be bleached white or it could be partially like a light brown, or it could be not bleached at all; it would be a kind of dark brown. So I had those three colors to start with. And in this case, it was white with this—with this dark brown Ohm thing in the middle of it; it was pretty far out; it was a beautiful rug. When I saw how they could do it—oh, my gosh.

So we started thinking about it sociologically, let's hire young people, teenage people that could develop a profession in their lives and have some income, because there was not a lot of money in agriculture at that time. There was lots and lots of poor people. Even the Otavalos that traveled all over the world, it was not like a huge amount of money at all. They had this big group, this big tribe, that really tried to keep everybody up. So there was a whole social system of helping each other. They were getting nothing. The primary weaver guy was getting a dollar a day. It was so horrible. I said, "He's worth thousands, you know?" What do I know?

At one point after we had made about 10 of these different things, I thought—I saw how fast they had moved it—in some of the first ones, I would make a circle and then they wouldn't pound hard enough, so the rug would be a kind of oval. I said, "No, you guys, this is supposed to be a circle, you know?" And they'd look real sad. They'd try to pound it harder so it would. Finally, they got really good at it, so they would do exactly what the drawing was. So I thought, this is great I'm going to give them an extra buck [… –DF].

These were mainly girls, they were mainly teenaged, 16, 17-year-old girl working with this older man and he was teaching them all how to do it. I gave them a dollar apiece, it was like, big deal. Then I went away. They were working, in the town of Otavalo—and I was living in the country, not right there. It took a lot of hiking, about a mile and a half hike to the bus, and then I could take the bus to Otavalo. So I wasn't there all the time.

So it was maybe a week went by, and then I thought, I'd better go and see how they're doing. So I went there and there was nobody there, and there was no sign of anybody being there since I was there last, by the look of what was on the loom. I said, "What is going on?" So I went out to the plaza, and they said, "Well, you have insulted the whole town, because you gave these girls money. They have more money than their fathers, and their fathers got drunk and went up in the mountains. And you're going to have to go up there and talk them into coming back." [They laugh.] But I couldn't give them a tip I couldn't do it. I felt so stupid, like a dollar a day, and the father's getting a dollar a day, so that daughter can't get more than 50 cents, otherwise, everybody goes completely nuts. And then that father beats that mother and goes off into the hills and dies somewhere, and he's like, come on, dear god. [He laughs.] But anyway, I realized I was awfully stupid about it.

Then what I did was I'd get a bag of pinto beans or a bag of flour or something like that, and just say, here, for the group. They would be all happy and the father didn't have to commit suicide or anything. [He laughs.] But they would not, could not, take more money. I mean, they were impressed by the dollar thing. That's the way I kept alive, was the money going for that.

Then I had these friends in New York that were putting these rugs in galleries. The most famous was this Armenian rug dealer on 57th Street, and I'll never forget that. I had been in the remote, remote area with nothing happening, and then when I finally got to New York to see it, this guy had put these 9-by-12-foot rugs on the floor, and then he had easy chairs and a couch and like a glass table so you could see the rug. But these chairs would be upholstered with [colors and forms –DF] that related to the rug. He had the upholstery made and matched and—I mean, unbelievable, oh my god. These were worth thousands and thousands of dollars. And I'm thinking, my poor girls down there with their 50 cents, such a weird world.

ELISSA AUTHER: So how long were you there?

DEAN FLEMING: I was there a year, and I had gotten really lonely. I kept begging Linda to come down, and I knew she was with other people and doing other things, and not really very related to me, but she did come down. She said, "I'm not going to follow you all over the world." [He laughs.] She followed me to Japan and now Ecuador. She said, "This is it; I'm not going to do this anymore." But we had a good time. She was there for a while, and then she went back. There's an interesting thing. People say when you have a mourning and somebody dies, it takes a year. And maybe I knew that, maybe I was thinking about that a lot, but in the meditation, which I would do a couple of times a week, I would go into Quito with this group and have the meditation—every time I would get really quiet and everything's fine, Lia would come to me. She would be laughing and smiling; she was just a little girl. Then I would cry. Then I would be screwed. It was not what you'd call meditation. And this went on twice a week for a year straight, and it was so painful and so hopeless. I'm wondering—nothing is changing.

