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Oral history interview with Rackstraw Downes, 2016 April 10-11

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Rackstraw Downes on April 10 and 11, 2016. The interview took place at Downes' Studio in New York, NY, and was conducted by James McElhinney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Rackstraw Downes and James McElhinney have reviewed the transcript. Their 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

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay. This James McElhinney speaking with Rackstraw Downes at his home in New York on Sunday April 10, 2016. Good afternoon.

RACKSTRAW DOWNES: Good afternoon to you.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So you've just returned from Texas?

MR. DOWNES: That is correct.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How long have you been in Presidiooh ?

MR. DOWNES: Well about 15 years I would say; 12 or 15 years I'm not quite certain. I could look it up and figure it out.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Not just, but a while at this point.

MR. DOWNES: A while, yes many winters; I go only in the winter for five months.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's a wonderful part of the country; I don't think many people go there; it's near Big Bend and—

MR. DOWNES: Right, they go to Marfa.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They go to Marfa now.

MR. DOWNES: Not now, not Presidio.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: The Presidio population is largely Spanish speaking, some of them have houses on both sides of the river. And the most wonderful thing I read about Presidio; however, was a book called *The River [Has] Never Divided Us*; and people down there just live on the river. To them it's nothing, you know, Mexico and the United States it's just the river. And that appeals to me very much.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How did you discover this place?

MR. DOWNES: I was going to Galveston, Texas every winter for many years; about 15 winters; and an architectural historian; a historian of Texas architecture specifically; called Fox, I think his name was Stephen Fox, told me he said, if you up to Presidio—if you go up to Marfa I mean; you should go down to Presidio and take a look it's only 60 miles further; and it's a real border town.

Also there's this woman down there who's doing adobe houses and she's from the Belgian Congo, and an interesting person who went to Egypt; specifically, to study with Hassan Fathy who was an Egyptian architect who believed that everybody should be able to build their own house to their own specifications and do it with the simplest of materials. So, he worked out how to build adobe houses; because the adobe was free; there was no cost for the basic material.

So, she was indeed very interesting lady. And I went and visited her and saw the house that she was building in Presidio. And that's how I got there. On my way up to her house, I saw a little glimpse of the Rio Grande, and right there they had a measuring machine. It was a measuring station that measured the depth and velocity of the water in the Rio Grande and relayed that via satellite down to the farmers down in the valley; near—what's

the town down there? [Brownsville–RD] It's on the coast, not Corpus Christie, but the next one down; where there's very intensive agricultural activity down there? So, so those farmers need to know what kind of water they're going to get. And this machine did it for them.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Fascinating—

MR. DOWNES: And I made five paintings of that site and you know wound up spending several years there at that one site.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And you've been there now for 15 years roughly?

MR. DOWNES: Right, roughly speaking, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So it's interesting that one would come to the American Southwest; Texas really is its own country.

MR. DOWNES: It sure is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And I met a Texan once who was very proud of his ancestor having been at the Battle of San Jacinto bridge with Sam Houston and he told me the reason why they put the lone star on the flag was when they admitted the United States into the Union.

[They laugh.]

MR. DOWNES: Very good, very good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But, it's an interesting idea that somebody would come from Africa with the adobe building tradition there.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: As opposed to, everybody knows famously, you know, the Northern Rio Grande.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. It is peculiar to have someone with African and Egyptian background in the technique of adobe to come and teach it to Mexicans; it's very surprising and very touching. One or two Mexicans there do practice adobe building, but very few. Mostly, they prefer cement block; it's much easier and ready-made.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh yeah, sure.

MR. DOWNES: It does not have any of the insulating properties that adobe has. So, even some of the wealthy people build their houses of adobe and theirs are very thick walls; extremely thick walls; and they're cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

MR. MCELHINNEY: A lot of towns in Latin America you can see you know the rebar sticking up.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And waiting for the next story to go on.

MR. DOWNES: That's right, that's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Or like in upstate New York or in certain parts of Maine where you have the slab houses that are just a basement and a roof and eventually they're going to put the house on top of it. Sort of provisional architecture. But did you ever know J. B. Jackson?

MR. DOWNES: Oh, he's a writer. Is he a writer?

MR. MCELHINNEY: John Brinkerhoff Jackson.

MR. DOWNES: He's a writer on landscapes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He's a late writer; now about ten years I guess; but he was a very influential theorist of landscape.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Studied by architects and so forth.

MR. DOWNES: I think I have one of his books.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wonderful.

MR. DOWNES: And I worked with one of his apprentices or students at a; I went to a conference in Virginia; Lynchburg, Virginia.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yes.

MR. DOWNES: There's a school there, and there was this guy from Harvard; who I think studied with Jackson or was; I can't think of his name.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Another guy from Harvard named [John] Stilgoe.

MR. DOWNES: Stilgoe, that's the guy who was there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He's a little younger; but J.B. Jackson was known for riding around the landscape on a motorcycle and going from various appointments; going from Harvard to UVA to wherever you know to teach and very interesting ideas about landscape. Not, not, when I learned about him I was quite surprised and intrigued because it put the practice of landscape painting in a different relationship to how the rest of society understood place and utility and how terrain could be adapted to human use; and how making a picture of it was part of that process. Interesting ideas.

Anyway, I'm curious to know when was the first time that you were aware of being in the presence of a work of art? As a child I suppose.

MR. DOWNES: I knew when I was in the presence of a landscape; that is to say something that can be separated from the continuum of daily life and remarked on as having a special character. And that was when I was about four or five years old and my mother took me up to London to see the effects of the blitz. And that whole area of London was just razed completely and Saint Paul's Cathedral was spared and stuck up in the middle. And then I knew, you know, this you could really call a landscape; because it's partitioned off so to speak; it's separates itself by its very strong character.

MR. MCELHINNEY: To use the German word *Landschaft*; so how old where you then, four?

MR. DOWNES: Five.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Five?

MR. DOWNES: I would have been five because it would have been after the Armistice; I was born in '39 just as the war was beginning and so that would have been right after the armistice was signed; late in '45.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It would have shocking I imagine.

MR. DOWNES: It was extremely shocking.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Where did you grow-up?

MR. DOWNES: Well, I was born in the county of Kent; quite near my uncle's house, where my mother and father moved into that house because they had a house in Central London, and Londoners were warned in 1939 to get out of there because they figured there was going to be a disastrous amount of bombing. And so I was born in the county of Kent and grew-up the first five years in my uncle's house in Brenchley, Kent; which was tiny little village and had some very lovely old buildings; very old buildings.

Later after my mother and father split up, my mother bought a cottage there; called the Crook Cottage and it was built in the 1300s.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Marvelous.

MR. DOWNES: The beams upstairs were so low that in order to get from one partition space to another you had to go down on your hands and knees practically to get under it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wonderful, for a kid that must have been—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, it was fun. It was a fun place.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You can imagine all sorts of enhancements and wonders.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, there was also an oak tree in the middle of that village which was mentioned in the Doomsday book as being a considerable tree.

MR. MCELHINNEY: One of those.

MR. DOWNES: So you were surrounded by history; you were just surrounded by antiquity, you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What was your education like at that point in time? Were there books; was there a library in the house? Were there pictures?

MR. DOWNES: There were books and pictures; my father and mother had both been on the stage. My father was very devoted to the stage and made a foolish decision; my mother—he proposed marriage to my mother and she said, 'You can marry the stage or you can marry me.' Meaning that he would be so dedicated and involved with his career that he wouldn't have time for her, you know. So, my father did it, he quit the stage and was miserable for the rest of his life. And they had a lousy marriage, of course.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How old where you when they split up?

MR. DOWNES: Well, I was about eight I think— no a little older. Let's see, yes, I was a little older more like 13.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, he didn't return to acting after that?

MR. DOWNES: No, he didn't. He tried a number of interesting things; he was a very constructive and creative man in many ways. He also had a fiendish temper; was very morose and depressed a lot of the time. And kept himself apart from other people; he was sort of an avoidant personality. But, he did interesting things. He teamed up with two women, one who made cloth and he was the tailor and he did the [tailoring–RD]. They had a store in Harrogate; which is a little bit like something on Cape Cod. You know a fashionable place to go; and they made ladies' tweed suits up there, the three of them combined together to do that.

And then after that, he quarreled with them; he quarreled with everybody he worked with. He went to London and worked at the Tavistock Clinic as private secretary to the man who ran that clinic. Which of course is where Anna Freud and all those people ended up; at the Tavistock Clinic. It was a very important place.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: So he had interesting jobs; and they were distinguished jobs; but he couldn't work with people very well; he just was a very querulous guy.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Downes is an Irish name isn't it?

MR. DOWNES: I don't know that there's anything Irish in my family; not that I've ever heard of.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Interesting.

MR. DOWNES: They claimed to be Flemish weavers; to have been Flemish weavers who came over in that; there was a great war in the Netherlands and the Flemish left. Something to do with religion I think.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well this would have been way back in the 17th century.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, earlier than that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Earlier than that? The 16th century.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, I think so.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Probably some of the wars related to the Reformation.

MR. DOWNES: Exactly, exactly, very likely so.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Weavers really had it rough through the centuries. They were the ones who filled the ranks of the Napoleonic Armies because all their jobs had been taken by mills.

MR. DOWNES: [Hugh] Crichton-Miller; that was the name of the man who ran the Tavistock Clinic when my dad worked there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Crichton-Miller.

MR. DOWNES: Crichton-Miller. And Crichton-Miller told my father— well my father told me, told us—that

Crichton-Miller for lunch had raisins only, because he felt that he would go to sleep on his patients in the afternoon if he had a proper meal.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Good story. So, when did you develop the resolve to become an artist?

MR. DOWNES: Early on; I was very fascinated by calligraphy and handwriting. I liked activities that I could do alone. I was growing up in that household with my parents, my older sister, and five older cousins. I was the youngest, and they, I always felt—, formed a group and I always felt that I was alone on my own. And I remember having a space up in the attic at my uncle's house; which was an enormous house, and playing a game of fantasy cricket. You threw a dice and it said you know three or whatever it is, that means that he runs from one end of the cricket match to the other end, pitch I mean, to the other end and makes a run. And every time the bowler throws the ball to the batter, batsman, it's recorded in a score book. And I had a huge number of those score books and I invented fantasy teams with names of all the players and so on.

And I think that really was the beginning of being interested in solitary pleasures and solitary skills that could be refined. And calligraphy was the first one that I really went in for. I loved old manuscripts you know, and old illumination; those beautiful miniatures they do at the beginnings of chapters or paragraphs. So that was, I would say, the first glimpse of that sort of thing.

Also, I think I was very impressed one day when my father was making clothes—ladies' clothes—he had a room to himself. My mother and sister slept in one room; I had a room to myself and my father had this big, big room to himself. And sometimes he was so intensely involved with his work and in such a bad temper, that he would have his meals up there too. Because it was on the second floor, his space.

I took his meal in one day for him and delivered it to him upstairs and I saw inside that room. There were enormous tables, like trellis tables; tables on trellis; and all these De Chirico-esque mannequins and pieces of cloth laid up on walls; and a tiny little bunk bed in the corner. And I think that was my first vision of what would eventually be an artist's loft. A working space and a sleeping space in the same room. And then a whole room dedicated to one activity. I think that made a big impression on me as a way that a person could live; a way they could be alive.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It was possible in other words to blend one's livelihood and one's ordinary existence.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, yes that would be true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Not sort of the idea that you would go to work and then you home—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And you'd have different realities.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, what was your trajectory as a student?

MR. DOWNES: You mean when I first went to an art school or—?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, what where you, what were you studying; I mean you were interested in calligraphy so I imagine you were in your teens then.

MR. DOWNES: I was. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Did you seek instruction from people?

MR. DOWNES: Well, yes I did. And I have all the calligraphic books to this day. They're all down on that bottom shelf there. Edward Johnston, you can see his name, he was the great reviver of calligraphy in England in the 1930s and '40s. And there are a number of other books there. His book was called *Writing, Illuminating, and Lettering* and he gives you all the techniques for doing those things. I was fascinated by those books and loved them dearly. And I got very good; my handwriting got good enough so that it was shown on T.V. as an example of the new trend in handwriting. It was a new fashion that caught on fantastically.

I refused to give it up; it was years before I had a computer. I really didn't want to have to do it. And I continued to write things for let's say the *New York Times*; I would write it in longhand. And people read those things. I have business letters in longhand. Well, it's very funny to look at those things now because really we don't have that anymore. Everyone is master of the computer.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well keyboarding is like having to write with a typesetter at your elbow.

MR. DOWNES: Exactly, exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I find it intrusive actually.

MR. DOWNES: Do you?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Because your, your working outside of the process of writing. Writing is not keyboarding; writing is writing. Writing is something that is done by hand.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And keyboarding is something that is done; it's the same conversation that a lot of people are having now about architecture and CAD versus freehand drawing.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I met Daniel Liebskind a few years ago at the opening of the Denver Art Museum wing that he designed; and I asked him if he used computers. And he just laughed and he said we technicians for that. He said, 'The design team uses whatever they want, markers, watercolors, pencils, pens. We don't want to be restrained by our tools.'

MR. DOWNES: Frank Gehry is the same way.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, I was at a conference one time and somebody mentioned all this business and he [Frank Gehry] said, 'You know, he said I don't even know how to turn the damn thing on.'

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's pretty hard to avoid that these days, but just the process of thinking you know. There was a piece in the *New York Times* a couple of years ago by a writer, a woman, who was supplementing her income with life modeling. She's a young woman, so she was modeling at the Art Students League or the Studio School or wherever and the teacher had the students doing gesture drawings—doing very fast sort of Rodin-esque ensemble drawings.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And she had been going to the you know the job, to the classroom with a laptop; and during the break she turned the laptop on and she would write. And she started to bring a yellow pad instead and started writing on it, marginalia, diagraming, doodling and so forth. And said that when she got back home there were more complete ideas that were unformed that were laying around on the page that she was then able to reassemble. Whereas a type written page was a finished product from the beginning.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, I see.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And missed that whole process of intuitive, rational, balancing that one needs in order to really get something authentic. So I mean in a way I think in a lot of ways people are today, interested again in handwriting. Interested again in calligraphy.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, do you?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah I do. And it's not because of painters it's because of animation.

MR. DOWNES: Ah, I see.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The animators have to know how to draw the figure from any point of view on a lunch napkin.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, that's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: At a meeting or else their technicians.

MR. DOWNES: Sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But the world is changing very quickly.

MR. DOWNES: It is for sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: We can talk about how it's changed over the course of your life as this conversation evolves; but when you went to University, what was your trajectory? I recall you—

MR. DOWNES: I majored in English literature, and in England to major in English literature means you did almost exclusively English literature, there were no required courses. You didn't have to take you know a certain amount of science and a certain amount of—you know you just were doing English literature. I had to do—at the end of your three years there you took an exam. And the exams consisted of about five exams in English literature, one exam in a modern language: French, or Italian, or Spanish; and one ancient language which for most people was Latin. A few did Greek, but mostly Latin. And you had to be able to do a little bit of Latin translation. And you had to be able to do—you know read; make some coherent statements about Baudelaire, or you know major French writers as well as cover all the various parts of English literature.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I recall seeing a biography of you in which I think it stated that you also studied art history.

MR. DOWNES: Not really.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Not really.

MR. DOWNES: A little bit; at Yale it was required.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Of course.

MR. DOWNES: Art history was required; because I was in the Art Department you know; so you had to do some art history. I didn't really —I wasn't so interested in art history. If you read what I've written, I would say that the analogies that I bring in have more to do with English literature than with art history. I write with as much or did write with as much familiarity about that, as I did with art history.

Art history I took up later on my own. And I do have a great friend and historian called Andrée Hayum, and she would feed me the names of writers that she thought I might be interested in. Or she was interested in. So I had a little bit of an inkling of the change of you know the sort of intellectual content of art history and how it changed from time to time.

And I think that English literature was very useful to me. I remember Dr. Johnson in his preface to Shakespeare, and in that he says: this idea of the unities, that Shakespeare wrote bad plays because he didn't observe the unities which Aristotle had said were essential to a good play? He said, Johnson said, 'Everybody knows the unity of place is absurd; we're not in ancient Rome, we're sitting in a modern theater.'

[They laugh.]

And the same thing with time! Why do you suppose that the play, the action represented in the play should be exactly equal to the amount of time spent sitting in the theater watching the play. We know very well that this incident took place several hundred years ago. And the whole thing is a fiction. And I think that Johnson's refusal to listen to theory was something very important for me. Very, very important for me, I do.

It took some courage actually to do what Fairfield Porter and Alex Katz and so on did in the 1950s when everyone was painting abstractly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And those sort of Greenbergian rules you know you could compare in a sense to Aristotle's ideas about the unities— supposed ideas.

MR. MCELHINNEY: People in those times though were not aware of the government subventions that were fueling a lot of that.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, that may be true; I don't know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's absolutely true.

MR. DOWNES: Do you think so?

MR. MCELHINNEY: But—

MR. DOWNES: Are you referring to any particular precedence?

MR. MCELHINNEY: The, you know, USIA backing Abstract Expressionism and Rock and Roll and so forth.

MR. DOWNES: Ah, I see.

MR. MCELHINNEY: As being ways to broadcast an imperialistic paradigm as a disruptive, cultural virus into an obedient space, a totalitarian society behind the iron curtain. Radio Free Europe.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, I see what you mean, right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And all of that. A lot of books about this now.

MR. DOWNES: Radio Free Europe, yeah makes much more sense to me than Abstract Impressionism.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it was hand in glove. It was all—

MR. DOWNES: Was it? Uh.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I mean it's—that's probably another conversation; it's widely known I've interviewed a few people who were involved in it, so.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, really.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah, so it was you know part of the reason why most CIA operatives in embassies were given jobs in the cultural department.

MR. DOWNES: Interesting.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And even our friend Bill Bailey—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: went to Burma at one point, or Thailand, and he was not directly involved in any spy craft or anything but he was aware that there were other agendas unfolding around the sort of cultural exchange. And I think pretty much everybody pretty much accepts that now.

MR. DOWNES: Wasn't Louis Armstrong on his tours were involved in some way?

MR. MCELHINNEY: I don't know that's a good question; I wouldn't be surprised; but I think that a lot of the Art in Embassies Program which is all that's left of it now. The exhibitions that came out of MOMA that were, you know, trying to sort of broadcast the new art of the '50s, abstract art. Because after all the Socialists and the National Socialists all like Realism.

MR. DOWNES: Right, absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, you couldn't go back to—

MR. DOWNES: No, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Tom [Thomas Hart] Benton you know.

MR. DOWNES: No, no, no, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So they had to go with Pollock.

MR. DOWNES: That was out, yeah Benton was totally out.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But, but so it's another conversation. But when you were studying English literature did you continue to practice calligraphy? Did you draw?

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Were you drawing all the time?

MR. DOWNES: Yes, when I was at Cambridge, I did posters; I did illustrated magazines; I did stage sets. And so I was involved with making, you know, visual stuff with my hands.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, where you interested were you inspired by artists like Blake and—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, I loved Blake, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Because he combined of course—

MR. DOWNES: He certainly did—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Words and pictures.

MR. DOWNES: And that's a very British thing to do. I think even the purest British painting is somehow literary. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: I also have an image of Samuel Palmer; although he wasn't a—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, I loved that, I adored Samuel Palmer, he was a hero of mine.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He was great, his 'Blacks,' wonderful, wonderful works.

MR. DOWNES: Those sepia drawings are incredible, absolutely incredible.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah but kind of—

MR. DOWNES: Palmer appealed to the kind of emotional stuff that people go through in their teens and late teens you know. Because he was so passionate looking, and you know and that moon up there; the young moon with the old moon and its arms kind of. Yeah, you know he fascinated me. I adored him; I have books on Palmer right here now still. And Palmer wasn't known in this country. I brought a book of mine to Yale to show the students there and they were very interested and quite impressed. Nobody had heard of Palmer.

MR. MCELHINNEY: There was a wonderful show about ten years ago at the British Museum that I guess came here, that was a revelation I think for a lot of people.

MR. DOWNES: Of Palmer's work, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, but at what point did you —I guess as you were completing your degree you must have been pondering, what next. Were you going to be a novelist or were you going to be a—?

MR. DOWNES: Oh no, I wished to be a painter.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Always?

MR. DOWNES: I would say early on yes. I went to Cambridge not expecting to like it very much and I did in fact like it very much indeed. And I got quite interested in pursuing an academic career. When I came to Yale I actually came—I had published already an essay on Johnson; Dr. Johnson's Theory of Language in a learned magazine; and when I got to Yale I thought, you know, I'm going to work on this dictionary study in the evenings and paint during the day. Well I found it was absurd it was quite impossible to do that. I needed every minute you know.

I came to Yale; there were a lot of kids there who had been in the Boston Museum School…something like that, they'd been drawing the figure for three hours every day for the last three years.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But Bill [Bailey] told me when Albers was there that there was no life drawing.

MR. DOWNES: Well, no that's quite likely; but in Boston there was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Or had been. So these kids I mean really had had a lot of practical experience making things with their hands and being tutored in that and I had not. I had this intellectual education and I thought I could practice it concurrently with the painting but it was quite impossible.

I had a hard time my first year at Yale, a very hard time. Because I could enter discussions about aesthetics and I would be one of the brightest sounding guys in the room; but when it came to presenting our drawings and pinning them up on the wall together, mine didn't rate at all. They really didn't.

MR. MCELHINNEY: This was before the School of Art moved into the Paul Rudolph [Art and Architecture] building, right?

MR. DOWNES: That's right it was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Street Hall or—?

MR. DOWNES: Street Hall, yes it was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So that was the old art school building?

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That had been there for about a hundred years almost?

MR. DOWNES: Yes it had. It's still there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I know it's marvelous. It's odd to think that the first head of the Yale School of Art was the son of the man who was the head of the Drawing Academy at West Point.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, was he?

MR. MCELHINNEY: That kind of connection. Robert Weir had a rigorous program for the cadets. They could all draw pretty well.

MR. DOWNES: I'm sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But, what year was that 1961, '62?

MR. DOWNES: I started in '61 and '64 was when I got my degree.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So what motivated you to come across the pond and—?

MR. DOWNES: Jazz.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Tell us about Jazz.

MR. DOWNES: I was nuts about Jazz, yeah as many Europeans are. You know we are much more admiring of Jazz then most Americans, I think. Who tend to regard Jazz as being, you know, a sort of a peripheral thing. But, what got me interested in Jazz, that's an interesting question. That was at boarding school and there was a bunch of kids who played in a little band. and I joined up with them. I liked the idea. And I don't know when I first heard any live Jazz; I don't know I can't answer that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But there was a passion that you had developed?

MR. DOWNES: Yes there was. And I played in that band and played very badly. I played the string bass, I was terrible. But the group wasn't very good at all either. But we sure were passionate, we just believed in it. We had these old 78 [RPM] shellac recordings with a you know the big horn sticking out—[laughs]— of the machine; and you'd crank it up.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The old Victrola.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah we'd all put are ears in there saying, 'Hey Johnny Dodds is going to have a break, hang on listen to this thing.' You know, 'He muffed it, he muffed it!' [Laughs.]. We studied every note of those records, we didn't have very many for one thing. And when I came here and went to Hotchkiss, as I did, right in the town in Lakeville there was a guy who had a little store there. And he had piles and piles of these LPs of Lester Young; and anything you wanted, you know all that music.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So that's how you got here. You got a job at Hotchkiss?

