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Oral history interview with Irving Petlin, 2016 September 13-15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Irving Petlin on September 13-15, 2016. The interview took place in Petlin's home in New York, NY, and was conducted by James McElhinney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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: Good. This is James McElhinney speaking with Irving Petlin at his home in New York, on Tuesday, the 13th of September, 2016, at quarter of 3:00 in the afternoon. The cat's playing with a wire.

IRVING PETLIN: The cat's playing with—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's—it's—[laughs].

IRVING PETLIN: Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, the microphone wire.

IRVING PETLIN: Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's okay. The transcriber can ignore that. I was reading your bio, and actually, a book that Doug Walla gave me of your pastels, when I attended the Kyle Staver opening the other night. When he was kind enough—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —to give me the book, which I hope you'll sign. And, I get—I get the sense that you had a kind of an interesting childhood growing up in Chicago.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And, was there art in the home?

IRVING PETLIN: No. The family—the Petlin family that came to the United States from Russia/Poland, had no art in its history. It had one thing, and that was the male members of the Petlin family, of my—were cantors in the synagogue.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Synagogue of Zabludow, in Poland. Very famous wooden synagogue that was built in 1615, one of the oldest in Poland. Modeled, that is, in the Metropolitan, and in Yad Vashem, because it was such a beautiful Spanish interior. The early settlers, obviously, came from Spain, how they got there nobody knows, and the Petlin family, sort of, were the cantors of the synagogue for many years, so that element of musicality was in the family, but no other—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Visual art?

IRVING PETLIN: —art. None whatsoever.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But artistry—artistry of, you know, the musical variety.

IRVING PETLIN: The religious musical—

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

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

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

IRVING PETLIN: At some point, my father—who had no commercial experience, and he had no commercial sensibility—became a factory worker in the United States. He couldn't sing in a synagogue; he was not able to

support the family. Became a worker in a cleaning and dying plant, taking out spots in fancy clothes. A terrible—at that time, a terrible vocation, because of the lack of any environmental awareness—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The chemicals—

IRVING PETLIN: —the chemicals and the—you know, so forth. Leaving the house every morning, at around 5:30 or 6 in the morning, he would see me in the room I shared with my two brothers—the bedroom we three brothers shared, I would be drawing at the little table. And I'd see him go off to work, carrying his lunch that my mother had prepared for him. And he characterized himself as the plank upon which we walked from the old world to the new world. He was the plank, he called himself. It was a modest, but consistent pattern, that he devoted himself to seeing that we had enough to go on. And at a very early age, I realized that I enjoyed drawing almost more than anything else, and I drew the war, which was going on at that time. I was born in 1934. By '39, '30—'40, '41, I was drawing almost every day, and the subject was the war. There was a dream-like subject that entered into the work, and that was the fact that on my mother's side, my grandfather had an ice wagon in the summer and a coal wagon in the winter, drawn by a horse. He was one of a few people in Chicago who still had a horse and wagon delivering ice and coal.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: And I drew that white horse, Babe, over and over again. It was a sort of dream-like—often, in kindergarten, the teachers would try to interest me in other activities, but I was just happy sitting and drawing. This went on, and I continued to draw at home, and I started drawing workers, and I have some drawings called, "The Mine Workers." I had very strong, instinctive leftist sensibilities, without knowing even anything about politics whatsoever.

Sometime around the time I was about 12 or 13, we had a music teacher in this ghetto school, not a Jewish ghetto, a Polish ghetto, Polish Catholic ghetto. And the reason for that was my Grandfather, Abraham, could only have a horse in that neighborhood. No other neighborhood was still available for a horse and wagon. And thus, the family surrounded the grandparents, and lived in that area. And, at the age of 12 or 13, somewhere in there, you know, I had a music teacher, Mrs. Muller [ph], who said to me when she saw these drawings, "I'm going to take you to see the Principal, Mrs. Peterson." And then they called my mother, and she was frightened, because to be an immigrant mother to be called to a public school meant something was wrong. But they were to tell her that, "We're offering—" "We're giving one scholarship by the Art Institute Children's School, for elementary school in Chicago, and we'd like to give it to your son. He's very talented. Mrs. Muller spotted him."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: She was the music teacher, but she also taught one day a week drawing. So, I started as—in the Children's School of the Art Institute of Chicago, at the age of 13. Which was a very difficult thing for the family, because Saturday was the Sabbath, and I was singing in the synagogue with the cantor. My dad had to be persuaded that this was okay to leave the synagogue and go downtown on the elevated train to—and it was my mother who was my chief defender. And she explained to him that, "Sam, we're in America now. Being an artist is a profession, like being a dentist, a doctor, or a lawyer—"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: "—and you've got to start early."

[They laugh.]

IRVING PETLIN: And so, he said, "Okay."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, you grew up in Wicker Park area?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. So, near—near the ballfield, and—

IRVING PETLIN: No, the ballfield was further—further east.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Further east.

IRVING PETLIN: But it was Wicker Park area. And it's now kind of a hot area in Chicago.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: But at the time it was a very poor area of the city.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, had your grandfather, the ice man—coal man, had he, uh, emigrated, too, from—

IRVING PETLIN: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —eastern Europe?

IRVING PETLIN: Yes. All the family—we were the first generation born in America.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: From what I read, your dad immigrated through Mexico?

IRVING PETLIN: He couldn't enter the United—he couldn't get a visa, he was escaping from the White Russian Army, that were gathering up young men to—to fight in the—against the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, the civil war there.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: And, so he was smuggled out of Russia by his sisters, two sisters, except they didn't have papers for him or a visa, there were two ships in Gdansk—or—or, which was the harbor then, for emigration. And one was going to Monterrey, Mexico, and one was going to Havana, Cuba. He didn't know what either one of them meant. So, he went, "Eeiny, meenie, miney moe."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: Literally. He ended up in Monterrey, Mexico. And for four years he tried to get into the United States, but couldn't. And, finally, some families who had known the family in Europe had gotten enough influence to get him a visa, and he came to Chicago. Where he was met by my mother, who had seen photographs of him as this handsome Mexican gentleman in a white Panama hat, and they were, like, immediately a couple. And, a long—a long-lived and very, very happy marriage. They were very good parents.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And, what kind of stories were you told by your grandfather?

IRVING PETLIN: The grandfather never told stories, but the grandmother told stories.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ah.

IRVING PETLIN: The bubbe. Her stories were the stories of an orphan. She was a Jewish orphan, who was very beautiful, but had no dowry and could not be married off, being raised by a peasant family in Poland. And, my grandfather's family were, sort of, kind of, for that period, well-to-do landowners. And they had this son, Abraham, who loved horses more than anything. But he was a rascal, he couldn't be depended upon to do anything except ride horses, wrestle with the boys in the dust. So, they brought her to Grodno, to the county where they had their farm, to present a beautiful woman to him and say, "This is your wife." They didn't need a dowry, and so forth. On the way to Grodno, she was so beautiful, they tied red ribbons on her.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was the name of the place, again?