She comes and she's happy; she's not sad or wounded or anything like that. [He laughs.] She'd come to say hello and then I'd start crying, and she would be so exasperated. She'd turn around and leave, and then I'd be even sadder, because all I wanted was her to stay. It was all crazy. But in a year's time, it stopped. She came to me, and that's fine, hi, everything's fine. And she said, "Wow, thank God," you know? And then she could leave. It wasn't like this sorrow went away, because I have this sorrow right now when I'm telling you this, but I could at least function. I could go home. I got this whole rug thing started and then helped the guy with his farm and these Rudolph Steiner techniques, and then I finally went back to Libre. That was 1972, toward the end of the year in '72. So it was a long pilgrimage and I'd want to put that in chronologically.

ELISSA AUTHER: So do you want to go back to the late '80s now?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, sorry. [He laughs.]

DEAN FLEMING: Put that one aside a little bit, because that was a resurrecting time in terms of the painting, because I went through many, many changes and got beyond just the straight painting many different things. I showed work in Denver when I got back, [… –DF] not just the paintings, but also rugs.

ELISSA AUTHER: Do you remember where you showed those?

DEAN FLEMING: It was on Downing Street—it was like Carol Steinberg, Vera List's daughter, had a gallery. I'm trying to think of the name; I keep mixing up. I also had a show on Wazee, which was a whole different thing. The Wilamaro, that's what it was called.

ELISSA AUTHER: Wila?

DEAN FLEMING: W-I-L-A-M-A-R-O, and I think that was like her kids' first initials or something, the Wilamaro Gallery. Anyway, it was very successful. I remember John DeAndrea had the show before me, and he was entering these figures that were extremely lifelike. He had a bunch of them in the storeroom, and I came in there. I was like hanging my painting, and I had to go in the storeroom, there were all these naked people—[he

laughs]—oh god. That was a compliment to him, man, I thought they were real. I go, what? [Laughs.] I am hallucinating bad; all these people sitting around. [He laughs.] Anyway, Carol did some nice [exhibits –DF]. That show was quite well received.

ELISSA AUTHER: This is after you came back from Ecuador?

DEAN FLEMING: Yes, it was actually before that that. Bernie and Beverly Rosen had a place down on Wazee, a big loft, and she actually gave Linda and [me –DF] two floors. So we put all of our most recent things, and then on the other floor, we had work from all different times of our life. It was extremely successful, I have to say. We sold things to the Denver Museum and to the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. We had a four-page spread in the Denver Post standing around with our sculpture. Beverly Rosen was a well-known painter in Denver and one of the art world there. Her gallery drew attention also, but boy, I thought, now, we're finally off the ground in Denver. But—[he laughs]—you can't stay off the ground unless you really work hard at it. [He laughs.] So Wilamaro was the next show that I had in Denver, and that was—no, it was before that. It was before. I'm trying to think of just the nature of the work—getting mixed up with the time, because that probably was '73, and then the Wilamaro thing was probably like '78, just before we went to San Francisco.

Anyway, I'm up to the '90s—so I was painting [objects –DF] that were closer and closer, because they were in focus, and I didn't want to see that blight that was happening over all the land. The sky used to be this brilliant, dazzling blue; it was so intense that it was hard to believe. At one point, the London Sunday Times came from London to find out what's going on with the—Libre—and there was this wonderful woman who was a photographer, and she said, "I cannot shoot this sky, because nobody in London will ever believe it." So she only shot things right around sunset where it was subdued somewhat—[he laughs]—because they said, "This blue—they'll think I just painted these photographs." Anyway, that was gone. Man, that sky was over. Now, we have light blue; we don't have that deep, deep blue, where you're looking out to Mars. The world has become covered.

This had a very strong and irreversible effect on my painting of the landscape, because with that kind of focus, I was just becoming really, really depressed by what was going on. It's not like just because I'm not painting it, I'm not aware of it; that's not true. I watched it change in this 45 years, in this place.