MR. DOWNES: Well, I didn't get a job, I got a scholarship to go to Hotchkiss for one year. I graduated high school, or boarding school in England. And I was a year ahead because I was the first group that wasn't called up for the draft. The draft closed in England in 1957 or so, and I didn't go. My good friend Roger Jellinek for example went and was stationed in Cypress; and had a very interesting time there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I can imagine, interesting. [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: The Greeks and the Turks fighting away. The British were supposed to monitor those battles. In any event, he had to go. So I had a year to spare before I went to Cambridge, and I went to Hotchkiss and spent the year there. It was an English speaking union scholarship.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, how did you find northwestern Connecticut?

MR. DOWNES: Well it seemed enormous to me; that was my first impression. The scale of everything is so big in the United States compared with Europe, very big. And it was cold and the temperatures were extreme, much

more extreme. And the kids were wild in their language and expressive in their language, to me they seemed to be. And they were much franker in their moods. They were more straightforward in mood, I mean they got up in the morning and came into the breakfast rooms sort of scowling and you know being offended by the—. The Brits can be very sour, and you know these guys would come in for breakfast saying, 'I'll have four eggs for breakfast, give me four.'

[They laugh.]

MR. DOWNES: You know two is not enough; and it's a terrific day and we're going to do this that and the other. They were much more out spoken and much more definite in their moods. You know the British will say, 'Oh that is rather nice,' 'That's fucking fabulous,' would be the American version.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well I imagine at that point in time there was sort of a lot of Holden Caulfield and—

MR. DOWNES: Probably. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: That Beat spirt.

MR. DOWNES: Excuse me; I'm going to have one of these.

[he eats a biscuit]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, by all means. I think that was the time of the Beats too so that was—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, well I don't think we had got aware of the Beats yet. I hitchhiked all over this country after school got out. Well once—the first time I went was in the spring, the spring vacation, and it was snowing in Connecticut and then we got down to Mobile, Alabama. And all these beautiful flowers street flowers were all in bloom you know. And I don't know what where we talking about?

MR. MCELHINNEY: We're talking about you we're at Hotchkiss; but Alabama must have been I mean a shock too. Because those years as well, we're talking 1956, '57?

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right on the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement.

MR. DOWNES: That was just beginning to happen.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, just beginning to happen. And I wrote my thesis, there was a contest at the end of the year for the best thesis written on a historical or sociological topic, and I won the prize for that. Writing on, precisely, on integration and the problems of integration. And it was pretty wild.

We also—this friend of mine and I, we hitchhiked through the South in that spring vacation and we were picked up by a school teacher, and he said I'd like you to talk to my class, they've never seen anybody from another country. So we went in his class and there were kids, married kids sitting there, husband and wife at the same desk; they were juniors in high school. That was unheard of in England.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Was this rural south?

MR. DOWNES: Rural south; Douglas, Georgia. And this guy; one of the questions that were put to us —my friend and I addressed the class, you know, and after we made a few comments, there was a Q&A. Somebody said, 'Winston Churchill says that the north started the Civil War, what do you think of that?'

MR. DOWNES: And I thought, oh my God, I don't think that I'm allowed to think about it at all. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, his mother was from a border state; she was from Saint Louis.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, was she?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, so Jenny Jerome, they were.

MR. DOWNES: Funny.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I think, I think something to do with fur trade in the early days.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah. But that was a great trip down there though and speaking of Jazz we went to New Orleans and just a wonderful time exploring.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Did you meet Elvis?

MR. DOWNES: I did not meet Elvis.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: You could have gone to Memphis I guess.

MR. DOWNES: We did meet a man who put us on a riverboat going up river, pushing 14 barges full of asphalt.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Up the Mississippi?

MR. DOWNES: Up the Mississippi.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So you did a big loop. I mean a spring holiday—

MR. DOWNES: —We did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —is a weeklong so you must have been—

MR. DOWNES: —I don't know, I think we took two weeks.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Two weeks? Well that's still a pretty ambitious itinerary—

MR. DOWNES: It was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —to go to Mobile and Saint Louis and then up the river. How far up the river did you go?

MR. DOWNES: Well we came across Tennessee; we came through Bristol, Tennessee. We got off in Mississippi; I think Greenville, Mississippi. The way we got off was pretty interesting too, we were going under a bridge and the guy said jump for it. The captain of the ship said jump for it and we jumped onto that bridge off the moving boat.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Great story.

MR. DOWNES: We had a great time, we had a great, very colorful time, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And no ill effects?

MR. DOWNES: Apparently not, no we did okay.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, then you went back to Cambridge?

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: You took your degree in English—

MR. DOWNES: One question I wish I could answer and I can't; that class that we addressed in Douglas, Georgia was it integrated or not? I don't think it was. It was all white kids.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Probably not at that point.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, I think it was all white kids only.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You could have gone to the black school but that would have been all black.

MR. DOWNES: No we didn't do that. No I think they were all white kids.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But married.

MR. DOWNES: Married at the age of fifteen.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It was a different world.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Safe to say the South has changed a lot in the last half century. So you go back to Cambridge and you take your degree in English literature.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then what?

MR. DOWNES: I come to Yale.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Immediately, so—

MR. DOWNES: At Hotchkiss there was a fabulous teacher who—he's dead now; but he was alive until a few years ago; and he sat right in that chair and we discussed what had happened. He'd studied under [Josef] Albers; and there were only two of us who had majored in art at Hotchkiss that year. And he'd come in and he'd say okay Frank, okay Bill, Bill Franz, Bill today we're going to make a new tune and it's going to be made out of color and it's going to be as clear as a Bach fugue. Let's go for it. Now here's some colored papers, do it. And he was so exciting. I had had teachers who would come around and look at your life drawing and say, oh, yes that's really rather sensitively drawn actually. And it was all so it was just very discouraging. Very unexciting; whereas this guy was just snap, crack, pop, you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Can you share his name?

MR. DOWNES: Speier, Robert Speier He went out to the West Coast. He ran into trouble at Hotchkiss, because he was too lively, too interesting. He refused to sing in the choir; and he refused to coach football, and for that reason Hotchkiss dropped him.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's still pretty waspy I think.

MR. DOWNES: I think so too. Well I had nothing more to do with Hotchkiss. I said I'm not sending you any money, and you know what I think. You know that guy changed my life, and was a wonderful teacher, and a very exciting man and it was petty of you to do that you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So you came to Yale. What inspired you to apply to Yale?

MR. DOWNES: Spire had been at Yale.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Spire?

MR. DOWNES: He studied under Albers.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So he was the inspiration for that.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, he was. So, I went to Cambridge just not expecting to like it at all you know. And wanting to come back here as soon as I could, which I did. I applied to the English Department and to the Art Department because I knew that if I applied only to the Art Department and my background was in English they wouldn't bother with me. And this way I got into both schools but I took the money and applied [it–RD] to the art school. I chose to go there. The English Department was pissed off.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I imagine.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, they were very pissed off.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So who was teaching there then? Hersey and people like that?

MR. DOWNES: Good people, Bloom, Harold Bloom.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Harold Bloom, John Hersey was there for a while.

MR. DOWNES: [William] Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right. And you begin working at the Art School at Yale. Was it organized pretty much the same way where you had to take an art history course and studio elective and then you basically signed up for tutorials with critics and they would come around and—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I didn't get tutorials with critics so much the first year. I was in a class; I was in a class that Bill Bailey taught and Alex Katz would come once a week as a visitor to that class. I got along with Alex

enormously. I thought he was very exciting. And Bill was very withdrawn in those days, very quiet. And he said something very important to me which I always remember but on the whole, I was interested in Alex.

Bill said one day; I had showed him a bunch of paintings; and I was making little marks; little sort of shovel shaped marks with a flat brush. And he said you know that could get to be a disease. And I laughed and he said it's not funny. And that scared the shit out of me, I was absolutely petrified. And that was a damn good thing to say because Brits do defend themselves behind their kind of—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Self-effacing.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, exactly. And ironic you know they tend to be ironic.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well he's very much— my sense of him—I was his student fifteen years after you were.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, were you?

MR. MCELHINNEY: I was at Yale also.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, really.

MR. MCELHINNEY: In the mid-70s. And so Bill was one of my teachers and a lot of very serious, very grave, you know, earnest, insistent, useful. But, but you know when you're that age and he was then older than when you knew him, he had a great authority and gravity. But I always sort of took that to be part of his being a westerner.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, did you?

MR. MCELHINNEY: He's from [Iowa] Oklahoma originally.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, is he? I didn't know that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And he grew up in the Plains [he moved to Muskogee, Oklahoma in childhood] and not long ago I reminded him of a comment I made to him when I was a student that he didn't like. Where I asked him, well if people are comparing him to Piero or Morandi wasn't it also fair to compare him to [Grant] Wood or to Ralph Earle. And he did not like that.

MR. DOWNES: No, he wouldn't, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I reminded him of that and he said, 'No I wouldn't have liked that.' But I said you know you can take the kid out of the prairie but you can't take the prairie of the kid. And he said well, you might be right about that. But he did have—

MR. DOWNES: You know who adored Ralph Earl and admitted it, and was proud of it was Neil Welliver. He loved Ralph Earl.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I love Ralph Earl.

MR. DOWNES: He's my native substitute for Balthus he said.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's an interesting observation. But wonderful people taught at that school and really cared about learning. With somebody like Bill—

MR. DOWNES: That's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You didn't get the sense that he was—throwing his weight around the way Al Held did.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, right that's true too.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He really cared about the students absorbing the message and what he really wanted you to understand.

MR. DOWNES: I adored Al Held, I adored Al Held. It was his first experience teaching at all. I was cloning his paintings, Alex Katz told me to look at Al.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Was he also a critic when you were there?

MR. DOWNES: He came as a critic for the first time; he'd never done a school crit before. I was imitating his painting and he walked in my studio and all these mini Al Helds were around the wall and he was speechless. And he said, 'I assume you know my work.'

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well he was an object of terror. He was like going to a 'Pit-Crit' with Al was like getting into the ring with a pro wrestler or something. A lot of the students feared him.

MR. DOWNES: Did they? Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And his colorful critiques. Who else was in your class?

MR. DOWNES: Close.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Chuck Close.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, well he was a year ahead of me I think.

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Robert] Mangold?

MR. DOWNES: Because of the experience he had. Mangold was a year ahead of me, Janet Fish and Harriet Shorr. Shorr was in the same class. Janet Fish was a year ahead; Bob Birmelin was a year ahead. Oh, and all the famous ones too, Brice Marden, he was I think two years ahead of me. Sylvia Mangold.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It was a three-year program then?

MR. DOWNES: A three-year program.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's right.

MR. DOWNES: I'm trying to think, Irving is the one to ask, he's got the list.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It was an interesting time because as I understand that history, Albers was approaching or had just retired.

MR. DOWNES: He had just retired when I arrived.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And there was a bit of a tussle over the direction?

MR. DOWNES: Right. I thought that was very healthy and very good. We had a different Dean of the school every year that I was there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well that can be a little confusing.

MR. DOWNES: It was confusing, I thought it was very good to be confused. I felt that you learned there that nobody is right in art you know. You just stick up for yourself but there's no right and wrong.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So that was just before [Jack] Tworkov came in.

MR. DOWNES: Right, Tworkov arrived my last year there. Richard Serra and Nancy Graves were of course in that class too. So it was indeed going to be a stellar class. And I think there were two or three reasons for that. One was that the scene had exploded in New York. You know, De Kooning and those guys, they were pretty reticent people for a long time.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Let's just pause this until it—

[END OF downes16_track01]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay, we're resuming.

MR. DOWNES: Good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, the first year you didn't really have much interaction with the guest critics, but you did—

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —you did meet Alex Katz.

MR. DOWNES: I did. And the second year, we didn't have very many critics either. We had—Philip Guston came to the class, but Louis Finkelstein taught the class, and he was really the teacher. It was the third year that you had—what were they called?—a booth or a sort of little alcove all to yourself, and that was when you saw

nothing but critics. You only had visiting critics.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You were supposed to be spending that year painting a thesis show?

MR. DOWNES: Right. That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So what kind of work were you doing when you arrived in New Haven?

MR. DOWNES: Well, I wasn't really a painter yet when I arrived in New Haven. I did illustrations for magazines, designs, set design, and so forth, but it was more applied than fine art. I did a little painting on my own and I was trying to paint like Mondrian. I was a mad, passionate admirer of Mondrian after I'd been introduced to that kind of thing by Robert Speier, and I read Mondrian's writings in the university library when I was at Cambridge, I remember, and I was—

MR. MCELHINNEY: His Neo-Plastic Manifesto?

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I was fascinated by those things; the new man and all this business. I was a utopian kid. I was knocked over by that stuff. Later on, I thought, 'That's a dreadful idea; that's absolutely totalitarian.' And there is a totalitarian aspect, I think, to that kind of art, actually. There's a kind of certainty to it. Donald Judd had it, you know. 'This is this and this is that. This is black and this is white.'

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's absolute.

MR. DOWNES: Absolute, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I recently interviewed a dealer [Antonio Homem] here in New York who said that commercial success for artists depended mostly upon the capacity of their work to be misunderstood.

[They laugh.]

So someone who is very determined and very clear, which is what we're all taught to be, is liable to be very unsuccessful commercially. Funny—

MR. DOWNES: That's funny. It is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's a very droll observation, so—but—so you were painting like Mondrian in his De Stijl mode with black lines.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. Well, I was a little bit earlier than that. I was just in the floating rectangles—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, right.

MR. DOWNES: Not the ones where he did the black lines.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Like the tic marks, the mapping of the—sort of halfway between the pictorial and what came after.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. They were floating rectangles, you know. Right. Yeah, I loved those pictures, but of course, Bill's class—Bill made us all paint a still life, and I was so uninterested in painting still life that there was a doorway between my studio where I was working and the next studio, and above the doorway were four panes of glass. What do they call that? There's a name?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Clerestory or—

MR. DOWNES: Is it a clerestory window or something like that?

MR. MCELHINNEY: —eyebrow windows or—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, whatever.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They're all sort of colloquial expressions.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. Anyway, there were four rectangles in a row, so I said, 'That's what I'm going to paint, four rectangles in a row.' That's the same as work Mondrian was doing almost. And so I did that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How did he respond to that?

MR. DOWNES: I think he wasn't very pleased with me.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, dear.

MR. DOWNES: He said, 'They like you in the drawing class,' as though to say, 'but I don't like you.'

[They laugh.]

MR. DOWNES: The drawing class I did very well. I learned to do those - because it was very much like calligraphy. You did abstract things with other—Albers had us do, had people do—and I learned how to—I got to be the TA and when I graduated I got a job at Parsons School of Design immediately, teaching Albers' drawing class. Interestingly enough, though, everything cracked up at once that year.

Just as I was beginning to paint in the park outdoors, at the same moment I realized, 'These kids can't draw a whole scene; they can only draw one type of plasticity, do the—a cuff around a wrist and make it curl and curve. With the Yale 'breathing line', you can make it work perfectly, and then you go onto to another project; lots of straight lines in a row, and the gaps get bigger and bigger, and then they get smaller and smaller again, and you create this volume. Each one was a specific answer to a specific question.

It was beautiful weather in the spring and I told my class to go outdoors and paint what they saw, and I realized that, you know, the smoke coming out of a little boat, tugboat, was done in one way, the tugboat in another way, waves were a third way. Nothing went together. Nothing held together at all. So I thought, 'I've got to change my way of teaching,' and I did eventually.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How did you reintegrate that? How did you get—

MR. DOWNES: Well, I didn't stay very long at Parsons. I went to Penn. Fortunately, I was offered a job at Penn and Neil Welliver was the chairman there, and I devised my own classes. My painting class I started out engaging the whole surface by doing figure ground studies and then I got them to draw—you know, kids come out of high school and they draw every hair. That's the only way they know how to do it.

Okay. So basically, what happened was, I made them paint, draw with a big brush on big sheets of paper, and they had to draw the whole—themselves, all of them together, painting at the same time. That was impossible for them to do those niggly drawings with every hair showing, you know, that they did when they came into the class. It was a quick way to get them dealing with wholes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's a terrific exercise. It's like making a student pick up a brush that's four inches wide and paint on a canvas that's eight inches square.

[They laugh.]

MR. DOWNES: Exactly right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You really have to make some decision.

MR. DOWNES: You do. Yeah, you do, and you have to summarize. You have to grasp the essential.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yes. It's really tricky. I mean, I teach drawing myself, and I think the biggest challenge is to steer students away from just the regurgitation of archetypes and shapes.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And the way to do it—at least, I've had a bit of success with this—is trying to get them to describe movement and—

MR. DOWNES: Very good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —balanced with measurements. In other words, measure it with your body. Measure it with geometry, metes and bounds, the vectors and plumb lines, and then don't look at the model as much as you look at the page—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and trust the process. If you—I had in my class last year—I had Tony Bennett. You know, the singer.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: He came and was drawing the Arts Students League of New York.

MR. DOWNES: No kidding.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I was telling some kid—I said, 'Look, just understand the process. Study the process. Don't worry about the outcome. The outcome will take care of itself if you understand what you're doing here, measuring this model in a pose with your body, then [the] geometry against the edge of the page, against extremities of the body'—metes and bounds, essentially—'you know, it's a dance between the rational and the intuitive. Don't make the same mark twice,' all this stuff. I said, 'Just follow the—just trust the process. The product will take care of itself.' I hear, [from] across the room, this guy say, 'He's right.' Tony Bennett!

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: But teaching is rewarding. How did you like teaching?

MR. DOWNES: I loved it at first. I loved it. Then, you know, I was more and more dedicated to outdoor painting and I was more and more jealous of my time because, you know, you only get so many days of good weather. And I gave up teaching, not only because I was making enough from sales to live on, but also because it took up my time, too much time, and energy.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So you had come to know Neil Welliver at Yale.

MR. DOWNES: I did. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And, not that we need to go into that here, but as I understand it, there had been somewhat of a conversation about the direction that the Yale School of Art was going to take. He wanted it to go in one direction and other people wanted, you know, to go in a different trajectory.

MR. DOWNES: When you said 'he,' you meant Neil? You're—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Neil.

MR. DOWNES: —referring to Neil?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, Neil.

MR. DOWNES: Well, he left the school and went to Penn.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, he went to Penn with Bob Engman.

MR. DOWNES: That's right, with Bob Engman.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And the printmaker Hitoshi [Nakazato]—

MR. DOWNES: Hitoshi went there, too. That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He went there, too?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And the people who stayed at Yale were people like Bailey and—

MR. DOWNES: That's right; Chaet, Bernard Chaet.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Bernie Chaet.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Did you have a lot of interactions with Bernie? Because he was a—

MR. DOWNES: No

MR. MCELHINNEY: —jazz maniac.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, was he? I didn't know that at all.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I went with him once—

MR. DOWNES: Leland Bell was a jazz maniac.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Leland Bell. That's right. Well, Leland Bell was a musician himself, I think.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, was he?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Drummer or something.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Could be.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But Bernie—I remember going with him to a CAA meeting at the Hilton, and 54th Street used to have that row of [Jazz] clubs—

MR. DOWNES: Sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —Jimmy Ryan's—

MR. DOWNES: Sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and all of that. So we were in the lobby and he said, 'Let's go up the street to Jimmy Ryan's and I'll pay the cover, you buy the drinks.' Typically.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So we walk up—half a block up the street and he pays the cover. I go to the bar and I get two drinks, and I'm, like, looking around, and I can't see Bernie anywhere until I find—there's this guy in the paroxysms of dancing in his chair, you know.

MR. DOWNES: That was Bernie?

MR. MCELHINNEY: And it was Bernie!

MR. DOWNES: Oh, that's funny.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Completely in the grip of the music.

MR. DOWNES: I never knew that about him.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, well, I didn't either. He was usually pretty reserved.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But there he was, going crazy in a chair. The music owned him. So—

MR. DOWNES: Good for him.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, there was that side to him. But—so Neil and Bob and Hitoshi all went down to Philadelphia. What year was that, roughly? 1965?

MR. DOWNES: 1964.

MR. MCELHINNEY: 1964?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, 1964, I would say.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And you got out of Yale in—

MR. DOWNES: 1964.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —1964 also—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and came to New York and taught at Parsons for a while.

MR. DOWNES: Well, I went first to Philadelphia for one year.

MR. MCELHINNEY: For one year?

MR. DOWNES: Yes. I got some kind of a post-graduate fellowship down there at Penn.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, I see.

MR. DOWNES: I got one day a week of teaching at Parsons, so I commuted from Philly to New York for one day a week job at Parsons which was very little money. You couldn't possibly have lived on it. But I had this other—this fellowship down there which was a postgraduate fellowship at Penn and I spent one year at Penn.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Where did you live in Philadelphia, in—?

MR. DOWNES: In the—is it called—I don't know I remember—they have districts with names.

MR. MCELHINNEY: University City near Penn?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, University—I was very near the university. Yeah. It was an easy walk to school.

MR. MCELHINNEY: On that side of the river—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —you were sort of West Philadelphia?

MR. DOWNES: West Philly. I think that's what they called it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It would have been an interesting time then as the city was not so gentrified, as it is now.

MR. DOWNES: No, it was not, not at all, and there was almost nothing going on. I was shocked. There was no movie programming or—Yale had wonderful programs all the time.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah. Well, all the residential colleges, when I was there in the '70s, had film societies.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Linsly-Chittenden was—the English department had a film society. Berkeley College, Calhoun College, all of the different colleges had film societies, and every night they—you could go from one college to another. Like, Tuesday night would be Berkeley; Wednesday night would be Jonathan Edwards, whatever.

MR. DOWNES: Right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So you could be going to a movie every night, and I often did leave the A&A building at 11:00 at night to catch, you know, the midnight show.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: But—

MR. DOWNES: Well, at Penn it was more like a commuting school.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yes.

MR. DOWNES: People came in for the day and they worked and then disappeared in the evening.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So there was not much of a student presence?

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Undergraduates—I would imagine there must have been some kind of a dormitory.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yes, there were dormitories. There were.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And you got—next door you've got two great teaching hospitals. Drexel also is there—

MR. DOWNES: Drexel. We didn't pay much attention to Drexel. It was kind of a snobbish thing about that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's—I guess it still is a bit—

MR. DOWNES: Probably.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —being an Ivy League school.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So was the school then as it was later in the [Frank] Furness Building that had that wonderful

tower?

MR. DOWNES: Oh, the building was gorgeous. Yeah, that building was gorgeous.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The architecture school was on the lower floors and—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I didn't have a studio in that beautiful building. There was a rather ordinary building attached to that and you could go on several different floors. They were connected; you could walk right through, as I remember. I think you could. Anyway, they were—it was just a sort of a boring building of no special interest.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Just an institutional structure.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So this was before the Institute for Contemporary Art was built?

MR. DOWNES: No, that was built. That was there when I arrived, I think.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That had just been opened.

MR. DOWNES: Just opened, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So that would have been a pretty important moment at Penn.

MR. DOWNES: Well, it was. The other thing that was so important, I think, at Penn was Louis Kahn's presence there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yes.

MR. DOWNES: I would have architecture majors in my class, because it was an undergraduate class, and they adored Kahn. They worshipped Kahn and they hung on his every word, quoted him, and he was a beautiful guy. He certainly was a beautiful guy, and very modest and available. And you know how he died, in that railroad station in the men's bathroom, you know, a guy of that distinction who's absolutely incredible. In Japan, he probably would have had a group of people accompanying him where he went, protecting him, looking after him.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So how long were you at Penn?

MR. DOWNES: One year only.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then you came—

MR. DOWNES: Then I came to New York, moved to New York, took a second day at Parsons, and I could just survive on two days if I was very, very careful.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, if I'm remembering your early work, landscapes, there was a kind of sympathy with Neil Welliver's work a bit.

MR. DOWNES: There was a very close connection between the two of us, which most people assume that the effect went all one way, you know, usually from the teacher to the student. But in that case, I can show you reproduction photographs of paintings in catalogs where I'm painting in the woods, deep in the woods, and Neil is painting gorgeous dolls, you know, in all kinds of settings, and they were not painted from observation as mine were. I was kind of pissed, actually, and a lot of people went to Neil's first show of woods, woodland show, and said, 'What are you doing here at this opening? You shouldn't even be in Welliver's presence; he ripped this all off from you.' Now, those things are much more complicated than they seem always.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Of course.