IRVING PETLIN: Grodno. G-R-O-D-N-O.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Grodno. So, they tied ribbons?

IRVING PETLIN: Because that was a sign, at that time, that this was a witch, so you shouldn't look at her. They were afraid she would be abducted on the way; she was so beautiful. She was a blue-eyed, blonde Jewess, who was just an orphan and no dowry. So, my grandfather saw her, and immediately, of course, fell in love with her. But she saw him, and she thought he looked like a spider. He was hairy and small—they'll get that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, just—fine.

IRVING PETLIN: So, he couldn't—they were married, but he couldn't consummate the marriage with her. She cried all the time, being married to such a small, little, ugly man. And he went off to the Russo-Japanese War, passed him off—passed himself off as a Cossack. Because he was a great horseman. And, he fought in the Russo-Japanese War, and he was on the famous ship in Nagasaki Harbor, where there was a false truce with President Arthur. And the ship was being—was supposed to enter—the Russian ship with the—with the Cossacks was supposed to enter Nagasaki Harbor, to be refueled and to be given food for the voyage home. And then the war resumed. And so, the Japanese were not obligated under rules of law to supply them. And the ship was

starving, and they ate their horses. And, my grandfather said, "We thought we were never going to survive." But they did, and the truce was resumed. And he came back with baskets of wonderful clothes and gifts for her, and she accepted him back. She missed him after a while. They had 11 children. Of which—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Made up for lost time. [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: Made up for lost time. Of which, four immigrated to the United States; my mother, her two brothers, and a sister. After the—after the Bubbe and the Zeyde—the grandmother and the grandfather. The rest of the children didn't survive World War One. It was fought right in their area, and they were starved and died. And, so there were four children that came to the United States. Unlike my father's family, all of those who were left behind perished at Treblinka. And there were 49 of them who perished at Treblinka. So, my early years—the forming moments, did revolve around events in the world. It wasn't like I was growing up in some fantasy world. I was growing up in kind of a hard reality, that I was taking in, even more so than the adults in some crazy way. The parents wouldn't talk about what was happening, or what could be going on with their family. They didn't want to talk about anything to the children. So, I read the newspapers, at a very early age. I'd met my father at the streetcar stop, because he'd be carrying the Sun Times, and I'd grab it out of his hand, and we'd race home. First thing I did was read the paper about the war. Kept track of the war. So, if my later political activities had a kind of seed, it probably goes back there. Although, the connection was broken for a long time, between my later life and the earlier kind of instinctive involvement with questions of war and peace.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, another question I often ask narrators, is, when they were first in the presence of a great work of art? When were they mindful of being the presence of a great work of art? And I read one of the accounts of your life, where you were talking about seeing the Munch, at the Art Institute of Chicago—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, the adolescent girl sitting on—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, I'd love to hear that from your own—

IRVING PETLIN: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'd love to hear it, as it were, from the horse's mouth.

IRVING PETLIN: From the horse's mouth. I was going to the Children's School at the Art Institute, and never wandered up into the galleries—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: —because I didn't know, at that time, the connection. I loved going to the Saturday classes, and, one day, coming up from the classes down below, I saw the grand staircase of people going up to the, you know, the grand stair, and I said to myself, "I'm going to go up there and see what they're going to see." And I went up the grand staircase and I went into the room where the adolescent girl was sitting on the bed, and I just practically fell back down. Because I—it—suddenly, everything clicked. This is why I'm down there. It was so powerful, that picture, to me. So, I stayed for the whole afternoon, looking at Munch. The great Munch show was followed by Van Gogh—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —the big Van Gogh show that toured the United States in the late '40s and '50s. And then, followed by the Cezanne show. So, my three most powerful influences as a teenager, or, like, an adolescent were Munch, Van Gogh, and Cezanne. When I entered the Art Institute, in my first year—I got through high school pretty quickly, I was 17—just 17 when I entered the Art Institute. I had a full scholarship. I was so prepared, that the classes were boring, and I went to the galleries and to the library and to the print department, to the drawing—and, you know, and—and would sit for hours looking at original drawings. And I fell in love with Redon.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Because the Chicago Art Institute has a great collection of Redon. The widow of Redon was a great—Redon was—had a great friend—a curator of drawings who was an early supporter of Redon, from America. And he was the curator who passed on—who was the mentor for the curator at that time, and so, at her death, she left quite a collection to the Art Institute. Very grateful for the early support that it had given to Redon.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And so, I fell in love with Redon, looking directly at the works—they would take the wax paper

off—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —and you'd sit there with the drawing, you know, it was really an education all by itself. The Art Institute was, at that time, a pretty exciting place. There had been a generation of artists that preceded us, Leon Golub and Cliff—well, Cliff Reslin [ph] was in our class. Claes Oldenberg was in our class. But, it was a moment, you know, like all art schools go through this wave.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Wave. It was a wave; we were on the top of a wave. Very talented people, all. And preceded by a very talented group; Nancy Spero, Leon Golub. I mean, it was really lively, exciting—New York was far away. Although, we knew all about it, but it was far away, in the sense that it wasn't dominating our education. It was just one part of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There was also more of an acceptance of the use of imagery, too, in Chicago.

IRVING PETLIN: In Chicago.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And, I mean, the Imagist school, and—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And, you know, the roots, and people like Ivan—

IRVING PETLIN: Albright.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Le Lorraine Albright—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—and, also an emphasis on craft, that one was seeing scorned a lot by the new art.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In New York, that didn't really care about—about a thing being well made.

IRVING PETLIN: We were classically trained, basically.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. And, Blackstone Hall, the big exhibition hall, the student exhibitions, and so forth, was a scene of struggle between various groups of artists who were students. For example, in my first year at the Art Institute, we were told that we weren't eligible to be in the Student Show, that was held every year annually, you know—the Art Institute put together what they called the Student Show. And we weren't eligible. And so, I organized a Salon de Refuse. And, that's how I met Leon Golub. He came over when we had just hung the show. And he said, "Who put this together?" And they pointed to me, and he tapped me on the shoulder and he said, "I'm Leon Golub, I just want to tell you this is quite a show you've put together." And we became friends—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, good.

IRVING PETLIN: —from that time on.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, you're already, sort of, becoming an activist at this point?

IRVING PETLIN: Yes. Yes. But, at that time, it was—we were in the McCarthy period.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: It was all about what we were doing at school, rather than what was going on outside. We weren't participating because we weren't voters yet, we weren't politically active. We were active inside the school's politics of exclusion, preferences that weren't fair. So, in that sense, yes, our little Salon, was the beginning of a student salon that went on after I left, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, they continued to have a Salon de Refuse after—?