So anyway, there was a process there that went on where I was painting only fictional forests. They were not actually any of what I have around here, but they were vertical trunks of different kinds of trees and different kinds of foliage and different kinds of spaces on the ground, and not a whole lot of sky involved in these ones. That was going on—it was a pretty interesting period of work, and then there was this huge fire. It was curious, because my dear friend, Patsy Krebs, had gotten some land straight across the valley, at the base of Mount Blanca. The fire was on the other side of the hill there. You couldn't really tell exactly where it was, but it was big. And she was evacuated. Everybody in the area was evacuated from their homes. So she came over to stay here, and we sat on the porch every day and watched these flames and smoke. Oh, god, it was so horrible. It was so horrible. We were just praying it didn't come into where she lived. The destruction was beyond belief.

ELISSA AUTHER: What year was that?

DEAN FLEMING: Oh, god. I would really have to look that up. I'm sorry.

ELISSA AUTHER: Ninety-three?

DEAN FLEMING: Probably something like that. That would make it a long time ago, though. But anyway, whatever.

I went over after the fire was finally out, and it didn't destroy her studio or anything. She went back, and I went to see what had happened. There were a lot of vertical trees, even dead ones that were burned, but there were also a lot of diagonal trees, and so I painted them. And I realized that as long as I painted landscapes, there was never any sign of people in them. In fact, there was never any sign of animals or birds or any living thing because I was really concerned to not stop that landscape in a particular moment. I didn't want something that was moving or living in there that would place it in time. Also, I really wasn't interested in painting roads and houses and oil wells. I was still a beatnik about human beings and feeling pretty depressed about it.

I did a few paintings with this smoke and this fire, which was, as you can see, smoke is constantly moving. So a picture of smoke stops that, and that was dealing with a different principle entirely than anything I'd ever done before. And I didn't want to have a picture that stopped at a certain moment, if the cloud is like that. It was very funny. It was being pushed away from the painting.

I didn't have a whole lot of abstract ideas that needed to be done or wanted to be done, but I was being pushed away from these trees and I was pushed away from the mountains. So I just thought, "Well, that's a very abstract thing. That looks like a grid. I'll just paint a grid." So I painted, and the first grids were very similar to

those trees and diagonal trees, fallen trees. They were like verticals and horizontals and diagonals.

After I worked in that area for a while, it was also really frightening because I had made this huge jump again. Thirty years later I was doing another jump. I was like, "My god, it's merciless. It's something that probably never would have happened except where I was really isolated, like Libre, and nobody was looking. I'd been doing the sun dance. I'd been going up to South Dakota and doing the sun dance with the Lakota Indians. This was an unprecedented trip. I was in my sixties. I'd already suffered several different kinds of bad ailments that I had to fight through.

At one point, I had a stroke. The next day I was going to go up on a hill to do a vision quest before the sun dance. I was ready. Everything was ready. I'd already done three years. It was going to be my fourth year of dance. I was tarring the roof, and I felt really good. I thought, "Wow, I am superman." I felt so good. And I went to bed, and when I woke up I'd had a stroke. I think the reason I felt so good is because I didn't have very much oxygen. [Laughs.] But anyway, whatever. I was down. They took me away.

It was not such a bad stroke. I didn't get paralyzed. I was just really out there. There were a few things, but basically I was better off than most of the people in the ward at the hospital that had strokes. Some of them were paralyzed totally. So I wanted to get out of there, and I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could. So I was learning to walk again, learning to move around.

I finally talked them into letting me go home, and I was by no means totally capable, but I got here. I had been working on this painting, and so there was this canvas, and I needed to keep working on it. So I thought I don't really use my brain when I paint, I just use my hand. It was really a dumb idea. Of course you use your brain. You use it quite a bit, actually. I went over to get the paint. I'd knock everything over. And I realized I can't hold a brush. How am I going to put some paint on there? I didn't want to just mess it up. I already was halfway done. So I waited another day and then I tried again, and I just was knocking everything around and splattering around. "I am so out of control, man. How am I going to do this? I can't see properly either."

And then I had a revelation that actually that's the way I wanted to paint. [Laughs.] And if I hadn't—I don't know [what –DF] I would have done. That's okay. Just because you're splattering around, you can do it. These paintings became mainly very close-up of branches, limbs with foliage, but just great splats and carrying on and really very expressionistic kind of painting.

ELISSA AUTHER: What year did you complete that series?

DEAN FLEMING: Well, I would really have to look those things up. It's funny. In the past I could remember each year, but I'm not sure what was happening in '90. I'd have to look it up because I do have records of everything. I have all the slides of everything I've done, and I've kept diaries of all those years. So I have very accurate—we can look that up as we need—if we need to. It's somewhere in there.