MR. DOWNES: And I learned a lot from Neil. He was a wonderful teacher and he was very kind to me, but eventually he blew up in a rage with me and we had the most terrible—we just didn't talk for the last 15 years of his life, probably.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, I knew—I had a run-in with him, too, but that's another story.

MR. DOWNES: He was a difficult guy.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I think many people did.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, they did. They did. Phil Alexander, his dealer—I said to him, 'Phil, I had the most terrible row

with Welliver;' he said, 'Who didn't?'

[They laugh.]

MR. DOWNES: You know, he broke up with one person after another.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, and then he had this terrible, tragic—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, awful.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —studio burning, wife dying, child dying.

MR. DOWNES: One thing after another. That was—nobody deserves a life like that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: No. Horrible. But—so what kind of a presence or what kind of an influence, just to do a little housekeeping, had he exerted at Yale? How did you—

MR. DOWNES: Well, the second-year students, the people one year ahead of me, like Janet Fish and company, Bob Berlind, loved Neil. They thought he was a terrific teacher and their work was very diverse in that classroom. They all worked in a room together as a communal classroom upstairs at Street Hall, and I remember Bob Speier came to visit from Hotchkiss. He was still there when I arrived at Yale, and I showed him around the school, and I remember him looking at a Janet Fish painting and saying, 'Well, there seems to be some new traditionalists here. That's quite interesting.' Because Bob was a passionate follower of Albers to the very end of his life. He'd send out Christmas cards about two years ago just before he died and it was always an Albers thing, you know, something derivative of Albers. I don't think that, on the whole, Albers' students ever broke away from him, or very few.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Something about order. I interviewed a number of people who had been close to Bob Rauschenberg—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and who, when he was alive, said that the most important teacher he ever had was Albers, who by all accounts had a fairly low opinion of Rauschenberg's gifts. But what Rauschenberg seemed to have absorbed from Albers was this passion for order which no one would suspect, but you go over to Lafayette Street and you go into that building, his house, 380 or 360 Lafayette, as I did to do a number of interviews and have a look at his archives. Interviewing David White, I asked him—I said, like, 'Isn't this an enormous job taking all of this paper and making sure everything's in the right place and it all has to go into archival storage?' David said, 'Oh, Bob had everything in order, so all we needed to do was move it from these plastic sheets or plastic binders into different binders.' It was all—he said he was very precise in his archival practices. Every review, every letter, every postcard, just where it was supposed to be. So that was apparently what he must have absorbed from Albers, was this sense of order that allowed him to appear to be so free-wheeling in other ways. But Bailey also told a story about when he was a student, Albers came into the studio and there were two students who were painting Albers' paintings, and Albers said to them, 'Don't paint like me, be like me.'

MR. DOWNES: Oh, that's nice.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Anyway, but you didn't have any interactions with him? Was he a critic?

MR. DOWNES: I did a couple of studies for his color book, *The Interaction of Color.* I did the Goethe Triangle and one other one. I can't remember which it was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, you did the artwork in the book?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, okay.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. The original paste-ups with the Color-Aid papers, and then that was all transferred into ink which Albers, I think, and Sy Sillman did together. I was sort of accepted by the Albers people as being an Albers person. I wasn't really, but I was accepted as that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: There is a certain aesthetic, I guess, if you look at people like Janet Fish or Welliver and Mangold or Bailey. There is a museum, maybe it's North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, where they've got one room and there's a Bailey, there's a Welliver, and there's an Albers.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: And something they all—they're all related.

MR. DOWNES: No kidding?

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's an interesting—it's hard to describe, but it is something about that insistence on order and resonance and something—

MR. DOWNES: Well, Neil Welliver loved Albers, and then he was very, you know—he used to laugh and tell stories, and Albers said to Neil one day, you know, when Neil was painting those nudes, Albers said, 'For a long time now you've been very good with green, but, oh, those bazooms.'

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: I remember those paintings because he had basically, like, women who looked like Playboy pinups—

MR. DOWNES: Right! They were—

MR. MCELHINNEY: —standing in sylvan pools, holding—

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —their hair above their head or whatever.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And they're very much kind of come-hither, Russ Meyer type—

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And there was no irony in them, though.

MR. DOWNES: No, there wasn't.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They were dead-serious.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah, they were.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Which is kind of funny.

MR. DOWNES: Neil was a heavy-duty womanizer.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's the other thing, I think, that he had a reputation for.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But I don't get the sense that he liked to be kidded either.

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Because someone told me, who had been at the graduate school of Penn, told me that Welliver came down and had just traded in one vehicle for a truck or something. He had bought some kind of more manly, ostentatious kind of a vehicle, and whether it was Engman or somebody like that said, 'Did they have to put blocks on the pedals for you?' because he was so—

MR. DOWNES: So short.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —short, and I don't think he liked that very much.

MR. DOWNES: No, I'm sure he didn't.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But he did exert quite an influence at that school.

MR. DOWNES: I think he did. I think he did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But do you think that Welliver—I mean, how do you—now, this gets to an interesting point, because at some point you moved—you bought a house or you started going to Lincolnville or the Camden Hills —

MR. DOWNES: Maine. Yeah, yeah, I did. Actually, it wasn't Lincolnville or Camden. I was a little bit north of Route 3 and slightly further inland than they were, then Neil and Alex. Neil and Alex Katz were—

MR. MCELHINNEY: But you were on Union, around there?

MR. DOWNES: No, no, Union's south of there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: South of there?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. I was in a little town called Montville. It was so small we didn't even have our own post office or anything.

MR. MCELHINNEY: There's still a lot of people up there. I just ran into John Moore about a month ago—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —when he opened his exhibition.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he came later. He came up there later.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But there was a large group of people. Alex Katz was up there; Fairfield Porter.

MR. DOWNES: Lois Dodd. Right, Lois Dodd. There were a lot of people. Blackie Langley. Blackie got them all up there. Alex tells a wonderful story how they were all playing ball in Provincetown and Alex said, 'God, look at all these artists around here, Blackie. Let's get out of here.' Blackie said—of course, Blackie was a Native American—he said, 'I know where you can buy a house for $150.' So they got in the car, Lois and Blackie and Alex, and they drove up the coast to Lincolnville, Maine. They stopped there, where there was nothing. There was no Lobster Pound or anything at that time. And they all bought houses at once. It was a massive migration. Not massive, but several people.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Long way from New York, though.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, a long way. Well, that's why it was so cheap. It wasn't settled by out-of-staters until five or six years later.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But there were then a number of writers, people like Edwin Denby, right?

MR. DOWNES: That's right. Well, he and Rudy Burckhardt. They all bought a house the same year I did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yvonne Jacquette, obviously.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And Porter—was that—he had a house on Islesford?

MR. DOWNES: On an island, yeah. He had a house on an island. [Great Spruce Head Island–RD]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Vinalhaven—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, his father designed that house and they'd been there for ages. See, there were a number of currents here because there were wealthy, yacht-owning people who were on the coast of Maine; there were very poor people doing lobster boats and stuff on the coast of Maine; there were artists and intellectuals, too, all—two or three groups, two or three types of outsiders.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But Maine had been a magnet for artists since the nineteenth century.

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Hudson River School painters went there. Homer famously—

MR. DOWNES: Lane, somebody called Lane. I can't remember the name.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Fitz Henry Lane.

MR. DOWNES: It's Fitz Hugh Lane. Fitz Hugh Lane. Yeah, they certainly were.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They've changed his name.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, have they?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Fitz Hugh was a mistake.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: It was Fitz Henry.

MR. DOWNES: No kidding?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Somebody somewhere decided it was Hugh and it got into all of the literature as Hugh, and then some well-known art historian I won't mention [John Wilmerding] just quietly changed it to Fitz Henry and everybody just moved on.

MR. DOWNES: That's very funny. I have a book here that I reviewed for the *Times* called Fitz Hugh Lane.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Fitz Hugh Lane. That's—

MR. DOWNES: By John Wilmerding, who was a—he was a scholar.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He might be the same art historian.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Maybe.

MR. DOWNES: Maybe, yeah. Very likely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But, yeah, it had always been a magnet. Wyeth's Monhegan.

MR. DOWNES: Right, exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So Maine was not exactly virgin territory.

MR. DOWNES: No, it was not, although the part of Maine where I was, there weren't any out-of-staters to speak of at all, in Montville. They started coming just about the time I got there. I remember with my girlfriend, we were driving along a road and saw a car, station wagon, unloading bricks, you know, and taking them in the house, and I said, 'There's another immigrant coming in here from out of state.' You knew at once who they were and—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, there were—about that time, when I was a kid my family used to go and spend a month in Mount Desert.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And that would have been about the same time. There were increasingly a lot of Canadians also coming—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —south to the beaches of Maine.

MR. DOWNES: Yes. They—came further west and then got down to Ogunquit, places like that, they kind of skipped the area—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Orchard Beach. Did you have any involvement with Skowhegan? Did you go there—

MR. DOWNES: Yes—

MR. MCELHINNEY: —as a student?

MR. DOWNES: —later. I did not go there as a student. I went there as a teacher in 1975, I would say. Yeah, it would have been 1975 because I met my second wife at Skowhegan and I painted a picture of the—in Pittsburg for the centennial, 1776, 1976 centennial. It was in a show sponsored by the Department of the Interior. So I know that 1976 is a definite date. Yeah, 1976.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What was the subject of the painting?

MR. DOWNES: Oh, it was the coke works at Clairton, [Pennsylvania] the famous coke works. It's three miles long along the river there and the smoke and stuff that comes out of that place is just amazing. Even so, pleasure boats go by there, you know. So it was the first—one of the very first longish panoramas with a river going all the way through it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I remember taking a class with Bob Herbert at Yale—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —who was the great French nineteenth century—and wrote the book about Seurat. He made a very strong point that the Impressionists were not just looking for the sailboats on the Seine. If you went to, wherever that was, Argenteuil, and to the left of the bridge there was a marina with sailboats, but to the right of the bridge there were coal works, colliers unloading barges, and they painted it all, but the collectors only bought—

MR. DOWNES: Only bought the pretty one.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, the pretty ones. But that—

MR. DOWNES: Fairfield Porter told me he had the same thing. He didn't tell me, he told David Shapiro that he had the same thing. If he put a tank, you know, a fuel tank on the coast, you know, on a dock right in front of the painting, you know, that he wouldn't sell the painting. And my dealer at Hirschl & Adler, Donald McKinney, told me when I drew the cranes for the sanitation department way up on 135th Street up there when they were building their thing, Donald said, 'How am I supposed to sell that?' He just thought that it would—because it was a sanitation department and because it was cranes, a sewage treatment plant, you know, therefore it was smelly and ugly and not something you wanted in your living room.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But at the same time, someplace like Pittsburgh was all about steel and was all about industry.

MR. DOWNES: It was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And there was sort of a beauty in industrial form—

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Think about people—I was just on Rouge River the other day and saw that—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —factory that Sheeler had painted.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then you have all of these painters like Elsie Driggs and Ralston Crawford and others—

MR. DOWNES: Sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —who are making these paintings of sort of industrial—

MR. DOWNES: Sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —what today would be called dystopic—

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But at that point in time there was a kind of robust industrialism.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, and great hope for industrialism.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: Sure. It wasn't until Rachel Carson that things began to go the other way.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: I went to Pittsburgh because I was crazy about John Kane and that's where he worked.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: I loved Kane's work and I loved those—I loved Naïve art. I wrote a long essay called 'Henri Rousseau and the Idea of the Naïve' in which I discussed issues of what is folk art, what is Naïve art, you know, all these different group categories. It was a major, major preoccupation [...–RD] for me for several years, and I still love primitive painting. I still love those things. I love them because they're totally undefended, and I feel that I had not much talent, not much native talent in the tips of my fingers for drawing, so on. I wasn't one of those kids who, sitting next to that kid in high school class, they could make a caricature of their friend or something. I didn't have that kind of talent and I felt that I—I think that I was—I loved those painters because they were helpless, really. They had to not have skill. They didn't have training.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But they had courage and they had insistence.

MR. DOWNES: They did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And they didn't feel like they needed to be clever.

MR. DOWNES: That's right, and it worked. They didn't try to be clever. Those paintings are sincere, no matter what else you call them.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So that's also very powerful and—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, it is powerful.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and compelling.

MR. DOWNES: It is powerful.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You mentioned that you met your second wife at Skowhegan—

MR. DOWNES: Correct.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and you had been married before?

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I was married to Janet Fish. We were married before I graduated from Yale, my last year at Yale.

MR. MCELHINNEY: She was from Bermuda or some place—

MR. DOWNES: She was—her father—well, she was really—her family was from Connecticut—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —but they moved to Bermuda. The father had a sickness, some kind of sleeping sickness, and he was recommended—the climate was recommended to him by doctors.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Silas Marner type of—

MR. DOWNES: Who knows what it was?

MR. MCELHINNEY: —dozing off. Anyway—but I remember she told me once that she had grown up in Bermuda, or had spent part of her—

MR. DOWNES: She did. I went there. The night before we were married, I spent the night in a slave cottage on their property.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, you couldn't see the bride, right? It's very—

MR. DOWNES: No, that's right. Now you're getting it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So was there—

MR. DOWNES: I took a, you know, a companion down there, a guy called Farman Farmaian. He was a Persian, and he'd hung out with the beats in Paris and New York.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So you have a bachelor party in a slave cabin?

MR. DOWNES: That's right. And you know what he did? He read me a passage from a Chinese erotic novel about

a man who had a dog's penis grafted on his own because his own wasn't big enough for him.

[They laugh.]

MR. DOWNES: I thought, 'That's a hell of a thing to read to somebody the night before they're getting married.'

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's—so you married a painter.

MR. DOWNES: I did. And she was much better than me at that stage.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And how was that, being married to a painter?

MR. DOWNES: Well, after we were divorced, at the time—it was interesting. I worked in the school—this was when I was at Penn, you know, did that one year at Penn. I had a studio on campus and she painted at home, and I would come home for dinnertime and she would say, 'What do you think of this? What do you think of that?' and I would tell her, and I would become quite vocal, but it didn't go the other way. She was not—she was quite tongue-tied and awkward about discussing my paintings, so there was a funny kind of imbalance there, which I don't know what it means, but—

MR. MCELHINNEY: She was more intuitive or more—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. She was silent, and a much better painter than I was, much better. She was really good in those days. Well, she's—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Was she yet painting bottles and—

MR. DOWNES: She was. She started that early and stuck with it the whole time, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's an interesting moment because that—you know, you're talking about Alex Katz and Porter and Robert Dash, maybe, and others who, you know, are hanging around with the Abstract Expressionists, but they're painting in a representational way.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And it seemed, from speaking to those people and speaking to the old Ab-Ex guys, that they didn't interact with the same rancor that occurred later, like in the '70s, when people were really circling the wagons and saying, 'We're representational painters and you all are abstract painters' or whatever.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, that's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: There was much more acceptance, and I guess—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —Porter, because he was writing for Tom Hess for *Art News*—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the wonderful reviews and essays that you assembled into—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —that terrific—

MR. DOWNES: It's a great book, isn't it?

MR. MCELHINNEY: —anthology.

MR. DOWNES: I made it myself, but—I mean, he wrote it. It's just great writing.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I spent a day with Porter when he came to Yale right before he died.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, did you?

MR. MCELHINNEY: And he was great. —

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I had to deliver him to critiques, and I had to buy him lunch and buy him dinner—

MR. DOWNES: Great.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and take him to the train station—

MR. DOWNES: Nice.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and spent the day with him, and it was very, very memorable.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then he gave that lecture in Hastings Hall that everyone hated—

MR. DOWNES: Hated, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —but that was a wonderful talk about—

MR. DOWNES: Anti-technology.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —art and technology, right. Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. It is. It's a wonderful essay.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And I remember Bailey and Chaet and all these guys were saying, 'That son of a bitch, he's—we want to see his work, we don't want a sermon.' You know?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, Alex Katz hated all that stuff. I remember I told him, I said, 'There's going to be a section on technology in this book.' He said, 'Thanks!'

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, in a way, painters weren't supposed to be thinking about these things.

MR. DOWNES: No, and that's why I loved Fairfield, that he did think about it. He studied with [Alfred North] Whitehead at Harvard, and I thought to myself, you know, of all the painters that I meet, who A, studied with Whitehead in the first place, and who B, kept his interest in Whitehead up after all those years? I had huge respect for him for that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Was he a friend? Had he become a friend, or were you—

MR. DOWNES: He sort of became a friend. We didn't meet very often, but we corresponded from time to time. I sent him a text of an article I wrote, essay I wrote, and he went over it point by point, and they were numbered paragraphs and he referred to the number of each paragraph and said, 'When you say that, I wonder if you have thought of such and such,' detailed comments on each part of that thing. I was absolutely amazed that he did it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: A wonderful writer—

MR. DOWNES: Great writer. Great writer and an intense thinker, too, you know, and totally fresh in his thoughts, but highly controversial, still. His ideas are highly controversial. I was at the Met, on a panel at the Met one time recently, and the lady who was running took me—walked me through the show that it was all about, the reopening of the American wing up there. And I said to her something about, 'You know, I read this thing by Fairfield Porter in which he said that the Armory show did untold damage to American painting.' She said, 'And by listening to that, he ruined your life,' or 'you ruined your own life,' or 'he ruined your life by saying that.' That was crazy! First of all, he hadn't ruined my life. I wouldn't be on the panel at the Met if my life was in ruins.

[They laugh.]

MR. DOWNES: I'd be on the panel in Podunk instead.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's hard today to sort of maintain these canons that exist today.

MR. DOWNES: Very hard.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And in a way—I'll have to go back and reread that. Is it in—I don't recall that particular statement that he made, that the Armory show—

MR. DOWNES: I think it's in one of the—it might be in the Prendergast piece. There's a piece on Prendergast in that book.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay.

MR. DOWNES: And it might be in another longish essay called 'Class Content in American Abstract Painting.'

MR. MCELHINNEY: I've got the book at home. I'll look it up, but—

MR. DOWNES: One or the other of those, I would think. If you looked in the index under Armory show, you would be able to get it right away.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay. I'll do it. But it is true that American painting, in a way, in the nineteenth century had established some kind of rapport between art and science and poetry, and there was a kind of—

MR. DOWNES: Like Thomas Eakins, you mean?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, Eakins, but Frederick Church vis-à-vis Alexander von Humboldt and the impact of Humboldt on scientific practice and that sort of aesthetics of empiricism. I mean, Humboldt was a very important thinker—

MR. DOWNES: I know nothing about him.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —amazing. He was as famous as Napoleon.

MR. DOWNES: Really? For what?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, he as a young man inherited a pile of money and took—underwrote an expedition to the Ecuadorian Andes and went through the Magdalena River up into Colombia, what is now Colombia, and into the Andes, into the *Avenida de los Volcanos*, and studied plants and animals and geology, and came back to Europe and wrote a book called Cosmos, that proposed a new theory of the unity of nature. But he also declared that every scientific expedition had to be accompanied by artists and by trained naturalists, because by that point most expeditions were being run by military—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and were looking mostly for routes of transportation or strategic advantage of some—for espionage or whatever. Like Lewis and Clark was a military expedition; Pike was a military expedition. The first military expedition that went to the Rocky Mountains, the Long Expedition, actually had a corps of artists and naturalists. So that's was Humboldt's influence.

MR. DOWNES: And then, of course, Stephens in the Mayan country; he took an artist along.

MR. MCELHINNEY: John Lloyd—yeah, John Lloyd Stephens.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he took that guy Catherwood there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Frederick Catherwood, yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So that—

MR. DOWNES: I'll tell you a funny story about Catherwood. I went to see those pyramids in Teotihuacan and I said to my girlfriend, you know, 'We've got to go to Egypt next.' And I said—I traveled with an old friend of mine from the British Museum who knew all about—I said to her, 'Who's the Piranesi of these pyramids?' She said, 'Well, there's this guy, Catherwood. That's about as big as we can get, you know, as great as we can get.' So we were in an oasis in Egypt, this girlfriend of mine and I, and carved way up high on a section of the temple on a tympanum, I guess you call it, on the front of this temple, it said F.W. Catherwood, chiseled into the [stone–RD] —and I didn't know that, but Stephens hired Catherwood because of his superb drawings that he made of Napoleon's trip through Egypt.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, he was—that's a wonderful account, too, of Stephens and Catherwood going to Central America and buying the whole town of Copán for $50. But there was this whole uniquely American kind of amalgam of science, literature, painting. Frederick Church, you know, went to the Artic and he went—his first expedition was following Humboldt into Ecuador.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, was it really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: So *Heart of the Andes* is the result of that.

MR. DOWNES: I see, I see, yeah. I'll have to look this guy Humboldt up.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He's inventing everything. Church is inventing everything. I went and saw Cayambe, the volcano, and it—I stood in the very spot where Church had to have stood to see the peak of Cayambe. What he did was he took elements from the surrounding landscape and he made this fantastic composite, sort of taking John Martin…—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: …—and making it more convincing in terms of data. But there was this tension between abstraction and representation, but it seemed like your generation, that group—Mangold, Marden, Serra, Janet Fish, yourself, Chuck Close—all sort of were walking a tightrope between those two camps, and somehow a lot of —even, you could say, Sylvia Mangold's early pieces were abstract paintings made with imagery.

MR. DOWNES: True. That's true. I would agree with that, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And even her later—I just saw a wonderful painting of hers, a landscape, at the Detroit Institute of Arts that's very haunting, Nocturne.

MR. DOWNES: She's very good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But does that—are issues of style important anymore, do you think?

MR. DOWNES: Not nearly as much as they used to be.

MR. MCELHINNEY: No?

MR. DOWNES: No. I remember being introduced to Paula Cooper years ago, and I held out my hand and she didn't move her hand at all. She didn't raise it and shake hands with me.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Reason being?

MR. DOWNES: I was in the wrong school of thought. I was a realistic painter who attacked the idea that, you know, abstract art was some kind of mystical necessity.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Or Darwinian—

MR. DOWNES: Inevitable—right, Darwinian, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —kind of higher being, right?

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Sort of the culmination of some kind of evolution.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. It's been a slow process of disintegration, I think, that war between the styles. I really do. Because, I mean, Chuck [Close] started painting figures not long after he left school, and so did I, painting landscapes representationally anyway. And a lot of people did, and the whole division between those things seemed arbitrary and unnecessary. I was as interested in de Kooning as I was in any other kind of painting.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Painting's painting.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So what drew you to landscape? Was there a conscious, rational kind of decision that—like a self-analytical moment, epiphany, where you—

MR. DOWNES: I'm not sure about that. I know I was in—when I first went and painted a landscape, if you could possibly call it that, it was a park—I was living near Central Park on the Upper East Side on the edge of Spanish Harlem in a sort of Irish neighborhood. It was very cheap, very poor, and I used to go up around the reservoir and draw. I think that I was very lonely. I'd—just after I'd been through that divorce with Janet Fish—

MR. MCELHINNEY: But how long—

MR. DOWNES: —I was extremely lonely. Janet was very kind to me, but that was unusual. I deliberately isolated myself. I was ashamed after that divorce. I felt a great deal of shame. This is more psychological that you want, perhaps, but anyway, I think that one of the reasons I went out in the park was just to be among other people. Even if I didn't interact with them, they were there. I didn't paint the other people—well, I did in some sense paint the other people. I painted tennis—I went to the tennis courts every day and painted them playing tennis.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Porter did that a lot, too.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, that's true. He did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He loved tennis.