IRVING PETLIN: As far as I can remember, I don't know how long it lasted but it was—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think this is another thing that rises and falls, you have—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —because I have attended Tyler and Yale, and when I was at Tyler there was an annual student show, and certain people were picked and others weren't, and a lot of the people who were not picked—I was picked, but a lot of the people who weren't picked organized another exhibition. And even a lot of people who were picked were part of that—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY;—exhibition as well. To, sort of, show solidarity.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And inclusiveness. So, at—at what point did you make a decision that—that, you know, you were going to be an artist? Was that—

IRVING PETLIN: I never made a—it—it was—it chose me. I never can remember ever thinking, "I'm going to be an artist." That's what I did. And it felt like it chose me, out of this—out of this neighborhood, out of this family, out of everything. I don't know where it came from. I—I—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, a genuine calling?

IRVING PETLIN: Calling.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not a—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —choice. Oh, I could be a, you know, a chef, or an orchestra conductor, or an Indian chief, or—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —an artist.

IRVING PETLIN: And it felt like that. And when I—I—you know, my—my fellow students, we would talk about, "What are we going to do afterward?" None of us thought it was possible to make a living as an artist at that time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: We all thought we had to find some vocation, some skill of some kind to earn a living, or to get a teaching position, or—the idea of becoming an artist professionally was not in the air, it wasn't—especially in Chicago at that time. There was very little support outside of a few major collectors who understood that the young people that were coming out of the Art Institute at this time were a very talented group of people. One of them was Joseph Randall Shapiro. And he invited us to his house, often, to look at his collection. And the other—there were several other collectors who did this. And that's how we saw European art. Apart from the fact that the Art Institute itself was a very fine collection of European art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: But, post-war European art was in their collections.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What about contemporary American art?

IRVING PETLIN: There were collectors of contemporary American art who were buying the Abstract Expressionists, or were, let's say, the action-painters—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —at that time. But they—they were not the ones who were inviting us to their houses. It was the collectors like Shapiro, who showed us Gorky, who showed us Matta, who showed us Max Ernst, you know, so forth. This had a big influence on this generation. The Golub and the—uh—uh—Shapiro generation had—had a different orientation. It wasn't collectors who brought them to their art, it was their experience of World War II. Leon was—Rosofsky—many of the artists of that generation had been in World War II, and as combat veterans. And they came back with a kind of grittiness that made for the "Monster School," you know, as a—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —as a fennel man [ph].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As the grey—the Chicago Monster School.

IRVING PETLIN: Yep, yep, yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The—so, the—the, um, the experience of combat, or the ordeals that they—

IRVING PETLIN: And what they saw. Some—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what they saw, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: —of the things that they saw, I'm sure had a big influence. Also, they were interested in Art Brut —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —and the—there was like a conscious effort to—to, uh—uh, just like after World War I, the Dadas emerged out of a disgust—total disgust with culture that produced such a war. I think these people came back with a disgust for that culture that produced World War II.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—so there was—well, it's been much discussed, you know, the relationship between, you know, the Chicago Monster School, Imagist School, Art Brut in Europe, and so forth. And Expressionism, if you will. Who are your influences, who were your influential teachers, who was a mentor?

IRVING PETLIN: At the Art Institute?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, at the Art Institute.

IRVING PETLIN: There weren't any exceptional influential teachers. We influenced each other a lot. There were good teachers for the technical skills that we needed. There were some very good teachers. The professor Viegart [ph] at the Art Institute was a teacher of Nancy Spero, he was the teacher—my teacher, and so forth. I loved Mr. Viegart. And, I learned a great deal from him. But he was a Matisseian, and I was headed somewhere else. I knew that already. But I learned a lot from him. There was a Max Kahn [ph], who was a lithographer, who was a very, very interesting man. I never took his class, but I sat outside in the hallway talking to him a lot. There were people who influenced us, but it wasn't the crucial influence. The crucial influences came from what we were seeing ourselves do and what others around us were doing. We were very self-starting, as a generation. The big influence, coming from outside, may have been three or four people. One was de Kooning, during the excavation series of de Kooning.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Wonderful painting at the Art Institute, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Big impact on me and others. Rothko, color, and luminosity. We were—we were very taken with Matta, for the Surrealist push into the modern world. And Mata came to Chicago and taught for a period where we were in our third year, this group. And, he taught in a very interesting way. He never entered a studio. He said, "Come up to the galleries with me. We're going to just look at paintings." And so, for three or four weeks that's all we did, every day. He came, we just went up, different section of the Art Institute. He taught. We became good friends. He liked my work, he saw my work. He liked many of the young people he was working with. And he said, if you ever come to Paris, look me up. I'll help you out, you know. And that actually happened later in my life. Matta was a big influence because he opened up a whole other territory.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And by his example, um, uh, not only political imagery, but literary imagery began to enter into the work of this generation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting. Because, if you think about what was happening in New York, at least what the literature was, it was highly formalist.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was almost aggressively anti-narrative.

IRVING PETLIN: Anti-intellectual, in a peculiar way, because it didn't want narrative to be present, period.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It didn't want there to be any narrative other than—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. The narrative of paint—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the narrative of—of Cultureburg and formalism. And, at some point you—you came into contact with Josef Albers?

IRVING PETLIN: I was recruited by Josef Albers.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: To go to Yale.

IRVING PETLIN: To go to Yale.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Joseph Albers was given his first museum show in the United States by Katharine Kuh—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —who was a curator of modern painting at the Art Institute. She was a—an—she was a very, very energetic and far-seeing woman. And she saw that Roth—that Rothko, and the gave the first show to Roth—I think in America, was in Chicago, in her—she had a gallery for modern—it was, like, maybe twice the size of this loft. It's not—it—and she did small shows.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And Albers was who she chose for one of these shows. Albers came and he said—at this point, he had left Black Mountain, and he was at Yale, and he came and he told Daniel Catton Rich, who was the Director of the Art Institute at that time, "Why is it that we have no students from such a great art school at Yale? They don't come." And, Daniel Catton Rich explained to him, "Mr. Albers, most of the students at the Art Institute of Chicago are from very poor families, they're all scholarship students, they come from working class families." He said, "I will offer a scholarship to—if I can choose one of your students a full scholarship to Yale." So, he came during the gallery, the studios down below in the school, and he decided to choose me. I had just won a Raritan Traveling Fellowship, and had gone with the idea that I was going to leave for Europe as soon as graduation was over. The draft board told me, "You can't do that. You have to serve your—you have to do your military service before we'll give you a passport." So, when Albers said, "I'll give you a scholarship to Yale." I said, "Great," you know? It's perfect. And I went to Yale and studied with Albers. And, uh, uh—if—if your earlier question was, was there ever a teacher that had a really powerful influence—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —it would probably be Albers more than anybody that I had at the Art Institute, because color was my special instinct. And Albers and I could fight over narrative and everything else, but on color I was his number one student. And he ran a very peculiar class, these laboratories. It was a hundred students in the laboratory, taking his class in color. And he would grade them one to a hundred, "You are number 92." "You are —" [laughs] "—you are number 68."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Funny.