I remember now the stroke happened in '99, because that was going to be my last year of the dance up in South Dakota. You pledge for four years and you do this dance of four days. You don't eat and you don't drink, and you dance hard four days. I had done that, and I was in my '60s, and I felt extremely good and strong and capable. I saw young Lakota that were dancing at the same time that were in their '20s and they were really buff, they did a lot of weight lifting, they were really strong, and they went down, and I didn't. I felt actually, because of surrendering, which is what I did in Subud, I know how to do this, and I'm better off than these young guys that are just athletic. This isn't athletics. This is about surrendering, about letting something else be your strength. As a consequence, at the end of the four days, you feel like super, super. So I was ready for my last year and then, boom, down I went.

When I was able to move around, I went with a friend here to Texas, where Leonard Crow Dog was doing a sun dance. There were probably 150 people or so there, and there was about 75 of them were dancing and the other people were supporting. There was a big meeting before the dance started. Leonard introduced his helpers. He had probably six different guys that were helping him do the whole thing. He introduced this guy, and the guy got up and he said, "You will have to go to your own sun dance. They're waiting for you." I saw Lakota guys standing, waiting for me. I don't know why he's saying that because everybody that was there was going to that sun dance. "What are you talking about?" He wasn't talking to me. He was talking to this whole group. You have to go to your own sun dance. They're waiting for you. So I went back up to South Dakota, and when I got there they were waiting for me. They said, "We hear you've gotten knocked down, now you're back. Now we can go ahead doing what we were doing." Whoa, man. These guys are so strong.

Anyway, I did my fourth year in 2000. Lots and lots of things happened. At that moment, when I was with Sybilla , who was German, and we had gone to Germany in 1990, and we climbed on the Berlin Wall, and we went to see this show in East Berlin of Rainer Fettig, who was one of my favorite painters. For whatever reasons, talking about capitalism, but the best painters in Germany were from East Germany, East Berlin, mostly. They were very free. Rainer had painted these paintings of Van Gogh walking along the wall, along the Berlin Wall. It was

one of the great paintings I've ever seen in my whole life. I just really loved that guy.

And so we traveled all over Germany. We traveled all over Denmark and Holland. We did France and we lived in Ibiza, in Spain and in Nice. Different people that we knew would have places where we could stay and where we could paint. All during this time, there were trips that we were going on, very magic trips where I would paint wherever I could, however I could. It wasn't like here where I could do an eight-foot painting but often I had places to work in a person's garage or someplace where I could work. When I was doing landscapes, it was particularly easy in a sense that I would just do whatever was around. Ibiza, I did hundreds of paintings in Ibiza, all the different coves and mountains and caves.

In Nice, there was no natural world in Nice. People had lived there 5,000 years. So it was well paved over. The only trees you saw were in a line in a park somewhere. So I did these paintings in a line.—They were very abstract. So they contributed to the movement into abstract work.

We had a friend that had a place in Mexico, so we went there for two winters, and I painted outdoors there. Since I really started painting in Mexico, I felt it was a [cycle –DF] that had been performed there. I was working outside, and there were parrots jumping around in palm trees. I would surf every afternoon and paint every morning—it was like some kind of idyllic thing—and come back here and have my gardens. So it was actually a beautiful life.

Things happened. This friend that had the place in Mexico, he died suddenly—he was a young, strong man—and then the house was no longer available. Then after that, I went to Panama and got even more isolated in the jungles of Panama, on the beach in Bocas del Toro. I did 150 paintings down there, two years in a row, little paintings on paper. They were not so big, but it was four, five or six paintings a day. It was pretty amazing. I was just cranking. Then I'd get home and take some of the best of the 150 and make them larger. Of course, once I started painting larger, they changed. So none of them were exact copies of these earlier paintings.

ELISSA AUTHER: Did you exhibit any of the work?

DEAN FLEMING: I must have somewhere. I can't remember now. I guess I didn't really.