MR. DOWNES: Well, one of the interesting things about tennis, and also musicians the same way, which I later painted, they repeat the same gesture over and over again. One person's serve is always roughly the same thing.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: So they go back. You can have another shot at it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They're moving, but they're moving—

MR. DOWNES: Repetitively.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —from one pose to the other eight poses they're doing.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, and they keep repeating themselves so you can say, 'Well, that's how it looked. I wasn't sure the first time around.'

MR. MCELHINNEY: Interesting. So was it the subject that intrigued you, or was it the mode of engagement, was it the—sounds almost like you were trying to create a space for yourself that painting gave you. Going into the landscape, going onto the motif, if you will, gave you a way to construct—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —a different—

MR. DOWNES: One thing I know—now, this is a help; I've just suddenly thought of this. I mean, I've known it for years, but in this context of this meeting here, I only just this minute thought of it. But when I went to Maine, the first summer in Maine, I expected to go to Maine and be painting abstractions in the barn. Well, during the course of that winter I began to feel that my abstractions were owed too much to Al Held. They were really too much like his painting, and I couldn't break out of it. I tried introducing figurative elements; I did fishes swimming through these waves and looked at Hokusai, artists like that, and that was the beginning of the breakup of my style. I remember Welliver came into the studio and he said to me—he obviously didn't think very well of these paintings. He said, 'Why don't you just do something you absolutely know you can't do, at all?' and he pointed out the window. Well, the next thing I did was I was painting out of the window, and after that I was painting outdoors. You know, the sequence seemed quite logical. So, that was the origin of it, really.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So it was not about the landscape or the terrain as a subject—

MR. DOWNES: No. No, it wasn't, not yet. It became that very quickly because once I got to Maine, I met a few people who were doing organic gardens, for example, and I began to feel it was a restorative aspect to living in the country that I really liked, and that became important to me. So that it was an endorsement of the kind of life people were leading in Maine.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Ordering terrain in support of life, of existence—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —of sustenance.

MR. DOWNES: And leading a very simple kind of a life, and a life that was also healthy. The state of the landscape in Maine, which was very green, you know, was based on the modesty of people's lifestyle. So there was a moral edge to it all, you know, something moralistic about it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What today we would call, sustainability?

MR. DOWNES: Exactly so. Exactly so. Yeah, and it has a lot to do with population growth which is one of the things people won't bring up. They keep talking about the weather, you know, and the bad weather and climate change and so on, but very few people—a society called the Population Connection and they're trying to get into the schools and explain to kids, you know, if you keep having these numbers of babies, the place is going to be too full. You know, one of the reasons why we're running out of oil and so forth and so on is because there's so many of us.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: We all want to live the same standard.

MR. MCELHINNEY: We are consuming resources at an insupportable rate.

MR. DOWNES: Exactly, so we're making a mess of the place with our huge dumps. No one has ever produced so much unwanted material either. We don't—you know, recycling has put a nibble in that problem.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It's almost like TSA and the airports. It's almost like an exercise that lets people feel like they're making a difference, and maybe in a small way they are, but it's sort of trying, you know, to bail out the Titanic with a teaspoon.

MR. DOWNES: That's true. That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So it seems like—how long were you in Maine? How long did you—

MR. DOWNES: I bought my house in 1964 or 1965, 1964, I think, and then I first lived in it in 1965, occupied it for the summer of 1965. I sold it in about 1990 when I started to go to—I'd started to go to Texas and I couldn't see spending three months in Texas, three months in New York, three months in Maine. You know, that's too much moving around, just too much moving around.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Had the population in Montville grown?

MR. DOWNES: It had a little bit, yes. The character of Montville had changed. It wasn't a pure Maine place anymore; it was a hybrid place with people from all over the world living there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Out-of-towners—

MR. DOWNES: Exactly. They took over.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —timeshares and—yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yep. I remember when a friend of mine from Colorado got elected as the chief selectman of the town. The selectmen—there were three selectmen who ran the town, and I was so excited. I thought, 'This is so wonderful, somebody outside of Maine, from outside of Maine, is going to be a selectman. This is very embracing. This is very good for the town.'

MR. MCELHINNEY: But then you—

MR. DOWNES: And for my friend, who I never would have thought would get elected.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Is he still there?

MR. DOWNES: No, he's gone. He opened a restaurant on the coast. This milking cows is tough work.

MR. MCELHINNEY: This might be a good time to take a break.

MR. DOWNES: I think so, too. I've got a little crick in my—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Thank you so much. We are going to resume in the morning, so—

MR. DOWNES: In the morning? Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —at 10:00.

MR. DOWNES: Now, in the morning my assistant will be here, but he'll be working down the other end of the loft.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Perfectly fine.

MR. DOWNES: I don't think that'll bother us.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's great. My assistant will also be here. Thank you.

MR. DOWNES: And I may have to break from time to time to check on what he's doing, to make sure he's got the right idea.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Very easily done. No worries.

MR. DOWNES: Okay.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Thanks so much.

MR. DOWNES: Okay.

[END OF downes16_track02]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay. James McElhinney speaking with Rackstraw Downes at his home and studio, in New York. on Monday the 11th of April, 2016. Good morning.

MR. DOWNES: Good morning.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So as we were—as we were parting yesterday—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah?

MR. MCELHINNEY: —we were—we were talking about many, many things off the record and one of the things that came up, I guess I have a few questions in—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —anticipation of some future researcher. The subject matter for your work: you migrated kind of easily from, as you described, looking out the window, going from doing the sort of Al Held-influenced abstractions to looking out the window in Maine at landscape. Did you ever—did you ever after that point explore the figure or still life?

MR. DOWNES: I did. I did and I never got interested in still life except as a teaching tool. It's a very useful—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —easy teaching tool, but I never—I don't think I ever painted a still life. I think Bill Bailey wanted us all to paint a still life and he said, 'I don't want to see you demonstrate your school style. I want you to look directly at the objects themselves,'—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —but I evaded the whole thing by painting the over doors, those windows over—

MR. MCELHINNEY: As you explained, yeah, the clerestories of the eyebrow windows above the door.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, I know. You're describing the kind of window that would angle in—

MR. DOWNES: That's right, that's—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Transom.

MR. DOWNES: Transom, thank you, that's the right word.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Transom windows.

MR. DOWNES: Transom windows, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah. No longer a popular feature.

MR. DOWNES: And they were painted—no. They were painted of course, painted over like they often are now. People aren't interested in Transom. I put—I did a loft on Hudson Street at Reed and we put transom windows over all the doors—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wow.

MR. DOWNES: —because we only had ventilation on one side of the building and you wanted to get as much circulation of air, you know, as you possibly could. We had a tiny skylight about the size of that—half the size of that black thing you're sitting on and that opened, it was an operable skylight, so you'd open it up and you'd get the breeze to come—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —through that way and those transom windows really helped.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, Hudson Street, you would have gotten a lot of air off of the river.

MR. DOWNES: We would, yes, we would. We also got a lot of noise from the subway system which went right under our building.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh that's—

MR. DOWNES: —you could feel it at night and you could feel your bed shaking.

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: So I went to extraordinary levels of leather and rubber and all kinds of, you know, things underneath the legs of that bed.

MR. MCELHINNEY: To pad the bed, to reduce the vibrations.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's like you're going to a motel in the Midwest where you stick a quarter in the box—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and the bed would shake.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Magic fingers.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yes. I went—I had—I was giving a lecture at Cornell one time and they had one of those beds.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Magic fingers.

MR. DOWNES: It was a water bed—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —I think it was called. Yeah, and it was hot.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wow, a vibrating water bed.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, it was hot.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Gideon's in the side table, right?

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Bible in the side table.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So what kind of engagement did you have with the human figure? Were you doing things like Welliver with—

MR. DOWNES: No, not at all, not at all.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the nude and woodland setting?

MR. DOWNES: I did paint some nudes, but basically the nudes—I was getting quite sophisticated at that point. I'd been to Belgium and Holland for a tour of the Netherland—of all those museums there, and those wonderful painters that interest me very much and when I came back, I wanted to do something—I wanted to do

something similarly complex. So I posed my models against my own paintings, my own big landscape paintings and, you know, one would be lying on a mattress in front of this snow scene, you know? They were discordant, you know? You could reintroduce all kinds of interesting collaged kind of effects with it, you know. And so I painted a bunch of those and also a bunch of portraits, square portraits, and somebody said, 'Your portraits are rather stiff, you know? You ought to get your people to do something.'

So I had a friend whose younger sister was an oboe player, played the oboe and I got her to come over and practice in my uptown apartment. It was a big, rent-controlled apartment up there and I made a really nice painting out of her playing the—practicing the oboe. It sold to a collector in Chicago; I have no where—no idea where it is now. So I went from—basically I—I don't know which came first in that sense, but in any event, I think the musicians—eventually that oboe player brought a cellist and they played duets together—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wow.

MR. DOWNES: —and at the end of the duet I would say 'That sounded terrific,' you know, and they'd both laugh and say 'It was terrible.' I said, 'Well, frankly, I can't hear a note you're playing. When I'm concentrating on my painting you might as well be, you know, in silence. It doesn't make no difference to me.' [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: So that was—and that was the end of those; I don't think I did any more. The next painting I did: just before I went to Maine, I painted the whole room brown. I had one room in my uptown apartment, it was brown. I was sick of looking at white, you know, all these figures cut out against the white wall—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —and I liked Vuillard very much, I was a great admirer and I loved the wallpapers and the patterns and richness of color on the wall, not inside the painting, but on the wall itself and I painted the trim like several different colors. I was trying to be like Pompeii; he also—I love those—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —Pompeiian interiors. So that was that and the last ones I did were empty rooms. After I painted those two people reading aloud in that brown room, I thought this room is a lot better all on its own—on its own, without the people and I took—I said, 'I'm going to take the people out on the streets and put them in my landscape paintings or my cityscape paintings and not in these rooms.' So the last one, yeah, I did my own room uptown, my own brown study and then I did a dark room at Skowhegan. I was teaching there that summer, it must have been 1975 and I did an interior and I had an affair during that thing with one of the students, who had a little daughter, a six-year-old daughter and she used to come over and spend the night, you know, and one time she left her slippers behind and so I painted these slippers right in front of her chair and that was my little valentine card, you know?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Sweet.

MR. DOWNES: It's tucked into the painting; nobody would know, but I knew. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right. Just out of curiosity, where was the—which interior did you paint at Skowhegan?

MR. DOWNES: Oronzio Maldarelli cottage; it's changed its name now; they've changed the names of all those cottages unfortunately.

MR. MCELHINNEY: This was one of the cottages down along the shore of the Lake Wesserunsett?

MR. DOWNES: Down by the lake, exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I also was at Skowhegan.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, were you?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Two years before you.

MR. DOWNES: A teacher or a student?

MR. MCELHINNEY: As a whippersnapper, a student.

MR. DOWNES: Whippersnapper, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Troublemaker.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: I was there two years prior.

MR. DOWNES: Great place to make trouble, Skowhegan.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Absolutely built for it.

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Absolutely built for it.

MR. DOWNES: It used to be a very favorite place of mine, but now it's changed enormously, it's gotten much trendier.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It was much more youthful then; there were a few older students, but the preponderance of students who were attending Skowhegan at that time were usually undergraduate students—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —between their junior year and senior year—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —much like the Norfolk Program at Yale.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, Norfolk, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Sort of a—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —same demographic.

MR. DOWNES: That's true. I would agree with that, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Then it—then it evolved—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and I think that the setting was inspiring of all sorts of communions with nature, artistic and bacchanalian and—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —it was—it was quite a memorable and formative experience—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —without going into all the colorful detail.

MR. DOWNES: You are—do you remember Stephen Greene, the painter?

MR. MCELHINNEY: He was my drawing teacher at Tyler.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, was he really? Well, he was there the summer I was there. We didn't get along very well and suddenly in the middle of the summer he said, 'You guys are getting under my skin. That lake—that lake, it's getting into my painting.' [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: He was quite indignant, you know? He thought that he was the abstract painter on—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —the team there and—[laughs]—he wouldn't—

MR. MCELHINNEY: He was a sweet guy on another level.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah. I knew—his daughter was very nice—is very nice. She's in Houston. I saw her quite a lot when I used to go to Galveston every winter.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So that must have been an interesting—who was—who else was there that year?

MR. DOWNES: Sidney Simon was the sculptor—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —and Sidney and Steven got along very well. It was an age—age gap and there was one—a woman called Arlene Slavin—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yes.

MR. DOWNES: —who—you know her? She was there and John Button was there and Button, Slavin, and I always voted together against Sidney and Steven. And Arlene was ambitious to be the liveliest person on the campus, but John Button assured her I was, not her. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: There was all this petty stuff going on, it was quite amuse—sometimes we were satirizing ourselves, you know?

MR. MCELHINNEY: But by then Bill [Willard] Cummings had already passed.

MR. DOWNES: He died that summer.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That summer.

MR. DOWNES: Right, that summer and Daphne, his daughter—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —came running down my cottage in tears, you know, to sit there and cry and we—Pamela and I were sitting there together and—

MR. MCELHINNEY: But Jonnie [Joan] Franzen was there still.

MR. DOWNES: Jonnie Franzen ran the school. She ran it—I thought she ran it superbly, but the trustees didn't think so, didn't agree with me. She sat with her back to the road in that little house as you—that office when you come up the hill and you hit that office, but she knew everything that was going on, every single, little thing. Somehow her spies, you know, acted—she was a very smart lady and she—

MR. MCELHINNEY: She was.

MR. DOWNES: I had fell in love with that school because the first day, Jonnie called a faculty meeting and she said, 'Now, you guys, how do we want to run the school this summer?' and I thought 'That's an interesting question; she's not going to tell us what to do?' and she didn't. We devised a plan, the bunch of us. And at the end of the meeting I went up to her and I said, 'Jonnie, I know we're supposed to come in two days a week. Could I have a special schedule here? Instead of fixing my days as Tuesday and Thursday, we would say that if it was sunny on Monday, sunny on Tuesday, and sunny on Wednesday, I would do my teaching on Thursday and Friday to make sure I didn't miss any of the good weather. If, on the other hand, it rains on Monday, I'll come in and do my teaching on Monday, so it would be totally flexible.' She said, 'Of course, it's for you to have—you just go right ahead,' and I fell in love with the school over that because every other school has fixed days and whether it rains or doesn't rain, you're stuck with it, you know, you have to go teach—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —even though you've been waiting for two weeks to get this perfect sunlight. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: So at this point you're painting pretty much exclusively landscapes?

MR. DOWNES: I am.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And if I remember accurately the work from that period, there were—they're mostly rural landscapes, Maine—

MR. DOWNES: Maine predominated, yes, it did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and similar language, of sort of pattern, mark-making that related a little bit to Welliver and perhaps Porter. It was—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah, they were.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —it was a little more painterly than your work today.

MR. DOWNES: They were and then they got tighter and tighter and tighter, until they were really quite—I went to Belgium and Holland with Rosemarie Beck, we went together to look at paintings and I fell madly in love with those Flemish painters, the very tight ones and I imitated them. And I remember coming back to the USA where I was teaching at Penn at that time and telling one of the people there, one of the kids in the class, I said, 'I'm going to paint—make van Eyck look soft focus.'

[They Laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: But also are you speaking about the sort of urban painters in Holland as well?

MR. DOWNES: Yes. I got interested in them, too. Berckheyde and van der Heyden are both fantastic painters.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, right.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Of course the church, Saenredam.

MR. DOWNES: Saenredam, I was mad about Saenredam. Years later while on my way to India, I took a detour and went to Edinburgh, went via London and Edinburgh. I made a special trip from London up to Edinburgh because Edinburgh had just acquired the biggest painting that Saenredam ever painted.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wow.

MR. DOWNES: They think it was a gift to Charles II when he ascended the British throne because it was of course the return of the royalty after the Republican era.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, and that was a—

MR. MCELHINNEY: The Restoration.

MR. DOWNES: —it was a—Restoration, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Stuart—that's an interesting period of English history.

MR. DOWNES: It is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: From the—

MR. DOWNES: It is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the Commonwealth, right?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. Now if you want to refresh your memory, I have a book—a very nice book that Princeton put out with reproductions of all these things we're talking about or many of them.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, I—I mean I have an image of them too.

MR. DOWNES: You've got it in your head? Fine.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And—

MR. DOWNES: That's fine.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the other one was Cornelis de Witt.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The wonderful—you know who else? Around that same time I remember Colmon—

MR. DOWNES: Edmund de Witt, wasn't it? Are you sure it was Cornelis?

MR. MCELHINNEY: I don't know. Anyway—

MR. DOWNES: No. Go ahead.

MR. MCELHINNEY: de Witt.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, it was de Witt.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Here we are in a Dutch town—

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and you—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: New York is not really an American city.

MR. DOWNES: It isn't.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's a Dutch pirate city—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —with a veneer of culture—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —but I remember having a similar conversation with John Moore back in that period—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —because he was also very—he was also in Philadelphia.

MR. DOWNES: He was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He was also excited by these painters.

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: You said something a while back, a moment ago, about having gotten tired of looking at white walls and I remember very clearly there was a whole canon of the so-called 'new realism,' with Pearlstein and others who were putting big nudes and get very tactile, tangible nudes and objects against white walls with polished hardwood floors.

MR. DOWNES: Right, that's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oriental rugs and so forth—

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and it seemed like every art school in the country had legions of people—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —either doing that or painting with masking tape.

MR. DOWNES: Right. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: Well, it was very interesting because you can't get the kind of light that Vuillard and those guys painted without having colored walls. You just can't. In a white room—

MR. MCELHINNEY: No.

MR. DOWNES: —you can't get it, you can't get it. It suited Whistler, but not the other guys.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What was it about Vuillard that intrigued you most?

MR. DOWNES: Well, Vuillard put his paint on the canvas so it sat on the surface, so you got this mosaic right out in front always and he was very, very—the blobs of paint were extremely metaphorical. They turned into other things while still being blobs.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —and the patterning was so rich on the wall, that the figures emerged with the wall. It was exactly the opposite, for example, of [Thomas] Eakins. If you look at that oar up at the Met, of that guy in the single scull, you know, it doesn't really fit with the water at all, it's a line on its own. And it was that intertwining, that interweaving of colors that I loved so much in Vuillard.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Eakins is trying to be both rational and naturalistic at the same point—

MR. DOWNES: That's right, that's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and it doesn't quite—the twain never quite—

MR. DOWNES: Not quite merging.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —meet.

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They might have a dirty weekend, but there would never be a marriage.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: What about—as you were talking, I was having this random idea that—of Vuillard's mark-making being like knots in a tapestry and remembering that [Eugene] Chevreul worked for the Gobelins [tapestry factory].

MR. DOWNES: That's true, that's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and so that the color theory that influenced everyone came out of the textile industry.

MR. DOWNES: Think so? Yeah, well that's very on the surface.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, very much.

MR. DOWNES: Because it's so physical, it's so sculptural almost.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So were you ever intrigued by—but he mostly painted landscapes and figures, the domestic interiors.

MR. DOWNES: Who did?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Vuillard.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, oh, I see.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But there's some of his pictures and some early Bonnard where he's painting with distemper, with—

MR. DOWNES: That's right, he used distemper to the end of his life.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It was like raw canvas.

MR. DOWNES: Right, and on pieces of cardboard and stuff, too. Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right and—

MR. DOWNES: And that issue of the brown ground; I have always used a brown ground since I saw Constable's sketches on that same trip that I went to the Netherlands with Rosemarie Beck. I stopped off in London first—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —and in the V&A [Victoria and Albert Museum] are all those Constable sketches; they're all done on a brown ground, sometimes on just pieces of cardboard.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, that goes back to the Venetians—

MR. DOWNES: Yep, that's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That goes back to Venetians who were, you know, painting on canvas; there was all that sailcloth around, of course you couldn't—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: You couldn't paint a fresco in that town and expect it to live for five years, but when you go to the Sala del Consiglio and the Palazzo Ducale [Doge's Palace] and—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —you look at, you know, Veronese, you know, history of the city, most of the paintings are underpaintings with little accents of color.

MR. DOWNES: Huh, huh.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That brown or—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —oxide red color that they used.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. Well, you know that Monet is supposed to have had his—go blind because of working on a white ground?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Really?

MR. DOWNES: They worked on white grounds, the Impressionists. Yes, they did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And Courbet apparently—

MR. DOWNES: Courbet must have used a dark ground, I'm sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He used black sometimes.

MR. DOWNES: Did he? Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So what—so if you say you're painting on a brown ground, did you then do like a camaieu or grisaille-type—

MR. DOWNES: No, not at all.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —underpainting? Just painting right over the brown ground.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. The point of the brown ground was it was in the middle, it was a middle tone—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —middle pitch. So if you put up—mixed up some white and put it on a white canvas, a white ground, it looks gray. If you put it on a brown ground, it looks very bright white.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: So you get your sunlight immediately; the effect of light comes twice as quickly and it really speeds up outdoor sketching, outdoor oil sketching.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So the Dutch also used this, people like—

MR. DOWNES: They did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —van Ruisdael or Koninck.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, yes. Koninck was a great favorite of mine for years because he did those big, wide panoramics.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The big panoramics—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and there are a couple in the Alte—

MR. DOWNES: Pinakothek.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the Alte Pinakothek—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —in Munich that are really spectacular. We were speaking earlier, before we began the recording, about Frans Post.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Not many people know about Frans Post.

MR. DOWNES: No, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How did you discover him?

MR. DOWNES: Well, I had a friend called Emily Elman. She was a painter and she and I got along very well and had a romance and so on and she and I went painting together in Maine, and she had studied art history or was studying art history and she highly recommended a book by a very famous scholar of Dutch landscape painting. I can't think of his name now, but in that book he discusses the whole issue of high skies and low skies and it was a fashion, you know, to have a high sky and in the—in Amsterdam you can see a painting there which was—originally had a low sky and it's been added on, the whole sky—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —above here has been painted on, you know, and so that was a very interesting book. I have it here. I can't think of his name.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I guess the book I know is Svetlana Alpers'.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah. *The Art of Describing*.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: She has one on maps, a chapter on maps that interested me quite a bit.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And—yeah, it discusses the whole idea of chorography.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. This one—let me get that—just check it—check his name.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay, let's just pause—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, oh, oh, I'm hooked in. I don't—

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's okay. You're tethered, we'll pause.

[END OF downes16_track03]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay, we're resuming. Rackstraw went to get a book. So, we're having a look at a book called *Dutch Landscape Painting in Seventeenth Century* by Wolfgang Stechow, and you describe this as your bible?

MR. DOWNES: It was for a while, yes. I mean, that stuff about the high and low skies was of enormous interest to me, and the stuff about cityscape, there's a chapter on cityscape too. And that was the book that told me, you know, what I'd seen really on that trip to Holland. I'd never heard of Berckheyde and Van der Heyden when I

went to Holland. I just picked them out for myself and immediately you get it right away. There's a photographer who lives in this building, who feels the same way. He went down to Washington DC a couple of years ago. They had a big show of cityscape painting from Holland, and 17th Century Holland. And he said, 'You know, those two guys stand out immediately.' Because Saenredam is something else.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: He's not in the tradition of total painting like that at all.

MR. MCELHINNEY: We were also speaking about [Frans] Post and [Philip] Koninck—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —Koninck with the sweeping these really broad panoramas.