IRVING PETLIN: I was number one, but he would hold my example up and say, "But don't look at his paintings up in the studio, just look at his color studies."

[They laugh.]

IRVING PETLIN: Because he hated what I was doing. I was already very influenced by the Surrealists; you know? And, um, I was a figurative painter, a narrative painter, and a dreamer, you know, of—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, coming from Chicago, it seems like there might have been a certain kind of—well, seems like there might have been a certain kind of—no, I don't want to use the word regionalism, but a kind of self-sufficiency, where Chicago artists were evolving in an environment of their own, they weren't looking to New York for all of the answers.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And even someone like Matta, you know, who's from Chile originally, is sort of an outside—

IRVING PETLIN: Yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —of that canon, as well.

IRVING PETLIN: Matta had a big influence on New York painting, which has never been thoroughly acknowledged. Through Gorky.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I think it's being—yeah. It's being acknowledged.

IRVING PETLIN: Acknowledged.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, he had a huge influence on him in other ways, too.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not such nice ways, but—

IRVING PETLIN: No. But, I also know the children of Gorky—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —and it's a little questionable as to whether Gorky's suicide was a result of Mougouch leaving, but none the less, yes, that was a part of the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, he had—he had issues of his own.

IRVING PETLIN: Yep. Yeah. But he had a very big influence, because of the way he drew, naturally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And it was picked up by Gorky, and then by de Kooning, by, you know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, with a line that had such velocity and such force and energy and at the same time was very structured and—

IRVING PETLIN: He was trained as an architect.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Ah, well, there you go.

IRVING PETLIN: Yep. Yeah, yeah, yeah. He was trained as an architect. He studied architecture before he ever painted. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But, yeah, this sort of international, sensibility, that—that—that existed all the time around, you know, the New York school, that was—that was so, uh, much in the spotlight at that point in time—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and actually, as we now know, used as a propaganda asset by the—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —USIA and CIA.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, Max Kozloff did the major article on that subject—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —in a famous article now. It's a classic.

[They laugh.]

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—

IRVING PETLIN: I'm having supper with Max tonight.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, great.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, who were the—your classmates at Yale, when you were there?

IRVING PETLIN: At Yale, Varujan Boghosian.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course, he was a—who—who—who I believe for years was teaching at Dartmouth, or—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Bill Bailey, William Bailey, uh, the woman who—ah, I forget her name, who does the tapestries in the—Sheila Hicks.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: The daughter of Lester Beall who married Cliff Westermann. Mark Strand—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sure.

IRVING PETLIN: —who was a poet. He and I were—were—were operators of a certain kind, because a lot of us were pretty—we maybe had scholarships, but we didn't have a lot of money. Mark was—became the Poet Laureate of Yale, from—and, being Poet Laureate of Yale, you get invited to all the luncheons and drink tastings, and sort of cocktails that all the clubs throw. And he—we'd go there with big jacket—big jacket pockets, and all these hors d'oeuvres were out there, delicious stuff that we couldn't afford. We'd load up and bring it back to the studio.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Fun.

IRVING PETLIN: Especially for Varujan Boghosian, who was desperately poor. Came with a little peanut butter sandwich every morning. So, we brought all kinds of good foods.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Big wheels of cheese miraculously—

IRVING PETLIN: Oh, yes, I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Disappearing off of the table top.

IRVING PETLIN: We did—we did wholesale robbery. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think every—everyone in our—a lot of art students had that experience—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —I think it's a—

IRVING PETLIN: Mark was terrific, because we went together, and we came back with a whole—everybody got—and, I know he died fairly recently—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —and I lost touch—contact with him over many years. We—I wasn't fond of his late poetry, and, I was never fond of him as a poet in general, but I was fond of him as a person. We had great times together.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He was very close, you know, to Bill Bailey.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—and who's a friend of mine and was a teacher of mine later—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —you know, so—but, yeah, they were extremely close. You know, just to—this is your—I'll tell you later.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have a—

IRVING PETLIN: Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, I have a Mark Strand story.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But, so—I guess, I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. At what point did you, ultimately, have to go do your—

IRVING PETLIN: Military service?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —military service. Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: I made the big mistake of taking my physical exam in New Haven. Because I wanted to go directly to, you know, to Europe. I was on the East Coast already. I thought, I'll just get it over with, because I was sure they were going to reject me. I had a bad back, you know, I had an injury in high school. I was—I was certain I'd be rejected. Every scholar out of Yale Graduate School was inducted. Every truck driver, son of people sitting on the board were rejected. It was just so obvious.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] Town and gown. Town and gown. [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: We made a terrible mistake. So, I was—I was—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You should have gone to Bridgeport.

IRVING PETLIN: I could've gone to Bridgeport or gone back to Chicago.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or gone back to Chicago.

IRVING PETLIN: And done it there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: Either way, it was a big mistake. But, my military service was interesting from the point of view of my future knowledge of world politics, because when they—when you finish your basic training, which I did at Fort Carson, Colorado, they pull your card up, and they pulled mine far enough up to say, "Master's Degree: Yale," and they sent me to Intelligence. Had they pulled it up a little more and seen that it was fine arts, I would've never gone to Intelligence. So, I was at the Army Intelligence School in Monterrey, Mex—California.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And I was stationed at Presidio, in San Francisco.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: A very beautiful base.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I know it well.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Now it's—it's this wonderful cultural campus—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. And, I was cleared for Top Secret, and I was put in—put in an office with a secretary, and I just had access to all kinds of material. And I, being a very curious person, I used that access very well. I learned a great deal about the way the world works. And the way the US impacted on the world after World War II—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —especially. And my own specific interest was, what did we know about what was going on in the concentration camps in Europe, and what did we do and not do?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: So, on and so forth. So, I did, nightly, all kinds of research. I could just go in and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—so you had access to materials that you weren't working on?