They kept evolving. So they evolved from the grids into these weaves, but the weaves were in such a way that they were not rational. Some of the things that looked like they were on top would actually be on the bottom of something else. So they were really complex, four-dimensional kind of weaves. That kept evolving until they became circles. The circles had these weaves going in and out of them. So the circles were like doughnuts, really. They weren't circles. They were like doughnuts that had holes in them. So it was even the sexual implication there, things going in and out of these holes, and sometimes in totally contradictory, spatially, ways. My feeling was then, which I'm still working on now, which was that there would be a ground for this activity, but the ground would be in different places in this painting, depending on what was going on around it. So it would be penetrated and then exalted and brought forward and pushed back and sideways. It was always trying to make a space that was not just a simple and rational space. None of the weave paintings were like you would see in a piece of cloth, for example, woven. They weren't like that at all, and very remotely related to that possibility.

Then as time went on, we're getting up to the present, in the present paintings they finally got rid of these ribbons or whatever they were that were diving in and out. The circles became squares, and that's what I'm working on now. But there are various characters that are on the canvas in spaces that vary from each other. There is the central basic illusion of painting, which I have always worshipped and is my analogy for God, that will never stay still. It will always be a changing thing. And you look at that painting. It's a mirror of your own capacity to see that this is not the same plane. It's a very simple idea. When I run through my whole life like that, it's been the abiding theme no matter whether they were landscapes or whether they were circles or squares or calligraphy or any of that. There was always a duality. It was always like a possibility of another space happening, and that's probably the subject of my life.

ELISSA AUTHER: So today you learned that you were awarded Pollock-Krasner grant.

DEAN FLEMING: Yes.

ELISSA AUTHER: What are you going to do with it? August 7, 2013.

DEAN FLEMING: Yes. Well, this application was put in because I wanted to make a catalogue. I thought I'm not really showing my work in any consistent way where friends and neighbors and people who would care about it are seeing it. So I'm going to make a book, and that book is going to be two paintings a year for 55 years. So each double-page spread would have two paintings, 1957 and the next page would be two paintings, 1958, and just follow it.

It's so contrary and such a beatnik dream that I don't know who's going to like it or whether it has anything to do with fine art or whether it's going to fit right in to the way things are. I have no idea about that. I've never felt like I could be responsible for that. I only felt really, truly responsible to make the items.

Here at Libre I've got these storerooms full of [art –DF]. I've sold a lot of paintings in my life, but certainly not all of them, and they're there. I just felt like here's an opportunity. If I could get some grant or some backing, I would have the money to make this catalogue. So it's going to be a big book. It's 55, let's say 110 paintings and probably there's four major essays that fit chronologically in this because I had done this other catalogue and I wanted to just do images. I didn't want to have any words. And they said, "No, no, you've got to have your resume. You've got to have your biography, bibliography." You've got to have this and that and went on and on. It ended up being more like a regular catalogue.

What I did learn is that you can't just have images. You've got to divide it up a little bit. You have to have something coming in there so people get a break. [Laughs.] Because I'm merciless in these. Picking only two paintings does not give you the transitional qualities of how each painting—you think, "Well, if he did these, how come on the next pages he's completely—well, actually they were connected. But you don't see that. So that was an interesting quality that makes it even more sporadic than it has been.

I haven't even considered stopping painting since I was a kid. I never even thought of life without it or some other possible—go get a job or—I never even considered that. What is remarkable to me is that I've gotten away with it because here I am in a place where there is no income, and I'm just completely happy with it. I'm productive, getting the work out. I keep thinking, well, something will happen. I think the grant certainly contributes to that because I would be able to get this book and perhaps put it on a web some way that people can see it without having to buy the book or anything. So there are processes that are going on now that will definitely be a breakthrough in my life.

It's hard. It's like singing in the woods. Is it real if it isn't seen? If it's a visual thing and it's not seen, does it exist? Does it mean anything? Is there any purpose to my life just plugging along like that.

For me, the painting has paved the way. It's told me what I needed to do and when I needed to do it: like get a space, get material, get something going, no matter what. I've loved to travel since I was a little kid. I love to travel all over the place and have different experiences. If I were hung up and I was a professional, I was in New York, I was paying thousands of dollars a month for a loft or something, you don't travel around then. You keep busy paying it off. But the way my life is, I can walk any time in any direction, and I love that. It's about freedom, physical freedom and aesthetic freedom and spiritual freedom. And here comes the rain.

ELISSA AUTHER: Should we stop here? OK.

[END OF TRACK.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]