MR. DOWNES: Right. You know, it's very interesting to me, because I was almost an art historian during that time. I was so interested in all the paintings. I stopped going to the SoHo galleries and stuff like that, and I didn't go to the MoMA for years and years, except to see the early de Chirico show. That was a special one, but I actually sort of got uninterested in modern art, contemporary art, modern and contemporary art, and was deeply interested in that sort of stuff.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Were there other living artists who were either of influence, or who you felt sympathy with, or you—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, yes. I talked a lot with Rosemarie Beck, who I went to Belgium and Holland with.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: Her husband was a very smart guy, very interesting writer, Robert Phelps, and he introduced Collette to the USA. He got her translated and all her books published, you know. He was a big fan of Collette and a friend of her daughter. And so, conversation in their house was always about art and literature, one or the other, and music a little bit too. Rosemarie played the violin and was quite serious about it. And they had lived in Woodstock for a long time when Guston was there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: So, they knew him too. So, you know, those things kind of merge and bleed one into the other, these social connections. And Emily Elman needs a little boost from me too, because she really did introduce me to that book, and other things. I'm trying to think what they were. It was in my head two or three minutes ago.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Where were you exhibiting your work at this point?

MR. DOWNES: Jill Kornblee.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Kornblee.

MR. DOWNES: Kornblee, yeah, 1972 was my first show, I think, or '73.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Since I recall, Kornblee was also showing other representational paintings.

MR. DOWNES: She showed Susan Crile.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Susan Crile.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, who was painting rugs at that time.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, textiles and—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. She showed John Button, who was painting realistic paintings. She showed numerous minimalist people. She showed, for example the little guy with the light—

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Dan] Flavin?

MR. DOWNES: Flavin.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: She showed Flavin. She showed somebody who did glass things. I can't remember who that was,

sheets of glass. Was it Larry Bell?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Larry Bell was doing that.

MR. DOWNES: It might have been Larry Bell.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But one of Al Held's wives also—Susan Stone?

MR. DOWNES: Oh yes, I remember who you mean, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Did work with glass.

MR. DOWNES: Sylvia Stone.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Sylvia Stone, pardon me.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Thanks. Yeah, it's interesting you bring up Dan Flavin because a lot of people don't realize that one of the most significant collections of Hudson River School and luminist sketchbooks was amassed by Dan Flavin.

MR. DOWNES: No kidding.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And if I'm not much mistaken, now owned by the DIA Foundation.

MR. DOWNES: Really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: And he before he passed had a desire allegedly and of course this is all part of the legend. I can't prove it, but this is what I was told, that he had wanted at some point to organize some kind of a museum for the, you know, the enjoyment—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —interpretation of these things.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But he was fascinated by 19th Century expeditionary practice.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: This is a very interesting thing. You would appreciate perhaps the frustration of working in books with graphite—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —because they're never immobile and of course opposing pages are going to rub, and smudge—

MR. DOWNES: Rub against each other.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and so forth. And create this foggy—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —mess out of what might have—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —once a beautiful drawing.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But John, I saw a show at [Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center] Vassar [College] and—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and there was a sketchbook by Kensett.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: John Frederick Kensett.

MR. DOWNES: Sure, sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And I'm reading the tombstone label. And it says, 'Graphite with Chinese white.' And I'm looking at the drawing.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And it just looked like a pencil drawing. It just looked like—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: —a graphite drawing.

MR. DOWNES: Really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then I realized the Chinese white he had made a thin wash of it, and painted the whole thing.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And it acted as a fixative.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, that's good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Clever.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. Well you know, there's another way to think about that too. I love that. My hand when I draw is black all along here, and I love that tone of build-up there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And I use it. And I used sharpened erasers. I take an eraser, and take my jackknife, and cut it into a point. And then draw with it, you know by reserving the paper color from underneath.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, yeah and an eraser, one of those white erasers, one of those—

MR. DOWNES: Right, a vinyl eraser.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —technical erasers.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. You can buy them in the shape of a pen now, right?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, you can.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But you can really—it's not about correcting. It's about excavation.

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely. It's not correction. It's positive drawing, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I tell students all the time that there are no mistakes in a drawing, only decisions.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. You're right. I agree with you totally. I said, 'You should love your mistakes. They show up what you need to know. They tell you what you don't need to know and what you shouldn't be doing.' [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, also anyone can draw what they know. Therefore, the process of drawing is about teaching you what you behold. Then if you succeed in that, you'll be able to draw it.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Makes sense.

MR. DOWNES: I don't know about that. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's teaching you what you're looking at.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, I see, yes, yes. Well, there's valid reasons if I draw my friend, I realize I didn't know what he looked like until now. Yeah, that's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Perfect.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, to connect the dots a bit, the interest in Dutch art and the—we were talking after we concluded our conversation yesterday in your studio, having a look at the drawings which precede the paintings, but are not preparatory to them. They're not—as you said, they're 'like rehearsals.' They're not reference material.

MR. DOWNES: That's right, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, and so the relationship between those drawings which are, I guess, very empirical and, carefully observed, and sort of absorbing data and—

MR. DOWNES: Right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and then sort of consuming all of that prior to then repeating that process with paint and canvas.

MR. DOWNES: Right, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. Now, I do square them up, both drawings onto the canvas, which I do with white paint, a brush and—one small brush and white paint, zinc. It's a mixture of—

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, do you use a grid? Do you use a right angle grid?

MR. DOWNES: I do, I use red threads. I use red threads because red shows up on virtually any color. It doesn't matter what. So, I use red threads inside a mat. I build a mat to go around the drawing, and red threads go across it. I'll show you on the way out.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, the drawings—so, you don't actually draw a grid over top of the drawing itself?

MR. DOWNES: No, I do not.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You've got a—

MR. DOWNES: No, I do not.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —with—

MR. DOWNES: I save the drawing, because—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —I don't like all those squares on the drawing there. You know, why bother? Your drawing is, you know, perfectly good as it is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: So, I prefer to do it with threads.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, why turn it into a subordinate device?

MR. DOWNES: Exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: Exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, interesting.

MR. DOWNES: You know, I have to say also though, that after I square it up and start painting again from observation onto a new canvas, that the drawing goes out the window. The existing drawing doesn't stay that way necessarily. It might and it might not. You reinvestigate the thing from scratch.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: But it's better to have something wrong than nothing at all. It's very hard to start with nothing. You don't know where to put your horizon line. You have no idea, you know, where to go. So, to have something —it was done in a sketchbook, and weren't interested in those questions, you worry about them. Worry is a very, very bad enemy of painting. You mustn't worry about it. If you're worried about it—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: —it cramps your style terribly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Someone characterized worry as a prayer for what you do not want.

[They laugh.]

Well, one of the things that is intriguing is your relationship, the relationship in your work between drawing—your drawing practice and your painting practice, but also talking about the Dutch landscape painters, who were the first to actually use optics as a drawing tool.

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And as we were leaving yesterday, after the recorder had been turned off, you said that you wanted to talk about your work in relationship to photography, because I think a lot of people who would look at your work—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and see what some might assume are a sort of optical conceits—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —or are optical conceits would think that you might be working from—

MR. DOWNES: Photographs.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —photographs.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah. I'm often accused of that. Somebody actually made a bet up at the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Two guys came up to me and said, 'We must settle a bet, please.' I said, 'What's the bet about?' 'He says your painting of the Columbia campus was painted from a photograph, and I say it was painted from nature.' I said, 'Well, you win,' and the guy who lost said, 'Oh, you could never believe what artists say anyway.'

[They laugh].

MR. MCELHINNEY: Sore loser.

MR. DOWNES: Really.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, in a way you could say you do paint from photographs, the ones on your retina.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] That's right, you could say that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But there is—

MR. DOWNES: I'm a great collector of panoramic photographs, by the way, not a great collector but an amateur collector, and when I cross the country to go from New York to Texas every year, I always stop for food at the Cracker Barrel on the highway, because Cracker Barrels collect 19th Century panoramic photographs, and put—they hang them out in the store. It seems there was a moment in the 1860's, or '70's, or so when anybody could take one of those panoramic photographs and make an interesting photograph out of it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it was very novel too.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, it was a novelty. Yeah, absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And I think people were forming this national idea of American landscape prior to that. I think even people like Thomas Cole—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —earlier artists too, Archibald Robertson and others were—

MR. DOWNES: Claudians.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, they were all Claudian.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, Cole was totally Claudian.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And you know, he's working solidly within that hole, sort of Italianate trope.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And it's wonderful because when you look at Turner—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —Turner's got a Claudian composition inside one of his compositions—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —but he's gone to sort of cinemascope or—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he sure has.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —or—

MR. DOWNES: He sure has.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the real big view of—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he gets the biggest. He gets the most blown up thing of all, I think.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But I think he must have had a deep competition with Claude, because of his *Liber Studiorum*, you know—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —in response to the *Liber Veritatis* [by Claude Lorrain].

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Claude, he thought, 'I'll show that.'

MR. DOWNES: Oh, I think he would absolutely do that. I think you're dead right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: I think Turner was a very, very ambitious guy, huge. I call him the Napoleon of—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, he was the Napoleon of—

MR. DOWNES: —because he was so small.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —painting?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, he wanted to knock Claude off the mountaintop, yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he did, and he was a little guy like Napoleon was too.

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: They all had that. I believe that's a common trait of small guys. Welliver was of Claudian too.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah.

MR. DOWNES: I mean, Napoleon too.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Absolutely.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Even if they did have to put, you know, blocks on the pedals, so he [Welliver] could reach them. So, you don't work from photographs.

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But how do you—how would you describe to someone the way that you measure space and the way that you discover what's before you—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: In such minute—with such close attention and minute detail?

MR. DOWNES: You know, I never really related to drawing as useful until quite late. I thought first of drawing as being an alternative medium for making works, but then I decided that drawing for me was going to be—or had to be, because the compositions were so complicated, and the amount of information was so complicated, and so spread out. It was very hard to relate this end to that end, and I had a great deal of trouble with that. And I started to draw in order to resolve that issue. And rather than directly launch right into the painting. So, that must have been about 1974 or 5. I painted a pond with some cows wandering around it, and the cows, to speak of photography again, the cows of course took poses that I'd never seen them in the photographs.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: The camera sees much quicker than we do, and so you know, their legs were in positions that I'd never seen before. So, I gave my camera away, and then the camera also showed me a pond, the organization of the pond, and the space around the pond was quite different than what I saw.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: For one thing I was turning my head.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And the camera doesn't turn its head, except in 19th Century photographs, which were spliced together.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: It's quite a common thing. Jan Dibbets has made contemporary versions of those things too. He interests me.

MR. MCELHINNEY: There was a big installation last year at MASS MoCA by an artist named Clifford Ross, who did this gigantic mural of I want to say a landscape in Alaska, and he developed a camera, I want to say for the military, or for some official application.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And just this incredibly high resolution.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: But it did sort of come close to reproducing the feeling of being in a place.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Interesting, anyway but—

MR. DOWNES: The photographer downstairs who lives in this building showed me a photograph, and they reproduced it in the *New York Times*, made with a camera that is especially designed to photograph the night

sky. And it can show you the horizon to the east, and the horizon to the west, north, and south. And make this dome shaped thing out of it. And that's very much how I see the world, as a dome.

I am standing—well, I'm standing in the center of a sphere really. Because you're standing on level ground, you can't see the rest of the sphere because it goes underneath you, but essentially I see space as being spherical, and that camera, you know, is a damn good job. It does a damn good job of getting what I'm trying to do.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: There's a little reproduction as you go out and past my studio on the wall, from the *New York Times*, of a golf course photograph with this camera, and the golf course, the grass sort of comes down like this very steeply. And in the horizon this curve, and...

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, when you're organizing a picture, I mean, you must be mindful of the fact that most people today have been so brainwashed really by photography.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And so accustomed to it that they unquestionably—unquestioningly accept it—

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —as veracity.

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely and the camera is consistent.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: The lens is consistent. We don't look in a consistent way. I look at you. I'm interested in your face. I'm not interested in the wall behind you.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: Equally. You know, you see selectively and with emotional charge.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: Which affects your physical impression.

MR. MCELHINNEY: As opposed to merely data collection—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —based on—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —light sensitive surfaces.

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, in that also—

MR. DOWNES: Now, with Photoshop that's changed.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: I don't—know nothing about computers and everything at all, and nothing, so I opt out of that topic, but it's clear that with Photoshop you can do a lot of things you couldn't do.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I think you can—yeah, there are a lot of things that—a lot of manipulations that one would have to acquire mastery of in the dark room like—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —dodging, like waving your hand over a part of the photograph, while you're exposing it, you know, in the dark room, or

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —blocking out light, or whatever—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —you know, as you're exposing the negative, or you have—what was that? The enlarger, remember—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —those things? Anyway—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I do remember those things.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —people today don't know anything about —

MR. DOWNES: Oh, no, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —an enlarger—

MR. DOWNES: No, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —exposing a piece of paper.

MR. DOWNES: I give slide lectures still. It drives people crazy. They have no idea what a slide and a projector is. Actually, projectors suddenly become very primitive objects, once you've seen the, you know, a computer.

MR. MCELHINNEY: As I was saying during a break yesterday to Lizzie that one of our friends who is involved with publishing told us that archiving color photographs today is done optimally by three color—four color separations—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —preserved as four by five Plus-X [film] transparencies, so that the tiff or the jpeg or the—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —any of these electronic formats are degradable at a much more rapid rate.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, are they?

MR. MCELHINNEY: And whereas the old, tiny celluloid or transparency is more durable, if it's properly stored.

MR. DOWNES: Interesting.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Just the same way that a lot of people are going back to vinyl.

MR. DOWNES: Vinyl, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But you were talking about 78 [RPM] records, those wax—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —those hard wax records.

MR. DOWNES: Well, we're not going back to those. I have a bunch of those. I do.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They're very easy to break.

MR. DOWNES: Very easy to break.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You know, you can like, hit them against it. They just shatter, but—

MR. DOWNES: But I hang on to them, because they're very beautiful.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: I have one of a treble singing in an English cathedral, singing solo in an English cathedral. It's absolutely gorgeous. You don't get acoustics like that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: No.

MR. DOWNES: You just can't get—can't reproduce that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's actually something vibrating, and your eardrum vibrating. So, there's a—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —it's physical.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's a physical experience.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. Well, if you go back to drawing, of course too—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —I mean, when you're choosing a line and making a line, there's all kinds of sensibility being expressed about your fingers. You can't reproduce a line, you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: No.

MR. DOWNES: You can't. You're you. You're in there whether you like it or not.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, there's a lot of discussion now. There was a big controversy by, you know, certain people on the right about Hillary Clinton doodling in UN meetings, and the science actually is there to prove that if you're doing a different activity while you're experiencing something like a speech, you're actually going to retain more of the audio experience than if you're merely transcribing it.

MR. DOWNES: That's great. That's great.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And yeah, a lot of haptic, visual, cognitive—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —experiences are enhanced by working in a physical way as opposed to—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Conference.

[Telephone rings.]

MR. DOWNES: Could you get that, please, Paul?

[Crosstalk. Downes is speaking with his assistant]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, we talked about this yesterday, that the actual physical experience of moving the body in order to make a mark on a page—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —incorporates so much more intelligence and awareness than generating a line artificially.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And how we were talking about writing, and—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —how writing—keyboarding is like writing with a type setter at your shoulder.

MR. DOWNES: Right, right, right. Yes, I recall that discussion, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But so, have you ever, ever worked from photographs? I guess you must have—

MR. DOWNES: I did. Oh yes, I did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —for a while.

MR. DOWNES: I painted a painting of my jitterbug in Maine from a photograph. I painted it in New York, and I found it quite boring to do because the initial translation from 3D to 2D is such an enormous area in there for expression of a thousand things, endless numbers of things. And to take that away from the artist is a strange thing to do, I think.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Although, that was the rationale behind photorealism, that it somehow was going from flat to flat.

MR. DOWNES: Right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And that was its whole—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —raison d'être, right, that's going from flat to flat.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That it's not about the thing represented by the photograph, but the photograph itself.

MR. DOWNES: Itself, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Which I guess sounds—it's good as Al Held would have called it. It's a good 'bullshit rap.'

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: But what does that actually do for the painting?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, what must a painting do, in your opinion? What must a painting do?

MR. DOWNES: It must insist on its own presence, whatever character or presence that would be, including shyness and modesty. It sounds like insistence contradictory to that. I mean, that would be something it would —it should somehow project, so I love what Bill de Kooning said. He says, 'Nothing is certain in art except that it's a word.'

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: He was a funny guy.

MR. DOWNES: He was a great thinker in my opinion, yeah, he was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Did you know him well?

MR. DOWNES: No, I had a conversation on the telephone with him once, but that's all.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Me too.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Spoke to him for three hours.

MR. DOWNES: Do you?

MR. MCELHINNEY: I was at Yale. Lester Johnson gave me his number.

MR. DOWNES: No kidding?

MR. MCELHINNEY: I had seen a show of his at [Xavier] Fourcade.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Up in the Upper East Side. I was really impressed with it.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And I was at that time painting these sort of Roman wall painting influence thing.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Anyway, so I had this three-hour conversation with him, and—

MR. DOWNES: That's fantastic.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —then he had to excuse himself, because as he said, 'I've got to go watch my television show.'

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And he told me what channel it was on. And after we hung up, I turned on—I think it was, you know, the CBS affiliate.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And it was 'The Six Million Dollar Man'.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, he had to go watch the 'Six Million Dollar Man'.

MR. DOWNES: That's funny. Well, I had a discussion with him about Fairfield Porter and preparation for that book that I did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: And he was quite amusing about that too. He said 'What is—I thought to myself in those days, I thought to myself, 'What are Edwin and Rudy going to do when they run out of money?' '

[They laugh.]

He also told me that Raoul Hague was the first person to live in a loft, to live and work in a loft.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Really?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, and he built up the idea from Hague, and did it himself.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, Will Barnett told me once that he came to New York in like, 1928 or something.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And he was given the name of a person from Watertown where he could stay, and he arrived in a snowstorm from Boston. And knocked on the door of this man who he said was 'an Armenian pretending to be a Russian, calling himself [Arshile] Gorky.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And he said he was the only guy he knew that had a studio somewhere other than where he lived.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, no kidding?

MR. MCELHINNEY: That everybody else was painting in their kitchen.

MR. DOWNES: No kidding?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Or bedroom.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And this whole idea of loft living—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —was fairly newfangled.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, at what point would—did Raoul Hague move into a loft? Would it have been the '40's, do you think or—

MR. DOWNES: I guess.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the 50's?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, I guess. No, the '40's, I think. I'm pretty sure it would be the '40's.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Because SoHo, where we are now, we're on—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —near Canal and Greene, this was—

MR. DOWNES: This was late. This came late.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Very much.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, Chelsea was much earlier.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: Chelsea was where de Kooning, and Edwin, and Rudy, and yeah. They were all over there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And but that was near the Chelsea Hotel, in that area?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, so that area.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, right.

MR. DOWNES: And then, there was a famous coffee shop they all went to in the middle of the night. It was open 24 hours or something, and then nobody drank. Nobody had any money to drink until later, and Rudy Burkhardt told me, he said, 'I feel guilty for Bill de Kooning becoming a lush because when he started to do well, he got invited to all these uptown parties and he—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —found them incredibly boring.' So, Rudy said to de Kooning, 'Have a drink.'

[They laugh.]

So, he did with extraordinary consequences, I'm afraid.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, how long have you lived here in this place?

MR. DOWNES: In this loft right here?

MR. MCELHINNEY: In this loft?

MR. DOWNES: About 20 years, I think. Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And where had you lived prior, upper—

MR. DOWNES: Prior, I lived first on Hudson and Reed.

MR. MCELHINNEY: On Hudson Street.

MR. DOWNES: Hudson and Reed, 16 Hudson Street. Then I was on 111 Street and Broadway.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: 536 111th, and before that I was on 95th, East 95th Street and Third Avenue. There on one side of Third Avenue there was an enclave of artists, Motherwell, various people there, Giorgio Cavallon, several of the abstract expressionist painters. On the other side of the Third Avenue it was Irish, very poor, and I paid $26 a month for a three-room apartment.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wow.

MR. DOWNES: Well, actually it was four rooms, but the people before me had busted out a wall, and made it into three. So, I had one big space, which was good, you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, yeah. Well, how would you characterize the changes that you've seen in New York and in the art world since—

MR. DOWNES: They're profound.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —moving here.

MR. DOWNES: They're extremely profound. I would say that the idea of being a - what I would call an artist of conscience. An artist concerned with their own aesthetic sense has been replaced almost entirely by art as a public performance piece, as a show. And all these exhibitions that you see, like at the Guggenheim for example, of a Chinese artist who employs 110 people to work in his art factory is doing something that has nothing to do with the kind of art I'm talking about.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, what used to be described as a serious artist,

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: An artist of intellectual rigor—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and conscience—

MR. DOWNES: Yes. Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and mindful of what they're doing, being in some ways sincere, and not—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —calculated.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Not calculated—

MR. DOWNES: Good, very good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —for effect, but the achievement of some, dare we say loftier ambition—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: To speak truth in some way?

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I would say that those two things are incompatible careers.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, nowadays—and this came up in a conversation I had with Bill Bailey too, where I think he characterized people like Jeff Koons, and Damien Hirst, and so forth, without judging them,

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: He said, 'They're not serious artists. They're serious art directors.'

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And a performance would be the same thing.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, it's about the spectacle.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. That's right and it plays to a large audience. The bigger the audience the better, whereas the artist of conscience may prefer to have an audience of one,[laughs]if that person is intellectually keyed into what the artist is doing.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I don't want to misquote him, but I saw a transcript of a talk that Jerry Salz gave about a year ago, and he said that—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —'An artist only needs five collectors and—

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —a loyal dealer, and—

MR. DOWNES: That's right, one critic.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —two or three good friends, and you're set.'

MR. DOWNES: That's it. That's absolutely right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, when you were—how long were you at Kornblee?

MR. DOWNES: Quite a few years. Unfortunately, Jill didn't pay. She was a naughty girl about that, and I remember Janet Fish went and said, 'Jill, you owe me, you know, $80,000,' and Jill said, 'What do you need it for?'

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, this has sort of become a cliché that certain kinds of dealers, robbing Peter to pay Paul all the time and—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and very hard, you know, very elusive when it comes to compensation, like where's—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —where's this painting? Where's that painting? Where's my payment for this sale?

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They might not tell you about sales.

MR. DOWNES: No, absolutely so. No, I went to Marlborough after Kornblee, and well I went first to Hirschl & Adler and then to Marlborough of course because of the Rothko case, was supervised by the law. And they behaved very well indeed about money. So, all you had to do is get on the phone, and the accountant would, you know, electronically send you a check, same day.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, did you work with Frank Lloyd?

MR. DOWNES: I did not. Frank Lloyd was gone.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He was gone by then?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he was living on an island in the Caribbean, I think.

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: He still existed, but—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Beyond the reach of—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, yeah. So—

MR. DOWNES: I think I did one of my best shows at Marlborough, and also Marlborough's walls were all moveable, and I'd chose an arrangement of walls that confused all the staff at Marlborough, but it worked out beautifully for my paintings. Richard Haas said, 'I'd never seen that space look so good and so well used.' I was very proud of that, actually. It wasn't the sort of thing I normally do.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And what year would that have been?

MR. DOWNES: That Marlborough show must have been around 1990, 90s sometime.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, you were at Kornblee a long time.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, I was. Yeah, I did about four shows at Kornblee.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And when did you stop going to Maine and start—

MR. DOWNES: Going down to Texas?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Going to—and you were in Galveston?

MR. DOWNES: Galveston first.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's a funny place to pick as a—

MR. DOWNES: Well, I didn't choose it really. It chose me, in the sense that there was a little college, College of the Mainland it was called, not in Galveston, which is an island, but on the mainland.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And they had a little art gallery, which was financed with guilt money there, the oil companies did. It was an oil town.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: Import, and export, and refinery. And the gal who was running that gallery wanted to do a show of New York Realist artists. And she realized that she'd never get any paintings out of us. You know, she wasn't important enough. So, she said, 'I'll do a show called 'Behind the Scenes,' and you can all send me works that you wouldn't normally ever show to anybody.' And that was quite a nice idea.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Clever.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. So, I sent a bunch of—you know, I used to go and—to somebody's loft, rotated lofts. A group of us would get together and draw from the nude model, and I used to take my easel down there and make tiny paintings of the nude model. I'd do it when they had a long pose, and so I put in a bunch of nudes. And I don't know—I forget what everyone else did, but they all did something different anyway from what they normally show. And so, there was a little money left over for a lecture.