IRVING PETLIN: No. I had access to material at level of Top Secret.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, in other words, not just—not just your tasks that—

IRVING PETLIN: No. No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —you just could—

IRVING PETLIN: I could go in and just—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: —wander. And I did. I learned a lot, but I also was, uh, um, there were certain things I wanted to steal, because I was sure they would never reach the public. And, the system was run in such a way, every frame was numbered. If you removed a frame it would have showed up immediately, from a film. I saw films that Nazis had made of the concentration camps. And, at a very high level of technical production, meaning there were lighting experts, there were sound experts, while something horrible was being done to somebody. And I watching that, trying to figure out how could I get some of these frames out, and there was no way to do it. At least, I wasn't technically capable of doing it. Anyway, but I did learn a lot, and saw how—how completely knowledgeable was the United States in what was happening, because each—what we—I saw the correspondence between Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: On what to do about the camps. The correspondence between the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the President and so forth. Because these were all sent by virtue of TWIX [ph]. TWIX was the method of communication, it's a scrambling machine. And I saw the unscrambled versions, and they were always turning down any effort to stop the transports, with the same—it was if the British generals and the American generals were working from a formula. "Yes, we know. Yes, we could. But, you know, Mr. President, it would delay the end of the war. And mean more US casualties. And we don't have sufficient fuel supplies. And it would mean greater allied casualties."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It would also have given direct aid to the Russians, because the way the Nazis were working things, is they were delivering people to the camps in Eastern Europe, and they were returning with, you know, wounded and other from the Eastern front, as I understand, it was part of it. Is that correct?

IRVING PETLIN: It was a—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was part of it.

IRVING PETLIN: It was a complex of excuses, in which the end result was, nothing was done.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Nothing was done.

IRVING PETLIN: Nothing was done. At a certain point, I—I mean this, now we jump forward.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: I was in Paris, let's say this is 1957, '58. I'm in Paris in 1959, 1960. I'm working in painting in Paris and beginning to show. And I opened the—at that time, the Paris Hail Tribune, and I see that all the material that I had been working on and looking at was sent to the St. Louis Record Center for safe storage. It was either late '59 or '60, I read the story in the Paris Hail Tribune. The St. Louis Record Center burned down, all this stuff will never see the light of day again.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: It was done on purpose, I'm certain.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Shocking story.

IRVING PETLIN: Allowed to happen. Allowed to happen.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you must have known, too, if you were—if you had access to those kinds of documents, you had to have been aware, too, of the complicity of the French in the Holocaust.

IRVING PETLIN: The Vichy government. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, yeah. The Vichy government was very, very complicit, absolutely. And, it was only Chirac who finally admitted it. Up until then, the French were not willing to say that was France. It was some foreign form—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Occupied—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. But it was Chirac who made it very clear that it was France who did this.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We now see European nationalism rearing its ugly head again.

IRVING PETLIN: Terrible.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Terrible. It's very scary. It's very scary because it's—it's happening—it's happening because of a World War II problem. It's called immigration.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And a World War I problem called the Sykes-Picot Agreement

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so forth.

IRVING PETLIN: That's right. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN—and it was France and England that did it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: They wrote it in the Great Game period.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The 19th century sort of tried to keep that frolic going. And, well, we're still in Afghanistan, so, in a way, there's a little bit of the Great Game still being played.

IRVING PETLIN: The Great Game is still being played.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's true. I think, perhaps, the researchers looking at this interview in, you know, the future may have to run to, you know, the encyclopedia to look up the Great Game, I'm not sure historians know about that so much. But so, how long, like, was your actual tour of duty? Was it a year?

IRVING PETLIN: It was two years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Two years?

IRVING PETLIN: Two years. They wanted—I mean, I was—I was good at what I did for them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Which—which involved simply preparing—we often had to prepare the Generals of the Sixth Army for briefings with Defense Department officials. And, our job was to prepare them with information and rehearse them, so that when they spoke to these people who they were hoping to climb the military ladder, the worst thing that could happen was making a mistake in a briefing. Because then you lose your place on the ladder. So, we would rehearse them for these briefings on various subjects, whatever they were. And there were these corporals drafted from graduate schools yelling at these generals, "No, don't say that! Say it this way!"

[They laugh.]

It was kind of a—I mean, I wish somebody could have filmed that. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's great.

IRVING PETLIN: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's a little bit of a, you know, the Joseph Heller meets whatever—

IRVING PETLIN: Yes, yeah, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, but while you were in San Francisco, you—you, as I understand it, became acquainted with a number of the artists who were there, like—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Richard Diebenkorn, and—

IRVING PETLIN: Well, I taught with Diebenkorn—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And Elmer Bischoff, and—

IRVING PETLIN: And later on—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —at UCLA, when I was there—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: But, the ones that I really knew were Elmer Bischoff, and because I had rented a studio in the Monkey Block in San Francisco.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh yeah. [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: And, uh, it was filled with artists because it was cheap and because it was falling apart, and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: North Beach area?

IRVING PETLIN: In the North Beach area.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, right. Yeah. Okay.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, and it was called the Monkey Block. It's where the financial pyramid is now. That was a famous structure, it was where the great Sanford Murder took place. The architect murdered the man who was stealing his wife, or something. I forget, it was a famous murder case. It was a famous western hotel. It was the first iron structure built west of the Mississippi. Anyway, it had fallen into disrepair, and I was able to rent a studio there. I was living on 81 dollars a month, salary from the US Army, but I had a three wheel—a three speed English bike, and I would go every evening that was free to the studio. Paint, work until two, three in the morning, and at six I was there saluting the flag in my uniform. I never slept at the base one night. Practically.

[They laugh.]

IRVING PETLIN: Because I had what was called a Class A pass, because I was doing this work. At that time, in San Francisco, the Dilexi Gallery was the leading gallery, run by Jim Newman, who was a partner with—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: L-E-X—

IRVING PETLIN: D-I-L-E-X-I. Dilexi.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, Dilexi.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. And, Jim Newman was the owner of the Dilexi. And he was partners with Bloom, in a—who was running the Ferris Gallery in Los Angeles at the time. They were connected. Those were the two leading galleries on the west coast, during this period. And, in the Dilexi Gallery, nobody knew I was in the Army, they only saw me at night. And they just—and then, when I had my show there, it came out that I was in the Army, because the base heard that I was having a show, and sent a photographer to find out what the hell is going on here. [Laughs.] "Who is this? Is this our soldier?" [Laughs.] But up until then, for almost two years, I was able to work at night and I got to know a lot of people. And in the gallery was Robert Morris—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —who was in San Francisco at that time. Jess—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —of course, was a very—and I knew Robert Duncan, and it was—again, I was in the right place at the right time. It was the beatnik moment—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: In San Francisco. And all of them were—because I was never in my studio during the day, a lot of people slept on my floor during the day. And then I'd come home at like 6:30 or something, and they'd clear out and it would be my place to work. It was really, kind of, a period like that. And, Murial Francis, who was the ex-wife of Sam Francis, was also in the gallery. And Jay Defeo, who was a wonderful artist. I mean, it was really a kind of wonderful moment.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There's a wonderful show that is up now at the Denver Art Museum, in which, "She Looms Large," the women's Abstract Expressionism, a lot of—a lot of names that people don't know.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And, I mean, obviously, it's go people like, Helen Frankenthaler—

IRVING PETLIN: Yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and Joan Mitchell and so forth.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—but a lot of others who are less, uh, less well known.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Because Robert—Robert Morris at the time was living with Yvonne Rainer.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And Yvonne was dancing in San Francisco and so forth. And, it was a very wonderful, lively moment.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did that environment influence your work?

IRVING PETLIN: Probably not at all. Because, I was like a—I was like one of these creatures who only lives at night. And doesn't share any other moment. And most of my time at night was spent working, so I didn't participate, unless people—I ran into people, but I didn't—I wasn't a participant. And I was not in the drug scene whatsoever.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you weren't—weren't a beat?

IRVING PETLIN: I wasn't a beat, no.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you weren't—you weren't hanging around, sort of doing the Café Society?

IRVING PETLIN: No. No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Art Bar-thing. Whatever it was.

IRVING PETLIN: No. The one thing I went to, because the Dilexi Gallery was located above the great jazz club, where Miles Davis was playing all the time, on Broadway. The original Dilexi space was above the—the jazz—I forget what it was called. But that's where Miles Davis, all the great jazz musicians—so I would hear them and see them, literally, passing. But never within a social relationship.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, how did you meet these people?

IRVING PETLIN: Because, um the partner of Jim Newmann was Jim Alexander, who ran the jazz club, and so—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

IRVING PETLIN: So, any moment I pass by or went to the gallery or so forth, I would—I would—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean people like Robert Morris, and—

IRVING PETLIN: Oh, Robert Morris was in the gallery.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —and so we met at openings, and so forth. And we stayed friends. We were friends long into—before he left New York for upstate New York, uh, and I left for France. But we did a lot of things together. We did the Art Strike together at the Metropolitan Museum. And, he—he was a—he was a really bright, bright person. I liked—I liked his mind.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: But he was also very moody. Very moody guy.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Bischoff?

IRVING PETLIN: Elmer was wonderful. He was very—because I came at night there, he'd only see me at night there, and he'd be in his undershirt, working. And he'd say, "I'll make you a cup of tea." And he would, and we'd have a cup of tea, sometime in the middle of the night, and he'd say, "Anytime." I watched him paint, and we'd have a tea, and I liked him a lot. And he was really a—I mean, he kind of looked after my place. I didn't have to worry. Elmer was terrific.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A lot of his imagery too, had to do with jazz—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and had to do with musicians, and—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Elmer was really there. He was a—he and Frank Lobdell, they both had studios in the Monkey Block. I—I wasn't friends with Lobdell, but with Bischoff, yes. And I think Bischoff was one of the few people who knew I was in the Army all day long. Because he had been in the war. And I think he understood, you know, who I was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He could see the tells.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, when you came out of the Army, this was before you went to Yale?

IRVING PETLIN: No, this was after—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: After you went to Yale.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. I had come out of the Army in '59, and I took up the fellowship I had waiting for me, the Raritan Fellowship—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

IRVING PETLIN: And went to New York, to catch a boat to France. I'd packed a big thing. And my friend in New York was Claes Oldenburg, and I said, "I need to stay somewhere while I get ready to get on the ship." And I stayed with Claes, and he had just married Patty. And, I was seeing Eva Hesse at the time. And she was—I almost didn't go. [Laughs.] But I decided to go. And, she was beautiful—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —and touching. And I—no hint at what was coming—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —to just this beautiful—and we were colleagues at—fellow students at Yale. She was a year after me, and Albers was very harsh on her. Lucy—I—Lucy Lippard interviewed me about this. I thought Albers was very harsh on her because she was German. And he was particularly harsh with her. I thought. And she would come crying to me, and I would support her, you know? I was a little bit of a mixture of a big brother and a hopeful lover, you know? But, it was—it was something about—because, with the other women students he was—he was harsh, but not like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There was this culture at Yale of really needlessly abusive crits.

IRVING PETLIN. Crits, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—and it continued well into the '70s, when I was there. And—and it was this sort of trial-by-ordeal, you know? You had to sort of stand and—

IRVING PETLIN: Stand your ground.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —face the music, and get knocked around. And there were often tears, and once or twice, fist fights. I once witnessed a student who was an ex-marine physically eject Al Held from his studio.

IRVING PETLIN: Oh, well, Al Held was a fist fighter from way back.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. And then Held turns to all of us, after he'd dusted himself off and said, "I like that guy," you know?

IRVING PETLIN: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —after he's been—actually, physically shoved out the door and been told never to come back again, you expletive deleted, door slamming. But, so that culture was there at that time as well.

IRVING PETLIN: Albers and I had crits that were memorable, because even if I was his best color student, he'd come up before my paintings and go, "Oy! Oh, God, please don't look at his work." He would tell them. And I would fight back, because—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why was he so hostile to it, because it was imagery?

IRVING PETLIN: He didn't want his best colorist to be painting what he called "baboon's asses."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Baboon's asses?

IRVING PETLIN: Asses. He—these Surrealist fantasies.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

IRVING PETLIN: He thought that was—that was bad. That I was misusing what I knew about color. But it wasn't—you know, it was, "I'm going through this phase, I'm going through one thing after another." So, then, I began to hit back. And, would stand up to him. And, I once screamed at him, I said, "You, you've been painting a reclining nude your entire life!"

[They laugh.]

IRVING PETLIN: And he got so upset.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, man, that's beautiful. Well, I would imagine that at that time you'd have had an ally in somebody like Bernie Chaet, you know, who's—

IRVING PETLIN: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No?

IRVING PETLIN: Wasn't Bernie Chate.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because he was a, you know, from that—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Expressionist school in Boston.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, no Bernie Chate was never at the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He was a jazz nut, too.

IRVING PETLIN: —crits with Albers, when—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He wouldn't—he wouldn't—

IRVING PETLIN: He was never at the crits. And the result was, he was never there when any of this went on. And

people like Bill Bailey and, the others were all quiet.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Rolled over?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Well, they didn't' want to cross Albers. But, the students, like, who I was friendly with loved it. [Laughs.] But, I never feared for myself with Albers, because I knew something—he admired my fighting spirit. And it came out—and it turned out to be exactly true; I got the highest grade at the end of the graduate program. He later was at a reception in Chicago, many years later, with Joseph Randall Shapiro, and Shapiro asked him, "Didn't Irving Petlin study with you, Mr. Albers, at Yale?" And he said, "Oh, yes." And he listed, painting by painting, what I had done over a period of a year. Shapiro was so impressed. And, you know, I caused them all kinds of other problems, too. Because I fell in love with the dau—well, I fell in love. She was married to a Connecticut aristocrat. The daughter of Lester Beall, was a big donor to the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —and I think he sat on the Board of the Arts school. So, Joanna Beall left her husband, Gaylord, you know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: —and came to live with me on Orange Street there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, dear.

IRVING PETLIN: And Lester Beall was furious. He sent Jesse, the chauffeur, who wore these leather boots, you know?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Jodhpurs and a cap?