And Welliver by the way, very kindly, because at that time we weren't talking to one another. He suggested me as the lecturer. So, I went down and gave a talk. And there I saw a landscape. It looked just like the Meadowlands where I was drawing and painting at home, but the difference was it was February, and people were walking around in shirts. And shorts, I mean, and it was so warm. So, I thought, 'This is for me,' you know. We've got the oil rigs. We've got the same types of birds, marshland birds, and the same kind of vegetation. This makes the perfect place to winter.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, at what point did your work sort of evolve from these pastoral scenes of woodlands, and ponds, and cows.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And move into this sort of marginalia of urban dystopia?

MR. DOWNES: Right. Well, I got interested in the fact that there was a lumber yard in the town next to me, in Maine, in Searsmont, and that lumber yard was the center of a lot of business all around there. It was a very important building, very important group of buildings, and I felt I'm going to respond to this and paint it as an important thing, just like those old postcards, American postcards, you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: They have a picture of the factory, because it was a major, major provider of jobs to the neighborhood, and so I wanted to bring into my work the fact that this existed too. And that this was part of country life as well. And so, that was the beginning of it, of that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Sort of, you know, *The Machine in the Garden* [by Leo Marx–JM].

MR. DOWNES: That's right. That's right. It was. I was on a panel discussion with him, the author of that book one time. Very sweet guy.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's interesting because people talk a lot about Thoreau and the transcendentalists, but they all—they don't mention that Henry David could go out to his refuge on Walden Pond, and he could be home for supper.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Sleep in a warm feather bed.

MR. DOWNES: Exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It wasn't quite the same as—

MR. DOWNES: No, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —someone being out on the—

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —out on the planes under canvas or—

MR. DOWNES: No, and it wasn't Scott of the Antarctic either.

MR. MCELHINNEY: No. No, no.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Although some very, really wonderful images came from that expedition, some wonderful journal—

MR. DOWNES: True, true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —paintings.

MR. DOWNES: True enough.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, the idea, was it more of an emotional adjustment, or was it intellectual? Did you begin—

MR. DOWNES: It was both. It was both, yeah, definitely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You know, J.B. Jackson has a great definition of landscape, which is that—he says, 'Landscapes do not occur in nature, but are created when people adapt terrain to their use.'

MR. DOWNES: Good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, therefore the landscape represents desire or memory—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —or other things, human values.

MR. DOWNES: Cultural issues and…

MR. MCELHINNEY: Cultural issues.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And so, looking at—well, there's that painting by George Inness of Steamtown USA, The Lackawanna Valley with—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yes. That's a wonderful painting.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He hated that painting, but—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the foreground is a field of tree stumps.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then, you've got rail fences. And you've got a train climbing the hill. And then, off in the distance you see the, you know, the teaming industrial town. I think it's Scranton, Pennsylvania.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, is it? Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But there's a painting that shows a whole process of nature being consumed and turned into industrial—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —prosperity.

MR. DOWNES: Well, I felt also that people are very inclined to go by the motto out of sight, out of mind, and if they can build a fence around the dump they will do so.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: And I believe in getting through that fence, and painting the dump because the dump is the upshot of capitalism.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, the dump is a monument to consumerism.

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, all of the NIMBYs, you know that expression.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Not in my back yard.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, there is a narrative. When did you begin to admit a narrative into your work?

MR. DOWNES: Well at Clairton, Pennsylvania, that one I think we talked about that last time.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, '76.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah. I would say that was important. I had the names of certain people to meet and talk to in Pittsburgh.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: And I met a guy who was at Harvard, who had been at Harvard doing his dissertation in anthropology, and he decided—he was writing about steel mills. And he decided the only way to write properly about steel mills was to get a job in one. So, he did, and he said—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wow.

MR. DOWNES: —he had to go to the gym and work out, to get himself strong enough to deal with the job at all. And so, there were a lot of things like that. There was a guy who owned the land that I was painting on, across the river from the big steel—that big Coke Works. And he had been promised by the government to be compensated for his land being ruined by the smoke coming over the hill, and the foulness of the air. And he said, 'I've got exactly $8 since World War II ended, 1945. This was now 1976, and so there were a lot of stories there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: And the stories interested me. And they affected my view of the landscape, and what was kosher, and what wasn't, what I approved of, and what I didn't. And it was very, very important that—yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, your training at Yale would certainly have been heavily seasoned with Greenbergian tendencies, you know, the critical—what we would call formalist training.

MR. DOWNES: It was formalist, yes. I wouldn't call it Greenbergian. Greenbergian was rather specialized.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But formalist?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, but formalist.

MR. MCELHINNEY: No more.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, formalist, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But it would have been sort of on the tail end of that, I guess, how would you characterize Greenbergian or Cultureberg, as they used to—Rosenberg, Steinberg, Greenberg.

MR. DOWNES: Right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The sort of modernist taste, if you will.

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Which didn't admit storytelling.

MR. DOWNES: No, it didn't. That's true. That's one of the reasons why I like de Chirico so much. He's a storyteller and a modernist at the same time in those early paintings of his.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, did you feel any hesitancy towards telling stories, when you began—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I remember when the whole art world was involved in bringing stories in, particularly the blacks and the feminists.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: You know, they introduced—reintroduced storytelling, and I was indignant about it, and said, 'That's not what art's about,' you know. 'You keep your politics out of here.'

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: I didn't think much of it at first, but that was at first, and gradually I began to change my mind.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But then there were other painters like Jack Beal.

MR. DOWNES: There were.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Who took a very strident kind of a position about storytelling, and—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —I guess he had become friends with John Gardner, the writer who—

MR. DOWNES: I don't know John Gardner.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's—I'm trying to remember the book he wrote, *Sunlight Dialogues*, and a biography of Chaucer, and—

MR. DOWNES: Oh.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And anyway, Gardner, who taught at a college in Upstate New York, University of Binghamton maybe, or—

MR. DOWNES: Oh yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —somewhere up there, later killed in a motorcycle accident, took a polemic on the morality of art.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And this was much opposed at the time.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And he was accused of being a neo-conservative, and so forth.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But I recall also that in New York there were people like Leland Bell, who was aggressively promoting the legacy of André Derain.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: There's Balthus, who was a God to many.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, he was. He was, including me. Balthus' drawings, I felt—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: —you know, were very close to Cézanne. Cézanne was my great love as far as drawing is concerned, you know, because he saw connected, saw everything. It didn't matter whether it was a shoe, or a couch, or a head. You know, if it was connected like this, he would move through the space, and always with a continuum. He never stopped. He would draw the handle of a pot and then move onto the lip of a jug, whatever, and you can see his eye and his hand moving through the space there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: A mosaic of glimpses.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, really but they had to be glimpses where there was a head and a tail, so to speak.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

[Crosstalk.]

MR. DOWNES: This was the beginning of it, and this was the end of the glimpse, and then you moved onto the next thing.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Which kept the form open in a way?

MR. DOWNES: That's true, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And let it breathe.

MR. DOWNES: That's true, and you don't know ever when it—where an edge is. So, you have clusters of lines around something.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You close one eye and it moves.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Were you influenced much or attracted to the work of Giacometti? You must have been.

MR. DOWNES: Oh yes, absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, his drawings too.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Another two artists who are great for teaching purposes.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Giacometti and Cézanne.

MR. DOWNES: Definitely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, as you were moving towards a more narrative strategy in choosing what to paint—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —in choosing to paint the lumber yard is—it makes quite a statement. I mean, one could argue that it's about the geometry, it's about taking natural form, and turning it into fodder for the construction business, or whatever.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But it does—you're talking about the economics of the community. You're talking about—

MR. DOWNES: I am, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, have you painted orchards or farms before?

MR. DOWNES: Well, I painted for example some pear trees, which interested me very much because there were sheep in that field as well as pear trees, and the sheep, in the spring before the grass was greened up, the pear trees got the sap under the bark. And the sheep went and ringed the tree. They'd chew that bark off. So, the tree died, and then they'd sit underneath this dead tree, where there was no shade. [Laughs.] They were used to sitting in the shade. Trees are supposed to have shade. So, that was a very interesting narrative story for me to tell, with little chunks of natural life, and the sort of interaction of the various elements of life.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I'll have to tell you afterwards about my encounter with Maine sheep.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's at Skowhegan, and painting with an artist you might know named Frank Hyder, who had been up—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —at Penn.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, he was at Penn. That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He and I are old friends. So, but after you had tackled this new subject, how do you feel about it? Was it exciting? Was it—

MR. DOWNES: It was, very, very, and I love explaining my paintings to an audience too. I'm quite a good slide lecturer and people like my talks. And they're amazed what there is to be seen in my paintings. I tell them what the narrative is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, how did other painters, people you trusted, your friends, people who would come to the studio from time to time to see what you're doing, how did they respond?

MR. DOWNES: They went along with it. They all went along with it. Janet Fish was rather annoyed. She read in a review, I painted some of those black bridges over the Hackensack River.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: And they're all built with depression labor, those bridges. And I remember Janet sort of complaining and saying, 'Yes, I read some review about your show, and all these poor workers going to work in these miserable trains, crossing the Hackensack River.' She was annoyed by it, you know. She thought it was silly, nonsense, and that art was about celebrations of beautiful things, you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, there's a beauty in a story that's well told, regardless of what the story is.

MR. DOWNES: Of course.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Think about—

MR. DOWNES: Of course.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —about Zola's *Germinal* or something.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, oh yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What a miserable tale that is, but compelling.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. Well, it's what's real, what is real, and I at the same time painting those black bridges, I would paint Gracie Mansion, if somebody gave me the view. And somebody did. They had a little glassed-in porch right across from Gracie Mansion, and I enjoyed it very much because also there's a transfer station there for garbage and this business, sanitation department. And on the other side of the water of course, there's Queens industrial, Queens.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: Hugging that waterfront there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And right at the—

MR. DOWNES: That's a weird thing. Why do Americans allow the industry to hug the waterfront? Because they used it I suppose.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, the waterfront was originally a power source.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, but even if it wasn't—

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the water power.

MR. DOWNES: —the water power, it was a highway so to speak.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, yeah. I think although Hell Gate was not exactly a wonderful place for shipping, but interesting place because Gracie Mansion is on the east shore of Manhattan, right opposite the mouth of Hell Gate.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And right in the mouth of Hell Gate is a little island called Mill Rock.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: That used to be fortified. There was a fort out there.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, and also in Astoria there were also gun batteries and—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —like Randall's Island to the north—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —was called Montresor's Island after the British—military engineer who owned the island.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, really?

MR. MCELHINNEY: And made one of the maps of this whole area.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Early maps of this area, in the 18th Century. So, there's a lot of history there too.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, did you become interested—I mean, speaking about, you know, the bridges over the Hackensack River being a WPA project.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And did you become interested in the history of these places, and did any—

MR. DOWNES: Sometimes—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah?

MR. DOWNES: —I did, yeah. Sometimes, I remember borrowing from Donna Dennis. She had those WPA guides to the various—each state had a guide, and people like William Carlos Williams contributed to those guide books. And she had a complete set, I think, of those books. And I think some of them have been reprinted, but many have not depending on the state, you know, and how often it's visited. But I remember reading about Crazy Hill or something like that. There's a hill out here in the Meadowlands.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MR. DOWNES: And there used to be a psychiatric hospital on the top of that hill. And they called it Crazy Hill. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, that is actually the spur of the New Jersey Turnpike that goes to the Lincoln Tunnel—

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —is built—is anchored on that hill, and it does have a proper name, which is something like Crow's Rock, or something like that- [official name is 'Laurel Hill']

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But there's still a yellow brick smokestack, and I remember—I think it still is. Every time I've been on that road impressed by all the graffiti on the rocks—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —- that the kids would go out there and—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and tag the geology.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, yeah I think that had originally—it had been a mental hospital, but it had first been a TB clinic.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, had it?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, so it was a TB clinic and then a mental hospital.

MR. DOWNES: Right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I'll have to go home and look that up, but it's an interesting geological—

MR. DOWNES: It is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —feature.

MR. DOWNES: Sure is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: People don't realize today that that whole area, you know, the tidal marshes gave New Yorkers a different sense of their geography in relationship to the New Jersey mainland, because the—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —Palisades going down to Jersey City anchored I guess at Stevens Institute, Weehawken—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —is really like a finger of land.

MR. DOWNES: That's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then beyond it—

MR. DOWNES: That's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —it was just a—what was giant swamp until you got to Newark.

MR. DOWNES: Swamp, right, right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then came all this construction.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Railroads and—

MR. DOWNES: And also, but it was quite a lot too, that finger, because Crazy Hill had been used a lot, you know, stone had been taken off that hill.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: And needed to quarry for industrial use.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, again what year was, you know, the painting of the lumberyard, Searsmont?

MR. DOWNES: '70s, '70s I would say.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The 70s? So, you were at Kornblee at that time?

MR. DOWNES: I was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How did the gallery respond to this?

MR. DOWNES: Oh, they loved it. They loved it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, good.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, they sold the paintings like hotcakes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Did you get paid?

[They laugh.]

MR. DOWNES: I did get paid. I had a very smart lawyer, and she practiced on Janet Fish. Janet Fish left first, and then I left afterwards, a little bit later on. And the lawyer was—did a good job. She said, 'You can have another show, Jill,' and Jill saw money around my paintings. My paintings sold very well at that time, and she said, 'You can have another show of Rackstraw's work, provided you get all your back money paid up first before it opens, and on the opening date. And when the check comes in, it goes into an escrow account on which you have to have three signatures, yours, mine, and Rackstraw's signature.' And Jill went for it. She wanted the dough and she got it. And there were two paintings left over that didn't sell. Ten paintings in that show, she sold eight of them, and the two she didn't sell, she said, 'Well, normally they would stay with me.' And I said, 'This is not a normal occasion, Jill.'

[They laugh.]

'I'm taking them home.' And one of them I still have.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then, after that you moved to Marlborough?

MR. DOWNES: I moved first to Hirschl [&] Adler.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Hirschl & Adler.

MR. DOWNES: I left Jill and was floating. And I got nibbles from various people. And Hirschl Adler seemed like the most—Hirschl & Adler didn't have a contemporary department then.

MR. MCELHINNEY: No.

MR. DOWNES: No. Donald McKinney was hired. You know, he'd been in the Marlborough trial. He was one of the witnesses that was grilled, and grilled, and grilled in that trial, and then he moved to the country. He said, 'I've had enough of art,' you know. 'I don't want to do it anymore,' after that lawsuit which was enormous, you know. It went on for years, and he made a comeback. And the form of it was Hirschl & Adler Modern. And they actually hired a new space for him. And I decided to go with him.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I remember that space. It was in the '60s or '70s—

MR. DOWNES: Seventies, right near the museum, the famous—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Near the Whitney.

MR. DOWNES: No, no, the—yeah, quite near the Whitney, but closer still to—

MR. MCELHINNEY: The Frick.

MR. DOWNES: The Frick, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And so, not far from where Bob Schoelkopf had his—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, that's right, and also Knoedler was there too.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And Knoedler was also—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Seventieth Street.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, that's another story—

[They laugh.]

—which doesn't need to be—

MR. DOWNES: It certainly is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —part of this conversation, but it does—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —but it does seem like the gallery world is periodically afflicted with these scandals.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, it is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Larry Salander and—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —Frank Lloyd, and—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Lots of other smaller—

MR. DOWNES: It's too tempting.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —imbroglios to—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —to be worthy of attention, but—

MR. DOWNES: Well, us artists are such feeble business people, you know. We don't keep an eye on things.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's sort of amazing that you—so, Janet was the first person to sort of deal with Kornblee.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: To sort of hire a lawyer and get Jill to clean up her act.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But she wasn't doing it across the board. It was only just a few that were—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, that's right. If you happen to do it yourself—

MR. MCELHINNEY: —if you were to hold her feet to the fire, she'd—

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —but if you didn't—

MR. DOWNES: If you didn't do anything, you suffered.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Then she would just—yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, did other—

MR. DOWNES: Marjorie Portnow lost 20—Marjorie Portnow lost 20 or 30 paintings to that demise of Jill's gallery, never got them back.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, did other artists follow your example after Janet and—

MR. DOWNES: I'm not sure about that. I'm not sure, but it certainly—her gallery folded soon after I left, and she put a very—I remember *New Criterion* was first published about then. And I remember Jill took an ad saying, you know, 'A contemporary art gallery is composed of four white walls, and some good light, and the taste of an individual dealer—of the individual dealer, or something like that.' And it was sort of an angry, assertive thing, you know, I'm not going out of business yet, but she did unfortunately. She was a very amusing and witty lady, and she knew she was doing wrong, but she couldn't help herself.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, Hirschl & Adler moved or opened Hirschl & Adler Contemporary?

MR. DOWNES: You're exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Which was 70th and Madison?

MR. DOWNES: That's right, on the second floor.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And you were exhibiting there. I'm trying to remember who else. John Morre I know was exhibiting there.

MR. DOWNES: John Morre, he did. Nancy Mitchnick exhibited there. Who else? Oh, lots of people, and they also did people like Joseph Beuys. I was very pleased because they did things like that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: I hated to be contextualized always as a Realist. It was very boring.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: One of my best, favorite shows was in Houston, when Cam did a show called The *Americans, The Landscape,* and it had all kinds of—Catherine Murphy and I were the only two painters in the show, and the rest were sculptors, installation, et cetera, et cetera. It was a very interesting show. We were out of our normal context.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it would be interesting to—I mean, I think today that's normal. You wouldn't—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —you wouldn't define an artist's—the content of an artist's work based on polemics of style or —

MR. DOWNES: No, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Taxonomies of craft and style. You would try to put them in conversation with someone else, so you could be—your work could be in an exhibition with Christo or Smithson.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Or Walter De Maria.

MR. DOWNES: That's exactly right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And they're all artists who are engaging the terrain in some way.

MR. DOWNES: Sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, at what point did you really begin to embrace mostly urban, or what some would call dystrophic subjects?

MR. DOWNES: That's a difficult question to ask. I'm not sure exactly. You know, there was another phase in there somewhere, where as I'd said to you, I'd took the models proposed to me, and I put them on the street. And that was where a couple of paintings in there that I worked on for several winters, both where the pedestrians were primary to the painting. And I got models through - I paid out of work actors and, you know, people looking for a

job, and so on. And I gave them cash money, right on the spot, to walk up and down for me. And that was a very important part of my work for a while. And you can't pose them in a stationary pose. Then they look frozen in the picture, but if you let them walk back and forth, you notice that it's all you see are the shoes. There's a bit of light between the heel and the base of the shoe. That little speck of light gets very brilliant and very important, and you give it an importance that if you were stationary, it wouldn't have had that importance.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And the folds in the cloth would be as important as it, like Philip Pearlstein's work. Everything is equal, you know, and he can sit down in front of a little rag that's fallen on the floor, or the pyramids. It's the same thing to him. It's all just, you know, you just put it all in.

[They laugh.]

It's extraordinary. Philip's just like that too, when you talked to him, you know. He talks very quietly, and very low key, and very soft, no exaggeration, no excitement, flat, the flattest conversation you could imagine.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, was the idea to give the viewer a surrogate, or give the viewer a way into the space, or—

MR. DOWNES: No, I just think it was meant to be a record of what happens, and you know, people animate those spaces. Yeah, I did them much in the same way one did cows, you know. Joe Fiore, he said, 'Oh, yes, city cows, the best kind.—

MR. MCELHINNEY: City cows.

MR. DOWNES: —[The] pedestrian's [a] city cow.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And also the acknowledgement of optical experience—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —of allowing things to bend.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Because as we were saying yesterday after the recording was turned off, that if people were really honest about how things look to the eye, there are no straight lines.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, how were you able to—

MR. DOWNES: That was a tough one, you know. I had friends come in the studio and say, 'What's this one called, 'The Earthquake?' [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, really?

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yes. People were quite rude and impatient with me about that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Because the whole idea of straight lines, orthographic drawing, that comes—

MR. DOWNES: It's in the culture.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: It's embedded in the culture.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Like photography.

MR. DOWNES: Yep, just like Japanese perspective in Japan, you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: What do they call that? It has a name. I can't remember what it's called.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But that's a narrative device that allows the painter to divide the image into—

MR. DOWNES: True, true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —episodes

MR. DOWNES: Yes, that's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: If you look at the *Genji no Monogatari* [*Tale of Genji* by Lady Murasaki] or whatever—

MR. DOWNES: Right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —you have the different, you know, the battles going on and—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —so forth, and—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —walls, or bridges, or shoji screens, or what have you.

MR. DOWNES: Right, right. Well, that stuff interests me very much. I do vistas down the street, here down the street, and a vista down the avenue. And I want to have this thing as spread out as possible. I'm a big fan of [Anton] Chekov's stories, and there are no heroes and heroines in his stories. There's one called 'Three Years,' and I thought, what a great title. I'm going to call a landscape of mine, you know, 20 acres.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And a mule.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

[They laugh.]

I'm the mule.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You're the mule. Well, walking through the studio here—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —to this room where the front of the building on—

MR. DOWNES: Greene Street.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —Greene Street, number 16, and you were at number—and Hudson Street was also number 16.

MR. DOWNES: It was also 16, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Was that just purely by chance?

MR. DOWNES: Pure chance. Pure chance.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, a kind of interesting coincidence, but you seem to be fond of travel. Where have you travelled? You said you'd been to India.

MR. DOWNES: I did. I went to India for the two months.

MR. MCELHINNEY: East Asia too?

MR. DOWNES: No, that was as far east as I had ever been. I was there for two months and it was an important though. I'd never been so happy in my life. I found India to be a very upbeat, very positive place to be. People said, 'Weren't you horrified by the poverty,' and I said, 'No, I was horrified by the wealth.' And the poverty, it was remarkable to me how those people lived in those, I mean, amazing ghettos that they built out of blue plastic, you know. Sheltering from the rain, and hugging these huge, enormous architectural structures that already existed. And they pitched their tents there, and lived year round there, raised families with a couple of tin cans, you know, and a little Primus stove, or something.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What was your motivation for making that trip?

MR. DOWNES: I think all Brits have a sort of fantasy love of India, and Indians have a fantasy love of England too. And you know, people like E.M. Forster, I loved that book of E.M. Forster's. I loved it and his little sketches, and he was a wonderful traveler too. His book about Alexandria is very beautiful.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And he also traveled into the future. He wrote a fabulous story called 'The Machine Stops,' which is a very good argument for stopping the machine now, before it stops us.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, it's just a random—kind of what people would call bucket lists, the thing to do. You've got to get to India and—

MR. DOWNES: I wanted to go. I wanted to go. I believed there was something there for me, and I had been to the near east, you know, Cairo, I'd been to Cairo, and Jordan, and I'd seen great mosques in there. So—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —basically when I went to India, I went to Hindu sites, and tended to be more in the south than the north, and that made sense really. The architectural forms of Hindu architecture are totally different, and the Persian stuff, and the Muslim stuff is much more like western architecture, really.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, there's a huge influence, the Iberian, some argue that western culture, the culture of western antiquity was preserved at places like Salamanca.

MR. DOWNES: I see, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And that the Moors, the so-called Moors, Muslim Iberia was the, you know, the place from whence table manners and certain even academic practices—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —arose. One of the oldest—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —I think one of the oldest universities in Europe—

MR. DOWNES: Salamanca.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: If not the oldest there, and Bologna, and so yes, there is a kind of debt to—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Muslim culture there.