IRVING PETLIN: Jodhpurs, yeah, to come and get his Joanna, you know, bring her back to Brookfield Center. And, instead, she brought me with her. Joanna's mother liked me and wanted this to work, because she thought this was a terrible marriage that he had arranged with Gaylord, so forth. But Albers called me in and said, "What are you doing? You're going to ruin the Art School." Anyway—

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The heart will be satisfied, one way—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. And I brought Joanna to Chicago, and in a sense, introduced her to Cliff. I was leaving for the Army then. And I knew there was no future for us, as a permanent couple. And I knew Chris—Cliff, would be a wonderful companion for her. And he was. They were wonderfully married, and I was so happy, you know, that they—so, that ended well, somehow, you know?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's—that's a good—that's a good story. Post-Yale?

IRVING PETLIN: Post-Yale, of course, I left for Europe.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And, uh, I was staying with Claes and Patty, and seeing Eva, and then I decided to go, in any case, and met Sarah on the boat.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, wow.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: On the boat?

IRVING PETLIN: On the boat, yeah. On the way over.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Which boat was it?

IRVING PETLIN: It was le Flandre. It was the—an old German boat that was reparations, paid to France. And Flandre was the student boat.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was a training ship?

IRVING PETLIN: No, it was a liner.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A liner?

IRVING PETLIN: It was a troop ship in World War II, and they turned it into a liner—an ocean liner.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: For tourists. And we went—there was like 90 percent Fulbright and students heading for Europe in 1959—September of 1959, and one percent or two percent or three percent first class passengers, you know, sitting in their little section. It was a—just a big party from leaving New York harbor to arriving in Le Havre, you know? First, we stopped in South Hampton. And, that's where I met Sarah, and we've been together ever since. 1959.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you spell the name of the vessel?

IRVING PETLIN: Le Flandre, was F-L-A-N-D-R-E. Flandre—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Flandre. Got you. Okay, interesting. So, renamed—so, it was—it was acquired by the French—

IRVING PETLIN: By the French as a reparation—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —as a reparation.

IRVING PETLIN: —as a reparation for—yeah. And they refitted it to become a tourist ship. And it was a fun trip, at that time. Very inexpensive, I think. To have a little cabin that you had to share was—and meals, three meals a day and party every night was like 175 dollars.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was it like a five or six-day voyage?

IRVING PETLIN: It was five days—wait, four nights and five days, or four days and five nights, I forget now. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, but—that's—

IRVING PETLIN: And good food, and it was really fun.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where you met?

IRVING PETLIN: Huh?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's where you and Sarah met?

IRVING PETLIN: That's where we met.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, wow. Terrific. What was your itinerary in Europe?

IRVING PETLIN: I was going to go to Paris to see friends and then go on to Venice—that was my idea. I was going to spend the year in Venice. I get to Paris. I have met Sarah. I find Leon and Nancy, and my other friends; June Leaf. And I just couldn't leave. It just felt so good to me to be there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You must have known Dorothea Spire?

IRVING PETLIN: Very well.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah?

IRVING PETLIN: I had a show with her in Rue Dragon.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: And—and I decided to stay and delay my trip to Venice, and so forth. I had this big box of paints and materials and so forth, and I found this studio, uh, in what had been a German Army barracks during the occupation. And it was run by a kind of Paris mafia. And everything was all noir, you know? Under the table. And the rent was collected by a prostitute who would come—oh, you'd meet her at a certain—in front of a certain bakery, or she'd come to collect the rent. Nothing was ever sent through the mail or anything. And I had that place for three months until I painted myself out of it, I was just at a loss. I couldn't work there anymore. And Matta said, "I'll find you another studio." And he did. And that was on Rue Git-le-Coeur in—in Paris, off of Place Saint Michel. That's a medieval street—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: —Git-le-Coeur. Wonderful—I lived right in—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's right in the middle of this sort of tourist—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, and it was next to the Beat Hotel.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, no kidding. That's great. That's a terrific story. And what was the, uh, address or location of the barracks?

IRVING PETLIN: That was out towards, oh, Champ—it was in the 14th Arrondissement.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

IRVING PETLIN: It was out—uh, toward the edge of Paris, and it had—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: South?

IRVING PETLIN: —Southwest.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: West. Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. And—and it—Chatillon [ph] District.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Chatillon, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. And, Avenue Chatillon, yeah. And it was a, like, a—an open space where trucks could come in, and around it were these, uh, kind of Gerry-built houses, you know, where the German, uh, drivers, you know?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: It was an NCO barracks. You know. And each—each place had a window, big window, and a space about, you know, like here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Kind of a sliver. And I painted myself out of it in about three months. And four months maybe. And then I—I—luckily, Matta found this place for us, and Sarah and I lived in there. And it had a nice big room for painting with pretty good light.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long were you there?

IRVING PETLIN: About four years? Three years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: And I found a studio in the Marais, on Rue du Crussol, and that became my studio.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Rue de—?

IRVING PETLIN: Rue du Crussol.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Crussol.

IRVING PETLIN: C-R-U-S-S-O-L. Or maybe two Ls, I'm not sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I can look it up.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, no, it's interesting. Because, I think, you know, the geography is often an interesting component of these narratives.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And I'm not sure how often they enter—they're interesting to me, because I think there's a relationship between memory and place, you know?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. I have some really interesting photos of that studio, because it was a spectacular, uh, spectacular studio. Not in that it was fixed up, but it had these great skylights, because it had been part of a—it was a jewelry manufacturing, in that district of, near the Cirque d'Hiver.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Where all these little—uh—ateliers were making little things—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —you know, jewelries, and it had wonderful light and a big coal stove in the center, you know a big pole [ph], and in the winter, we filled it with coal, to the point that it was red hot. It threw a ring of warmth, but no more.

[They laugh.]

Anyway, uh—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At some point—at some point because—at some point I was reading that you had explored abstraction, briefly?

IRVING PETLIN: I did. When I was in the—a student at the Art Institute. First, I came classically prepared, academically too, and so forth—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And in my second year, I explored abstraction. Second year, into the beginning of the third year. For about a year and a half. And then I realized that I wasn't going to continue as an abstract painter. I was going to—I was going to be a figurative narrative painter. And I never, ever said there's any difference between abstraction and figuration. It's a false difference. It's a false dichotomy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Someone quoted the late Andrew Forge, and I'm probably paraphrasing, and he, you know, he was a witty guy, and he said that, "In a sense, all figuration is illustrative and all abstraction is decorative." And that he should just get over it, you know?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—and—

IRVING PETLIN: No, my thing that I—I always said was that, "There is no such thing as abstraction. There is—there—in the sense that we—we—all painting is abstraction—"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course.