MR. DOWNES: To Islam, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And now, we're at odds with it again.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, boy, oh and how.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I should say not we but the west is—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —at odds with it, but I think the west is at odds with some of it—with itself too, and—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —fundamentalism—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —but so, how did India transform you? Did you carry a journal? Did you—

MR. DOWNES: I kept a journal.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —do drawings?

MR. DOWNES: I kept a journal. I may have done a few drawings, but very few. I don't travel to draw. I travel to fill up at the gas station, to get ideas, and thoughts, and new shapes in my head. And India was plentiful. It was, you know, very rich and plentiful in that—in supplying that. If I didn't—I can't say it affected my work indirectly or in any visible way.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Just expanded your understanding of landscape.

Mr. Downes: Right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Terrain.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How did you find the Indian landscape as opposed to, let's say, the European landscape?

MR. DOWNES: I was more interested in Indian buildings than I was in the landscape.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, that happened in Italy too, to me. I love those little towns and I wasn't so interested in the landscape itself. In Peru, the landscape is breathtaking. The Andes is just a spectacular place.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And I was very impressed with that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Where did you go in Peru?

MR. DOWNES: Well, I went down—all the way down the coast, and I went down to the south first. And then came back up north. So, I saw the incredible stonework, and then the amazing adobe work in the north. There's all adobe there. These huge pyramids made out of adobe. That was a highly, highly organized society, the Incas were.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: Unbelievable, their mail system there for example, I mean these guys would be fired working for the Incas—[laughs]—, running our post as the postal service.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, the road system is incredible.

MR. DOWNES: Unbelievable.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, when you're talking about the adobe pyramids, are you talking about the Pachacamac—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —outside of Lima? Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wonderful place.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And of course Cuzco is a revelation because even today, the first story of much of central Cuzco is all Incan—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —masonry.

MR. DOWNES: Right. That masonry is out of this world. It's amazing.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And—

MR. DOWNES: Amazing.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —other places like Saksaywaman, outside of the city that—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —that big fortress.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, the spaces there are very different than Europe.

MR. DOWNES: They certainly are.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Have you been to Ecuador?

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I found Northern Ecuador to be very much like Italy on steroids.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Because there's these gigantic volcanoes, but then there are rose farms, and it's very green.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, that's interesting.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And agrarian, whereas Peru, you know, the Valle Sagrada, and the road down, you know, to Machu Picchu—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —along the Urubamba River—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —is fairly—it seemed more barren to me somehow.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, it is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It seemed more like Scotland or something.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Big Scotland.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: But you know, sort of mountains that were just stripped of any—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —if there were ever any trees.

MR. DOWNES: So, you weren't really in a jungle in Peru at all?

MR. MCELHINNEY: No, we never got—not yet.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Not yet.

MR. DOWNES: Right. I found that very interesting. I enjoyed that, and then I enjoyed the coast. The coast is so beautiful, because that ocean there is dangerous, and so there's no coastal building on the edge of these white beaches. And nobody on them.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, you know what they call that, you know, the current there.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah. They have a name for that?

MR. MCELHINNEY: The Humboldt Current.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, yeah we haven't spent much time on the coast. Lima obviously and—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —Guayaquil and Ecuador, but the idea of how human activity modifies natural spaces is very interesting.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, it's fantastic. Those streams that come down from the mountains, and then they make these canals, and run them into the ocean. And that's fantastic. They're all great engineers, great engineers of the landscape, I think.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Did you get to Machu Picchu and—?

MR. DOWNES: I did. I did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: A little bit vertiginous.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, just a little bit.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: What was shocking to me was going up the trail and coming to the entrance. And finding this whole crush of tourists. And then—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —going up another little side trail, and debouching it at the end of the Inca road, and finding a man with shorts down to his knees, a Mets cap—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —flip-flops, selfie stick, saying, 'Geez, isn't this awesome?'

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And it was like walking into Times Square. It's sort of—I hope you were there when it was a little less populated, but—

MR. DOWNES: Unfortunately, it was quite populated when I was there, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I'm surprised more people didn't just tumble off the edge with their selfie sticks, you know, these wands—

MR. DOWNES: True.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —that people—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —that have their cameras—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —on. It's pretty amazing.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: When were you in Peru?

MR. DOWNES: When was I in Peru? About five years ago.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Is that your only—

MR. DOWNES: It's the only recent trip.

[Crosstalk.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —time in South America?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, it's the only time in South America, yes. Yeah, these trips were—are important to me, but I haven't done very many of them. And I do one in Mexico with my former girlfriend, who was by then one of the curators at the British Museum of Pre-Columbian Antiquity, and she, and her husband, and an assistant went. We all went together, and so that was very interesting. We went to Palenque, and out that direction, and Oaxaca, San Cristobal.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And you've been obviously to Teotihuacan.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yes. Teotihuacan, that was why I went to Egypt, of course, after seeing those things. I said, 'Next stop, Egypt.'

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: And then, it was so nice because it was a connection, you know, because Catherwood of course had started in Egypt, and then come to Mexico.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, you went in reverse. You went to Mexico and—

MR. DOWNES: I went in reverse, exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —back to Egypt.

MR. DOWNES: Exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, just to return to New York again, and your exhibitions, how long were you at Hirschl & Adler? How many exhibitions did you do there?

MR. DOWNES: I had about three, I would say, three or four, and then Stuart Feld and Donald McKinney quarreled, I think over money. I think that Stuart felt that Donald had run off with some money somehow. I'm not sure, but I think that's it. I didn't inquire. I like Donald. Donald functioned wonderfully as a dealer for me after Jill Kornblee. He sold everything I did and paid me promptly. And he was very fond of my girlfriend too. She and I got along very well with gays, and he was a gay couple, part of a gay couple. And they felt and appreciated that no judgment was being made on them. And so—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —we got along very well. So, that was nice.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, they parted ways, and—

MR. DOWNES: They parted ways and it was a bad quarrel. Stuart had a lawsuit pending against Donald, and if he took any of the artists that were—he had in the gallery, he would be sued immediately.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So then, they closed the contemporary space, and—

MR. DOWNES: They did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and reorganized the townhouse gallery on 70th Street?

MR. DOWNES: That's right, and then moved of course to the Crown building.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, where they now are.

MR. DOWNES: Where they now are, and that looks like a cross between an antique shop and a gallery, art gallery.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, Hirschl & Adler always had, I guess—its genesis had been in selling 19th century American art.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: — it's evolving into the contemporary world was I guess a form of growth.

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then, it reintegrated that into its townhouse operation. And then when that closed they moved down to the Crown building on 5th Avenue and 57th Street, where they now are.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And so, you left Hirschl & Adler—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —because of the departure of—

MR. DOWNES: Because Donald was gone, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: And so, he went then to 57th Street. They used to show—there was a Greenbergian gallery. I can't remember what it's named, very famous. Anyway, I went—

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Sidney] Janis? No?

MR. DOWNES: No, not Janis. You're getting me a—he did a lot of stuff with South American art, pre-Columbian art.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh—

MR. DOWNES: Al Held showed there for a while.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay, we can look that up.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, we can.

MR. MCELHINNEY: We can look that up. [The André Emmerich Gallery–RD]

MR. DOWNES: Good. So, I went to Marlborough then, after floating, free floating for a couple of years, which I was able to do because Donald had done very well for me, and I sold my farm at that time in Maine too. And I lived off that farm. And on the sale of that farm for a while. And then, Marlborough took me on. And I did a show. And it sold out, just about sold out. And Betty Cuningham, I had requested when I'd joined the Marlborough, that Betty Cuningham and my dealer in Houston, Fredericka Hunter, who was very important in developing an audience for my work in the south and west. Fredericka and Betty had selling privileges on my show. So, they split the commission with Marlborough, and the show sold out essentially. And got fabulously well reviewed. So, I was pretty pleased with that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Who was your greatest champion as a critic?

MR. DOWNES: Well, my first champion as a critic was Hilton Kramer.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he came out strongly for my work, and always pursued me as a conservative. And I got mad at Hilton. And I thought Hilton became much too sort of bludgeoning in his manner, and so on, and rude to people, and contemptuous of people. And we had a sort of a falling out. I wrote him a long, angry letter. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: It did seem that for a while people conducted themselves in that way. There was a very, you know, people liked being polemical, and liked being—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —potty-mouthed, and abusive, and—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and haughty, and dismissive, and—

MR. DOWNES: Who was that guy that went suddenly came out, used to work for the—write for the New Republic, and then suddenly came out in favor of the Vietnam War? I can't remember. He was a British guy, very well known, and sort of a TV star as well.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I'm trying to think TV. Not David Frost personally, but—

MR. DOWNES: No, not David Frost, no, but on the same sort of lines. Anyway, he's suddenly—he took a very belligerent position too, and came out for Reagan, and so forth, like Hilton did too. Hilton wrote an essay in the New York Times saying on the night of Reagan's election that a lot of people were sitting around together who thought of themselves as liberals, and they all found out that they were all thinking like conservatives, you know, now.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Is it a generational thing? What's the—

MR. DOWNES: I don't know. They say that young radicals turn into old conservatives. [Laughs.] They do say that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, Churchill said, 'A young man who is not a liberal has no heart, and an old man who is not conservative has no brain.'

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] That's good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But—

MR. DOWNES: That's good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —I think whatever those terms meant then, they don't mean the same thing now.

MR. DOWNES: No, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And politics has become much more of a, you know, a B list, a midlist talent show.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And one suspects that the real power is above the government somehow—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —in the hands of the—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —of the super wealthy.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Without naming names. But so how many exhibitions did you have with Marlborough?

MR. DOWNES: Not so many, one big exhibition, and then there would be a drawing show that—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: —one painting show, and I think only one, and then a drawing show.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How did you do with the drawing show, because—

MR. DOWNES: The drawing show shocked the Marlborough staff, because I pinned the drawings to the wall with no frames or anything, just as though it were in the studio. I wanted to give a sense of it being, you know, this is my studio wall. These are the working drawings I make in order to make paintings. They're not works on paper. They're sketches for paintings, and they were shocked and surprised that I'd did it that way.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Did you have many interactions with other artists at Marlborough, like Antonio Lopez [Lopez Garcia] for instance?

MR. DOWNES: I never met Antonio Lopez, no. I would like to have done. I consider him pretty good. I especially like his early work.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: Which is more poetic and less realistic than his later work.

MR. MCELHINNEY: We could talk a little about some of your contemporaries. I know I'm—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Thinking about somebody like Antonio Lopez, who was very—who is very influential to—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, he is.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —a lot of American—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —Realist painters.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But his early work, which I'm thinking of the same work, there's one crazy painting of a street in Madrid with a couple copulating on the cobblestone.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: You know that picture?

MR. DOWNES: I don't know that one, but can sort of imagine it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, there's some—and just almost magic realism, almost—

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely, definitely, not even almost, just magic realism.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Magic realism.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: This sort of hyper-reality.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Almost surreal.

MR. DOWNES: Yes. Those are the ones I like best of his work.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They to me resonate a bit with people like Gregory Gillespie.

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Right, sure and some of those people who show with them—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Bella Fishko?

MR. DOWNES: Not so much her as Moore, Bridget Moore.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, Bridget Moore, yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, she has some of that kind of work.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: She has a gay guy. I can't remember his name now, a number of people who paint sort of vaguely on the edge of magic realism.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Living today?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, if not living today, then prolific during the '40's and '50's.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, people like Paul Cadmus.

MR. DOWNES: Paul Cadmus, exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And Peter Blume.

MR. DOWNES: Exactly so, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And so, there was that quality of hyper-reality.

MR. DOWNES: Absolutely.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And also narrative.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, and very hard to write about. When I was at *Art News* in the '60's, that stuff was dangerous stuff.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it was dismissed.

MR. DOWNES: It was totally dismissed, totally dismissed, but it did have a following, sort of a clubbish following.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Balthus, I guess, might have been one of the people who made it alright to do that, I guess.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. Well, Balthus worked on a big scale too, you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: He really did. I mean, that mountain I think is a great painting for any era, no matter where you give an era on it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, the painting that's at the Met now, yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yes. Bill Lieberman was smart about Balthus. He got a number of good Balthus paintings, there was one of a young woman in a—standing in a park, and the dog is all out of scale. And oh, it's just wonderful. It's so intense, that painting. What that woman is going through, I don't know, either break up with her lover, or something strange, but it's a sort of agonizing painting. I think Balthus is a tremendous, wonderful artist.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, he's had an enormous impact on a generation—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —or more of—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —American—

MR. DOWNES: Bill Bailey for example.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, Balthus.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I remember asking Bill Bailey if he liked [Paul] Delvaux, and he said, 'Well, not really. I'm interested in Balthus.' I said, 'Who's he?' I had never heard of him.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Paul Delvaux, that's an interesting—yeah, but there's that Surrealist thread.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That I guess one could argue comes maybe more out of northern painting than—

MR. DOWNES: Could be, could be.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —than the south. You think, obviously people like Bosch, but—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Peter] Breughel [the elder].

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And a different kind of reality. So, what is your thinking now about landscape and about the importance of looking at terrain, and what do you think people should be sensitive to when they're somewhere?

MR. DOWNES: Artists you mean or—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Anyone.

MR. DOWNES: —anybody?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, let's say anyone who looks at your work.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What would you like your work to teach people about looking?

MR. DOWNES: I would like my work to provoke questions. There was a power company in Texas, between Galveston and Houston. It owned an enormous generating station, right parked in the middle of the prairie, where there are no trees or anything.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And you could see for miles in every direction. It's an extremely long painting. It's the first one I did, perhaps that was that long, and very low. And the power company—the director of the museum—I gave the painting to Fredericka Hunter, my Houston dealer, to work with, and the power company—the director of the museum, the Houston MFA saw that painting, and said, 'I want that painting for the museum. Send it right over the acquisitions meeting this afternoon,' and so they all agreed to acquire it. And they proposed to the power company that they should donate the painting, and a tax write-off, and flip their own publicity. So, some suits came over to look at that painting, and—

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: Alison Greene was the curator. And Alison told me this story herself. And she said to the people, gave a little talk about who I was. And then said, 'Now, why don't you just look at the painting, and if you have any questions, I'm sitting right here.' So, there was a huddle formed around the painting by these suits, and eventually one of them came over to Alison, and said, 'We have a question.' And Alison said, 'Yes?' And he said, 'Is he trying to say that it's a bad—generating electricity is a bad thing?' And I thought, that painting has done its job.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, you're looking at these industrial structures as—

MR. DOWNES: I'm questioning them.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —disruptions.

MR. DOWNES: I'm questioning them. What are they? You know, just let's think about what they really are. I don't like to proselytize or—

MR. MCELHINNEY: No.

MR. DOWNES: —preach. I have no right to preach. I use electricity myself. How can I say it's a bad thing? But I can ask people to think, and so when people say, 'What on earth did he paint that for?' I'm very pleased with that reaction.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, I can imagine that whenever someone—if someone were to describe you to someone interested in becoming an art collector, let's say some hedge fund manager—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —who says, 'Well, you know, I always like landscape paintings,' then he goes, 'Go look at Rackstraw Downes' work,' and he's going to come. And he's going to look at high tension wires, and the Texas desert.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And not find sort of a pretty pastoral—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —scene.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What would you hope that your dealer would say to them?

MR. DOWNES: I'm not sure I know what dealers ought to say. I know once that the little painting up over the sink there, that long blue sink—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: It's called *Two Dumps in the Meadowlands*, and somebody—a couple came into Hirschl & Adler when that painting was there, and said to a Swiss guy who was working in Hirschl & Adler, temporarily there, a dealer, 'We're interested in Rackstraw Downes.' 'Oh,' he said, 'I have a beautiful Rackstraw Downes. It's a Venetian painting,' and he was talking about the dumps.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh.

MR. DOWNES: Because there was water in it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It looks like the—yeah, I could see—

MR. DOWNES: So, you can beautify anything, including the dump.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The Laguna [di Venezia], yeah, you could toss a campanile on the horizon.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Somebody might—but say you've got these two—the geology of consumerism, the sort of—these landfills that have risen above—

MR. DOWNES: Right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the swampland, like great mountains.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wonderful.

MR. DOWNES: I thought that was a very funny—Betty Cuningham told me that. She overheard the remark and thought it was hilarious.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Again, we get back to Antonio Homem and saying that what makes a painting commercially successful, attractive is a capacity to be misunderstood.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] That's right, that's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But you continue to be intrigued by these spaces.

MR. DOWNES: I do. I do, and architectural spaces of any kind, man-made spaces of all kinds are very interesting to me. I'm going to take a look at—I haven't done anything yet, but I've walked by it several times, the new sanitation department building out here on West Street, which is quite a good building I think, of its own right. I respect it highly as a piece of architecture. I don't know who the architect is. Do you?

MR. MCELHINNEY: I don't.

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: We'll have to look it up, make a note. We'll look it up.

MR. DOWNES: Apparently, Michael Kimmelman, has written about it—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —in the *Times*.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, New York has been very creative in how its' managed this. Now, of course everyone is

scratching their head about what's going on in Midtown.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: With the new Extell tower, and the new Vornado tower, and the materialization of Dubai on Hudson, on—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —57th Street—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, boy.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the closing of Rizzoli and so forth.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But the question is not, you know, like where are you going to put the people, but the question is where are you going to put all of the waste that the people create?

MR. DOWNES: Right, exactly, so—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Where are you going to put all of the garbage? Where are you going to put—?

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —all of the sewage, and all of that. And so, I imagine there might be another [sewage-treatment plant] project like the construction, like the park up at 145th Street.

MR. DOWNES: Right, right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Not enough people are aware that that's what that is, as they're driving down the Henry Hudson Parkway.

MR. DOWNES: Oh no, I don't think so either.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The sort of nice arcade. It looks a little bit like an old coastal fort, and then there's a park on top, but you painted that too, right?

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I did. I painted the highway going in front of it, to kind of—it's a very interesting, very densely little moment there, where the highway comes by, the west side elevated.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: West Side elevated highway.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, that part of the city too, I think with Columbia moving its new art center there, and—

MR. DOWNES: Oh, are they? Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —125th Street I think—

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —or maybe a little further north.

MR. DOWNES: Boy, Columbia razed a huge amount of land there, just knocked it right down to the ground.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's a vast real estate empire.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, huge, huge.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And NYU is another one.

MR. DOWNES: Yep, and then we've got one over here on [...Canal–RD] Street at Varick. That's another one, and enormous block there that's been down and covered with gravel for, I don't know, 10, 12 years now since living there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, you speak about going as a child to London in the Blitz, you know. We do that to

ourselves.

MR. DOWNES: We do, that's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: We didn't need the Luftwaffe to help us.

MR. DOWNES: We did not.

MR. MCELHINNEY: We just pull it down by ourselves.

MR. DOWNES: That's right, that's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And that's been the story of New York ever since, you know—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —before the war of independence. There are three big fires that destroyed the city.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, is that true?

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, maybe that imprinted to something on the genome that, you know—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —every so often you pull it all down and—

MR. DOWNES: Well, there are a lot of—

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and rebuild—

MR. DOWNES: Well, there were a lot of teardowns in Houston too.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Houston is a very curious town.

MR. DOWNES: Very.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Explain to me why there are two downtowns.

MR. DOWNES: I know, and why there are—there's no zoning, that you go from the dense downtown to woods in one block.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, or you could go from, you know, the like, you know, the de Menil Foundation, and a lovely neighborhood to some absolutely third world terrifying squalor in a matter of a few blocks too.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. Yeah, that's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But, so how do you now—how do you select what it is you're going to explore visually?

MR. DOWNES: I don't have an answer to that, because it's different every time.

MR. MCELHINNEY: There's no—

MR. DOWNES: It could be, 'Here's a nice place. I'm well protected here from the wind, and there's not much—not too many passers-by. I think I'll set up here,' or it could be, 'That's a compelling shape up in the sky there, and the scale, the contrast are terrific. I'm going to work here,' and then you could say, you know, 'It's a dump. It stinks and it should be reported on.' Any of those impulses.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And many more possibilities too.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, why the built environment? Why is that so compelling?

MR. DOWNES: Well, you know, I don't put people in my paintings very much.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You did once upon a time, as you said.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, once upon a time I did. For a while I did, and then they sort of got squeezed out, you know, 'by their works shall ye know them.'

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, you describe them as 'animating the spaces?'

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: But now you would say that just human intervention is what's animating the spaces.

MR. DOWNES: That's right, that's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So—

MR. DOWNES: That's good.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the presence of man or the presence of, you know, desire, or greed, or what have you that the desire for convenience, mobility. I mean, roads are all about mobility. You were talking earlier about—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, they are.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —the East River, and Hell Gate, and how yeah, the waterways were thoroughfares. See London, I mean, everything—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —moved by water.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, it did.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Everything moved by water here too.

MR. DOWNES: All over East Anglia and the large sections of England were covered with canals. Yeah, there was a network of canals.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I never knew until I went and saw that show at the Tate that John Martin had been involved with the hydrology of London. He had been—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, he was some kind of engineer, I think, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, yeah. So, talk about a bifurcated existence to going—moving water and then organizing these grand spectacles.

MR. DOWNES: Right. You know, it's very curious how attention moved, shifted, and it was attention that shifted really over issues like [John] Martin's involvement with the engineering aspects of things, because the attention moved so much that it actually interfered with what people saw. And I think they saw things where there was nothing to see. There's a beautiful, little painting by Berthe Morisot for example, and I think it's a painting about laundry flashing in the sunlight on a line, and in the breeze, you know. And the curator of the exhibition wrote a thing saying that there was some new experiments with the composting being done in this area. And that's what this painting is about, but I think that just suited his thesis that composting was a good topic for a painter, rather than the shimmer of fabrics, because you couldn't see any compost in the painting. I mean, why is not the compost the subject of the painting if that's what it's about?

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: And I think that was that turnover, you know, that certain art historians suddenly decided they weren't formalists anymore. They were interested in subject matter, and context, and so forth, and so on. I think there was more a shift in historical interest than in the actual—than the painting.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And I don't think it was a shift in painting so much.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, the idea, the formalist idea was that the painting was a self-contained autonomous—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —reality.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That it was obedient to nothing other than its own logic and perhaps the intention of the

artist, and the approval of the critics. And that it represents what a painting should represent, but what is that? What is the function of a painting today, and how do you see painting today? What role do you see it playing in the future?

MR. DOWNES: I don't see it painting—playing much of a role in what we—I previously had mentioned as being large audience art.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Spectacle.

MR. DOWNES: Right. I don't think it has any point in being in there. It's too slow and too cumbersome, and not agile enough, but I see it being for persons of conscience like somebody, you know, it's a difference between somebody celebrating mass in a robe and somebody praying quietly in a pew on their knees. They're two different activities, I think.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Versus a TV preacher with an ear mike walking up and down in a sharkskin suit.

MR. DOWNES: Right, right, exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: With a 10,000-person—

MR. DOWNES: Exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —worshipful audience.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, clearly you inhabit the world shared by artists of conscience.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. That's right, I would certainly say that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Have you found that rewarding?

MR. DOWNES: Very. Yes, I have. If you find somebody who really, you know, looks at your stuff, and responds to it—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —it's very nice indeed. And once a young woman came in—I went into a young woman's studio, in the graduate program at Penn, and she said, 'Oh, I saw your show.' She said, 'Wow, the concentration.' And I thought, that's beautiful. That's what my work is made of. I'm not a gifted person of immediate talent, you know? I just work very hard at my paintings, and look, and look, and look, and repaint them, and repaint them until they seem right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Do you think it's romantic to imagine that a lack of facility makes an artist less—more attentive or—?

MR. DOWNES: More attentive. They don't have any choice. Lack of talent, that has no choice. You've got to be—

MR. MCELHINNEY: I mean, like everybody assumes a pretty girl is stupid, you know.

MR. DOWNES: Right, right. That's right.

[They laugh.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: That someone with sort of average attractiveness has to work harder somehow.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But also artists who are adept, or who are very skillful are more prone to attract praise and adulation just for the virtuosity of what they do.

MR. DOWNES: That is true. That is for sure true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Not for the—but there's a big—there's a gap of vast gap between someone like Van Cliburn and somebody like Liberace.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: But there's a level of audience that doesn't—

MR. DOWNES: Doesn't see that?

MR. MCELHINNEY: —without the visuals they can't really tell what the difference is.

MR. DOWNES: That's probably true, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, you've been involved off and on with teaching, but you've never really had a career in academia.

MR. DOWNES: Well, I did to begin with, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: To begin with, yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, when I left art school, that's what I thought I was going to be for the rest of my life.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Whose teaching assistant were you at Yale?

MR. DOWNES: Sillman, Sy Sillman.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, Sy Sillman?

MR. DOWNES: Yep.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wow.

MR. DOWNES: I did the drawing class with him.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, that would have been very inspiring, and you'd have imagined that—

MR. DOWNES: It was kind of. You know what though? It's hard for me to judge from this perspective, because I got very turned off the whole Albers business for a long time. Recently I've seen two or three very interesting shows by Annie and Joseph together sometimes. They had one up at the Cooper Hewitt.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: And some couple of other places I've seen them. And you know, Annie was an extraordinary artist, and the way they make something complex and mystifying out of something so simple as a paperclip or something like that, her paperclip jewelry and so on, you know, it's absolutely extraordinary, the degree of how she could transform things. It's very beautiful and now I feel differently towards Albers, and I thought the exhibition they had at the Morgan Library of Albers' sketches done on blotting paper was one of the loveliest exhibitions of geometrical painting, color painting that I'd ever seen. I thought it was sensational.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What advice would you have to educators today? I think it's safe to say that well, without going into the whys and the wherefores, art education, studio education is in a bit of a crisis right now.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, it must be. I'm sure it must be. Skowhegan for example got rid of all the easels. He had a forest of easels in that place.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Now there's just iPads?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, now there are just iPads, exactly.

MR. MCELHINNEY: The problem with iPads, because I've tried to use one outdoors, you can't see it.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You know, because you're in real light, and you've got this—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: You know, the glowing object, which of course becomes invisible in sunlight.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, one imagines, you know [David] Hockney in the back of his car along some English lane, doing these—

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —things.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's one thing, but to—I don't know. I think electronic media has its limitations.

MR. DOWNES: It seems to have. It doesn't interest me. You know, I was turned off when I went in a darkroom years and years ago. I never liked that either.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, that compared to using, you know, Adobe Photoshop, I mean a darkroom is—

MR. DOWNES: Nothing.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —sexy as hell, you know.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: There's lights. There's chemicals. There's these plastic tubs, enlargers, you know. There's all this medieval equipment that—

MR. DOWNES: I hated it. I hated doing it. I hated making my own prints and so on. Well, I think I like the idea that you can go snip snap, and have a record of your life to yourself. I think that's quite a nice idea. So, I think of photography of being a sort of proletarian art form.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: Which it is not in the actual history of it at all. There have certainly been, you know, sort of [Ansel] Adams, and all those guys, the 5th Avenue place there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Alfred] Stieglitz.

MR. DOWNES: Stieglitz, exactly, those people. They are aristocrats of a certain—in a certain sense of their own art form, but—

MR. MCELHINNEY: But whenever it was, 1898 or whenever it was, 1903, maybe, it was for the, you know, St. Louis World Exposition or something that Eastman Kodak came out with, you know, the brownie box camera.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And suddenly everybody could—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —you had a little lever that you'd have to press in order to—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —make the exposure.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But I remember as a kid you could still buy film for those.

MR. DOWNES: Could you?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. Who was that guy who photographed the British cathedrals? Was his name Evans or something like that? [Frederick H. Evans]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Maybe so.

MR. DOWNES: He and Bernard Shaw were great friends, and they—both of them were very interested in the Pianola and photography. And the idea was, you know, that anyone could sit in their living room and have a piano recital played by a machine. And they didn't have to learn to draw in order to have the images that they wanted in their own life. And I like that approach to the subject. I think that's a fine approach.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Drawing slows you down. Like you said, painting is a slow art.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, it slows you down. It makes you pay attention in a different way. Someone could argue perhaps that prior to the invention of cinema, every painting was a moving picture, and you said one of the problems with a panorama was that you could look at what's in the left corner. You could look at what's in the right corner, and there was a level of vexation coming from the inability to look at them at the same time, but that could be liberty as well. In other words, they don't need to be painted the same way because—

MR. DOWNES: No, they don't.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —they're not—you can't see them at the same time. Your eye has to move from one place to the other.

MR. DOWNES: That's right. I got into that in an extreme way this winter. I started a drawing of the rock, an immense rock that went for about the length of a city block, you know, huge thing, quite high, and there was a bright white fence post coming right down it in a vertical, but no fence on it. And the thing was bizarre. It seemed a very strange moment to me, and I started drawing at one end. And this rock face that came down was rather like a profile of a person, as it came down to the ground. And then, at the other end I started. And these two drawings sort of came together. And they didn't meet at all. They were completely different scales.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Interesting.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, so I cut it in half, and now I've got two drawings.

MR. MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. DOWNES: One of them I'm going to continue next year, the one that I like of the two, and by splicing another sheet of paper in the same color.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Where is this rock? Is it in Texas?

MR. DOWNES: It's in Texas, yeah. It's in Texas.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, but that's not manmade. That's geological.

MR. DOWNES: No, no, no. It's a geological form, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, then there is a kind of I guess a geometry or a sort of—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —I mean; people often name geological formations after buildings like—

MR. DOWNES: That's possible, yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —The Castle Rock or whatever.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, yes, and we have Elephant Rock near Presidio, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Elephant Rock.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, we do.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, this is sort of an apophenic kind of—

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —naming process where you—

MR. DOWNES: And we have Cathedral Mountain too, yeah, which looks like a cathedral.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How high is it? What's the elevation?

MR. DOWNES: How high from sea level?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yes.

MR. DOWNES: I have no idea, but I know that it's some—Marfa is the same altitude as Denver.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right.

MR. DOWNES: And that Presidio is 2,000 feet lower than Marfa. It's only 60 miles away.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, you'd be at 2,000 feet.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Denver's a mile high.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, is it?

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, if Marfa's a mile high, then that's pretty high.

MR. DOWNES: It is high.

MR. MCELHINNEY: For Texas.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, it's high, and then Presidio is a bowl like this, and it's the hottest point in the USA.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Wow.

MR. DOWNES: Average mean temperature.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, the adobe architecture must be perfect for that, because—

MR. DOWNES: Unfortunately, you get these incredible downpours, just absolutely outrageous downpours. And my friend, Simone Swan, who built these beautiful adobe houses, her heart is broken every couple of years when they have a downpour, and it sweeps chunks of her vaults, or her balustrades, or whatever. It sweeps them away.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, then you just have to go out and get more mud, and straw, and—

MR. DOWNES: That's right and then rebuild it. That's what she does.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —make some more bricks.

MR. DOWNES: That's what she does. She has 'workshops.' You work for her. [Laughs.] But you do learn about adobe building. You do.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's wonderful. She's coming from Africa to the land of American adobe, to the Native American adobe practice.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah, isn't that interesting? Yeah. Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, it's interesting that two cultures with lacking a common origin would come up with the same technology.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So, how do you decide—how do you know when you can walk away from a picture? I'm not going to say when a picture's finished, because that's—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —a kind of layman's idea about what happens at the—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —end of the process, but—

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —when do you disengage from—

MR. DOWNES: When I think that it's about to go downhill. There seems to be a point where you feel like, 'If I work on this more, it's not going to get better. It's only going to go downhill.' It's going to start going downhill

and you'd rather not have to respond to that situation. So, you get out now, and you initial it. I always initial my paintings now, and that's a way of signing off. I don't initial my drawings, because I don't consider drawings to be finished in any way, you know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, a drawing that is, is in a way ceases to be a drawing. It becomes a drawn.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] Yeah, that's sort of true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, the drawing is a process. It's a verb and it is sort of—somebody, I forget who said, you know, 'A great drawing is never finished. It's just abandoned.'

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: But—and you could always return to it.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And something you said earlier, now I'm having a memory, one of those 'l'esprit de l'escalier' moments is what I had meant to ask you about an hour ago was if you use the drawings as a kind of rehearsal process, sort of addressing an idea graphically, and then addressing it in paint and canvas, will something that happens in the painting cause you to go back to the drawing and change the drawing?

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Never?

MR. DOWNES: No, never. I actually like to keep the drawings out of the way, once the painting has started.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Okay.

MR. DOWNES: Because the painting is not going to be like the drawing. It's not going to have the same characteristics at all

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MR. DOWNES: So best to forget the drawing because you may get irritated with your painting because it doesn't have what the drawing has. And there's no point in working that way. You've got to let the painting be what it wants to be, which is going to be different.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So when you—initially, your work, when you step away from the wall or from the easel, what is it—what is it that you hope is left there?

MR. DOWNES: On the easel?

MR. MCELHINNEY: You talked about—well, in the painting, what is it that you hope is—has occurred?

MR. DOWNES: I hope that the thing has substance. That is to say, that it feels an embodiment of something, and that whatever that thing is, is genuinely embodied some way in the painting. Because the painting is a physical object, and I like——the physicality of the painting. One of the reasons I prefer it to photography, of course, which is not physical; it has a rather weak presence on the wall at times with its physique, and that's because, I think, the physique is not real. It's not really embodied in the print, although it can be by those who actually alter that print—their prints, you know. Then immediately the photograph becomes a different kind of thing.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Have you ever been intrigued by lensless photography?

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I have. I wrote a long essay called *Turning the Head in Empirical Space*, and I used a number—one or two examples of lensless photographs.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So-called pinhole photography.

MR. DOWNES: Pinhole photography, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Which is a little closer to the physical—

MR. DOWNES: Yes. I agree with you.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —because you're not dealing with complex optics. You're just dealing with a single, tiny oculus—

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and also a different kind of temporal framework. You need a long exposure,—

MR. DOWNES: That's right. That's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and so you're not just snapping the cow in—like Muybridge, in a kind of instant in time. That's—it's more sustained, somehow. Have you ever experimented with that yourself?

MR. DOWNES: I've never done it myself, no.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Are there any artists or photographers who interest you who use that process?

MR. DOWNES: Not really, no. I'll tell you who does interest me as a photographer is Snelson, Kenneth Snelson, who uses one of those 360-degree cameras. His stuff interests me. Unfortunately, the camera gets so dominant in those things. They begin to look the same. You know you're going to start in one corner and swing around and end up in another corner. And I have the same problem in my own paintings. I have the 180-degree version of that 360 that he's doing.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, how do you decide—how do you decide where—how you are going to frame the picture? I mean, traditionally—conventionally, I should say, you know, one finds your horizon, your eye level.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Then you find—I mean, if you want to use the Claudian idea, you find some kind of anchor point on the side

MR. DOWNES: Sure.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —and then—and then diagonals dancing into the—as your distance, but just with any kind of pictorial composition, it's all about starting with a couple of big vectors and building on that.

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: So how do you—how do you do that?

MR. DOWNES: I don't know. When I worked on those rocks I was telling you about, I went for—I simply followed the fence posts down there. And the drawing had a—it was like a little tiny river or a waterfall or something coming down the side of that rock face, and I didn't extend it very far on either side or give it a base or anything until I got to that point—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: —moved slowly downwards. And so I would usually find some little corner of the painting or little moment in the painting, in the composition, where a lot of things came together. And that works both for line and for color. You've got—with color, you've got to make a chord. It's no use making one color on its own.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. DOWNES: You need two, and they've got to resonate together. And that's my method, you know. And the same thing with the drawing. You start with some place where there's convergence, a lot of convergence.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Where things could either be like a black hole, everything could be heading into this one spot —

MR. DOWNES: It could.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —or emanating out of it.

MR. DOWNES: It could.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What about the idea of a sort of poly-focal composition, where you're looking, you know, up, down, left, right at the same time? Do you—

MR. DOWNES: Well, I don't—you can't do it at the same time. You have to do it in time. Your head moves, your eyeballs move, and they're following some movement through the work.

MR. MCELHINNEY: What I'm thinking about—I guess I'm thinking about that [Michael] Baxandall-[Svetlana]

Alpers book on Tiepolo's composition. Do you know that book?

MR. DOWNES: I haven't read it. No. I haven't read it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Interesting—where it's, again, you're getting back to the idea of pre-cinematic paintings being moving pictures in some sense

MR. DOWNES: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —that, you know, you can look at this part of the painting and look at another part of the painting and look at a third part of the painting. It could be a composite, perhaps.

MR. DOWNES: Oh I see.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then your eye could move from one focal point to another.

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: It seems that the conventional use of photography is limited to the kind of Cyclops camera, the one eye that can look at one thing at a time.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, that's right. It is. Yes, that's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But a painting can look at multiple things at a time. And I'm having a memory of looking at some of your pictures—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —with a curved horizon, and looking to the—being encouraged to look to the left—

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: —to look to the right. Is this just—do you think of this as just sort of descriptive of your own experience of being in the place?

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I think it is indeed a record of the experience. Yes. One person I knew told me they'd seen one of those paintings in a show somewhere. He said, 'It hurt my eyes.' Because he tried to look at both sides at once.

MR. MCELHINNEY: At once.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: He wanted—he wanted what he couldn't have.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But in hindsight, do you think that that's true, that organizing and picturing that way does animate the viewer? Is that a goal?

MR. DOWNES: I don't know what the viewer's going to do with it. I can't—I can't speak for the viewer. [Laughs.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, I just—I guess I'm trying to construct an idea here based on the idea that on your previous work where you had people as vibrations in the landscape were animating the terrain or animating a setting. And then we were talking a little while ago about how the built environment is an intervention into nature.

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then, of course, the viewer, the person who's coming in standing, looking at your picture, is intervening in the picture.

MR. DOWNES: Again, right, another intervention.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So there's these interventions.

MR. DOWNES: Yes.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And that you make it impossible for someone to intervene with a glimpse, whereas a photograph would allow that. One of your pictures won't allow that—

MR. DOWNES: No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —so they have to stand there and absorb it. And, of course, what you're doing is slowing them down.

MR. DOWNES: Yes. Alex Katz said you can only ask people to look at your painting for nine seconds.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, Alex Katz also said that every painting is made with 72 strokes, as I recall. But this whole idea that it's quick, that it's—Knox Martin. You know Knox Martin—

MR. DOWNES: Yes, I do.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —told me that Alex Katz described himself to Knox as a painter who was interested in fashion or who was interested in, I guess—Knox is a very particular character. But I guess he's kind of the opposite of what you're describing.

MR. DOWNES: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MCELHINNEY: I mean, he's person who was influential to you as a young artist. But ultimately, his pictures don't have anything to do with what your pictures are.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, no. They don't.

MR. MCELHINNEY: They're very fast. They're made to be fast, so he's making them to be consumed in nine seconds. He said nine seconds!

MR. DOWNES: Alex did?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Yeah, Alex did. Because Philip Pavia, when he came to Skowhegan two years before you were [teaching] there, when I was there, he said it was 15 seconds. So it's getting shorter. How long would you like people to take to look at your pictures?

MR. DOWNES: I think they should look at my pictures until they started to get bored. Then they should leave.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But you don't want to put a time signature on that.

MR. DOWNES: No, no. No, I don't.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So you left Marlborough after two exhibitions and then started showing with Cuningham then?

MR. DOWNES: No, I went to Miller. Cuningham was at Miller.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Miller. That's right. That's right. She worked for Robert Miller.

MR. DOWNES: Right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So were you at Cuningham the same years as Bailey?

MR. DOWNES: At Miller.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Miller, I mean. Yeah.

MR. DOWNES: I joined her later than Bailey, but it was. Yes, we were there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Bailey had come from Emmerich, André Emmerich, Miller, and then how many exhibitions did you have at Miller?

MR. DOWNES: Only one, I think. Yes, I think only one.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Do you envy artists who have this sort of happy marriages with one dealer forever?

MR. DOWNES: No, I don't envy them because I've got it myself. I've been with Betty since Hirschl & Adlers, my second gallery, and I never really left her. She had selling privileges at Marlborough and did most of the selling. Marlborough didn't do it, just didn't sell it very much. And she also—she then went to Miller and I went to Miller too, to be with her, and then she opened her own gallery, and I'm still there. So I've been with Betty since 1980,

you know, a long time.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Have you had a show yet at the new space?

MR. DOWNES: No, I haven't.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How do you like the new environment?

MR. DOWNES: Well, that remains to be seen. I quite like it, and I like that little annex that she's got now next door, but I haven't shown in there and I have no idea how my stuff will work in there. I don't know.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It's Lower East Side. Which street is it on?

MR. DOWNES: Rivington.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Rivington, right. So just east of Bowery.

MR. DOWNES: That's right.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And seems like a lot of galleries are starting to move into that neighborhood.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, there are a lot.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But many of the dealers I talk to complain that the auctions and the art fairs are undercutting them, making it harder for galleries to be competitive.

MR. DOWNES: Betty seems to be doing okay. She wouldn't have taken on extra space if she wasn't.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right. But how long was she at the gallery on 25th Street?

MR. DOWNES: I did at least three or four shows there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right. So quite a while.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. She was there for a while.

MR. MCELHINNEY: But how would you characterize the changes in the New York art community from your first exhibition until your last?

MR. DOWNES: Well, we've sort of done this, haven't we?

MR. MCELHINNEY: Little bit, but I wanted to sort of hit it from a different angle. I mean, obviously you were showing mostly midtown and uptown, Upper East Side, 57th Street.

MR. DOWNES: Correct. That's true.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then moving downtown, as a dealer, another dealer I interviewed [Richard Gray] said that the only scene that mattered were the galleries that curators could walk to museums from, and that there have always been a lot of people flailing around downtown somewhere trying to make an alternative scene. But SoHo was very successful for a while.

MR. DOWNES: It was.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And then Chelsea came after that, but I know a lot of people complained that the location of Chelsea made it feel isolated, that there was—

MR. DOWNES: Far away. Yes, it does feel rather isolated, yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That it was sort of—had this outlet mall quality about it and there were no—there was not a residential element.

MR. DOWNES: No, but there were fabulous spaces in Chelsea. I mean, there was [Larry] Gagosian and those guys got incredible spaces.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Huge.

MR. DOWNES: [Paula] Cooper, yeah. Yeah, if you want to go big, that's a great place to go.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Cooper, yeah. But now the new frontier seems to be the Lower East Side where—

MR. DOWNES: It does. It does. And the spaces are smaller there.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So some would observe that the size of galleries there, much like the size of art fair booths, that the art fair has become the new—the new paradigm, the White Cube is dead and the art fair has taken over. But you don't see any of this affecting you, and you're not mindful of any of this.

MR. DOWNES: No. I'm not interested in it. No.

MR. MCELHINNEY: How do you think—

MR. DOWNES: I'm going with Betty, not with a room.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Right, you're going with a person.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So that's been a very long, successful—

MR. DOWNES: It has.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —relationship.

MR. DOWNES: Very long. Very long. Yeah, at times very warm, too, and sometimes a little fiery, a little touch of bad temper.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, you've been married a couple of times. You know that one of the ways spouses express love is by hurling things at each other. But it's been a successful—

MR. DOWNES: It has. Very.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —relationship. What about collectors? Are there any collectors who—?

MR. DOWNES: There are a number. There are a number of loyal collectors who've come back for more.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Mostly individuals or—

MR. DOWNES: Individuals.

MR. MCELHINNEY: —institutions?

MR. DOWNES: No, individuals.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Individuals.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So there are people who've collected you in depth?

MR. DOWNES: You could say that. You could.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Over the years?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. You could say that.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Because there are—there are—there are several kinds of collectors. There's of course the sort of ego [centric] your-name-here type collectors who want to have one of these and one of those. And I was told a joke by a dealer about two collectors in the Hamptons. One says to the other, 'I just bought a great Mao by Andy.' And the other one says, 'How much did you pay for it?' He said, 'Three million.' He says, 'I got you beat. I paid five for mine.' So this kind of—kind of, you know, the consumption of art in this way doesn't seem to be at all anything that you're anywhere near.

MR. DOWNES: Not for me. No. Nothing like it.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So what kind of—what kind of collectors are interested in artists of conscience?

MR. DOWNES: I don't know. I have no idea. I keep myself aloof from the collectors. I don't know any of them well.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Oh, you have—so you're not socially—

MR. DOWNES: No. No. No, I don't. And I don't keep an open studio. On the whole, my studio's closed. I have a few friends who I invite in, and a few professionals like you, for example, who pass through it. But I don't do studio exhibits, really.

MR. MCELHINNEY: So you don't play that game, you know, the social game.

MR. DOWNES: Well, I think I work out on the street too, you know, so that may be enough. It's important for me to go home and shut the door.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, there's another question about interacting with curious by-passers. I remember Paul Resika being—he was at Skowhegan the year I was there teaching.

MR. DOWNES: Oh, was he? Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: And, of course, clad all in white and with his great black beard and being sort of like the circus performer version of Claude Monet and going out with his adoring posse and going on the motif for—Frank Hyder and I would go out, but we would stand aloof. We didn't want to be part of that, and yet we didn't want to be unfriendly either. But I remember at one point, two tourists came up to Paul and were looking at his painting, or he had walked away and was talking to like one of the students, and they had walked up to his easel and were having a look at his easel. And he came up to them and he just, with a flourish, took his hat off and held the open part out to them, as if inviting a donation. They turned around and walked away. So have you got tricks for how to get rid of annoying curiosity-seekers?

MR. DOWNES: Yeah. [Raises his finger to his lips.] That's my trick.

MR. MCELHINNEY: That's all you do? Did you ever have anyone who was persistent?

MR. DOWNES: Oh, yes, you do. Sometimes you do. But mostly that's the universal sign. No matter what language or—

MR. MCELHINNEY: Raising a finger to the lips. The index finger, I might add.

MR. DOWNES: Yes, yes. Yeah. Listen, we're going to have to wind this down because I have to be uptown at 3:00, and—

MR. MCELHINNEY: I didn't realize we'd been talking so long. I'm sorry.

MR. DOWNES: [Laughs.] It's okay.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Just sort of to conclude, what do you see is the road ahead? If you knew—if you knew you had another 50 years to paint, what would you be thinking about and what would you hope other painters would be thinking about—young painters would be thinking about?

MR. DOWNES: The thought of 50 more years of painting makes me tired.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Really?

MR. DOWNES: It does.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I mean, even if you—

MR. DOWNES: It's a very strenuous art form.

MR. MCELHINNEY: It is, it is. What would you say is the most exhausting, demanding part of it?

MR. DOWNES: I guess interaction with the public is the most demanding and exhausting part of it because you have to protect yourself.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, you described going to the park and—in seek of solitude. When you lived on 95th Street or wherever, you were talking about going into the park and trying to—this is—this was conversation yesterday, just trying to create an environment for you to inhabit.

MR. DOWNES: Yeah.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Well, this might be a good place to end. Is there anything else you think we needed to discuss?

MR. DOWNES: I don't think there is. I think we did well. I think we—

MR. MCELHINNEY: There will be—there will be that moment of the stair [*l'esprit de l'escalier*] when I go my way and you go yours and we'll—but I will send you a book on Humboldt, I promise.

MR. DOWNES: I'll give you a book of essays to read by me—written by me.

MR. MCELHINNEY: I would look forward—I would look forward to that.

MR. DOWNES: Okay.

MR. MCELHINNEY: Thank you so much.

MR. DOWNES: Okay.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]