IRVING PETLIN: "—and all painting is—is fig—is—it's just that this has been taught so badly, that the seam between those two is invisible, in so many different cases."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But there were so many strident attempts to—

IRVING PETLIN: Of, yes. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —delineate a boundary between them.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, Greenburg did his work well, until he got—until he got dumped, you know? But he did his work well, he said, "There is no such thing as anything but abstraction."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And then he said, "Anything that tries to represent anything is wrong, and completely wedded to the past. Only—only pure abstraction is—" He went to India on a State Department—speaking of propaganda.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: I'll tell you a story.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Please.

IRVING PETLIN: If you want.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We're here to collect stories.

IRVING PETLIN: Okay. Greenburg, at the height of his fame—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —as the spokesman for Abstract Expressionism for—was sent on a State Department tour of various places. In Chicago, my first collector was a man named Sam Koffler, who went to India at a very early point after World War II, and began to import cocoa matting—cocoa mat, from Kerala. Because—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: For architecture, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: —cocoa matting, not for architecture. For road building. He knew that America would build roads, and tar—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh.

IRVING PETLIN: —can only be taken off the rollers with cocoa matting. To keep the rollers free of—so he went, and he became quite a successful business man importing cacao matting for the rollers that were building the roads. So, he was in Delhi on one of his trips, when he heard that Greenburg is going to be speaking. And so, he wanted to go see him. It was a hall—enormous hall. There were, Sam said, about 2,000 art—Indian art historians of various kinds, eager to hear the lecture by the great American critic. He said, the stage had two American flags on it, and the curtain parts, and Greenburg emerges. And he starts telling these 2,000 art historians—Indian art historians, there's no such thing as any other art that means anything except what's going on in America today. Abstract Expressionism has eliminated all other kinds of art. Well—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: —the tone, Sam said, began to rise. The temperature. And then they rushed the stage. And two marines, in uniform, appeared from behind the curtains, grabbed Greenburg, and hustled him out. They wanted to tear him apart.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh. Sure.

IRVING PETLIN: They hustled him out, to a car protecting him. Two marines, Sam said. He says, "I didn't know they were there, even." That was what happened to Greenburg on his India tour. And I don't know what year this was. But, it was at the height of his fame.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In—infamy.

IRVING PETLIN: Infamy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But another critic, younger generation—I won't name her—said that Greenburg was, and this sort of confirms it, was in the pay of the CIA, State Department, USAI. You're nodding your head. And she said also, that he—privately, his own work, looked like a poor version—it looked like—the less talented brother of—de Noye de Zagon Zacher [ph], someone like that—

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —did these sorts of cute landscapes.

IRVING PETLIN: Yes, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And that, meanwhile, his public face is as a great, strident polemicist—

IRVING PETLIN: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —as a sort of super-hyper—

IRVING PETLIN: Yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —formalist. You know, the top of the food chain—

IRVING PETLIN: Yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the ultimate achievement—

IRVING PETLIN: Yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —in art. And privately, of course, he's—

IRVING PETLIN: Something else.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Noodling away at these hopeless little landscapes.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're smiling. It's a funny—it's—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. No, no, it's exactly right. Exactly right. We lived in the West Village, in the—when we came back from France, in 1966. I went, first to Los Angeles to teach at UCLA, in 1964. We came back from France, Sarah and I. And, we went to Los Angeles, I was asked to be a visiting artist with Richard Diebenkorn.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And Llyn Foulkes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And—and I forget now who the—and that's when the Vietnam issue became, really, a part of my life. And it was—it was when we—I mean, that's a whole other chapter we could—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We could talk about that next time.

IRVING PETLIN: Next time, because that's a very complicated—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is 1966, right?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, this is in the middle of the Johnson presidency.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The Great Society, keep America beautiful, meanwhile—

IRVING PETLIN: Vietnam is—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. The war is—

IRVING PETLIN: Yep. Yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —escalating in Vietnam.

IRVING PETLIN: But we can do that at our next session?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, I think so.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I wanted to ask you a couple of things about your own work, I mean, how—how did you find the medium of pastel?

IRVING PETLIN: That was in France. First of all, you know I—as I explained earlier, I had fallen in love with the work of Redon—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —and admired the work of crystalline nature of the kind of imagery that—that pastel could produce. And what I—what I remember is Sarah and I were—we had a great friend, the philosopher Rachel Jacobs, who was a student of Lichtenstein, who had a little house in the south of France, near—near Aix-en-Provence. And she said, "On your way to Italy—" we were going to do this little trip to Italy—"come and stay with us—stay with me for a few days, that would be really nice. I'm on a little tiny canal, and I've a little house, and it would be really nice for you to spend some time with me before you go on to Italy." And I said, you know, if we

stop in, I'm going to bring some materials with me to work with Sarah. And we rented a tiny little car, a Vespa 400, which is like a sardine can on four wheels, tiny, and I put a roll of paper and some pastels. Because I thought that was the easiest to bring with me, easiest to work with. And I knew that if I'm going to the South of France, I want to have something to make color with. Not just black and white.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right.

IRVING PETLIN: So, I packed some pastels, and we went and stayed at Rachel's. And then, from Rachel's, went on to Arles. And I started working on pastels at Rachel's in the pig house. She had white-washed a little pig house. And it was clean and there was a nice big table there. But when we got to Arles, we were on—we had a hotel room, and there was a terrace. And the terrace looked down on the bull ring of Arles.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And they were rehearsing, they were practicing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: And I started doing the rehearsals of the bulls and the people and pastel was perfect. Suddenly, the material, the dust, the heat, the—the color of the—of the people all came together in this kind of unforeseen unity of imagery. And I then said, "My God, the pastel is quite a material." And so, that's when it started in 1960.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: My first pastels were done in Arles, and I went on to, when we got back to Paris, after this long trip, began to really use pastel as a major medium, not as a sketching medium.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: But as a major medium. And, it's been with me ever since.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's interesting how so many landmarks in the history of art, the history of—of individual artist's work or the history of art, in general, are sort of events where something backs up into a—a condition or an environment where something becomes possible. Like, I was speaking with a friend of mine, he's an architectural historian, and we were talking about, you know, the verticality of—of art in New York, especially, post-war New York. Why did painting become the top art form post war?

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—and why not all of these other new forms that had come out of modernism, you know? Performance, and Duchamp, and ready-mades, and collage, and merits-bound [ph] and all this stuff. Why back to painting, you know? And—and—

IRVING PETLIN: Scale.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Scale, but it was also that the major industry of New York, the major economy here, apart from high finance, is real estate. That of course, they're building more walls, and you've got to put stuff on the walls. And he said, that's exactly what happened with Impressionism. It was—it was the right size, you could paint in the field, it was large enough to be a—an object of conspicuous consumption, and you had Haussmann had just rebuilt Paris—

IRVING PETLIN: Paris. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so, there it was all about the wall—so, having this kind of—kind of, like, conversation, or why the Venetians paint on canvas, I mean, it's a maritime city, there's plenty of canvas around.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, it's not always the lofty artistic idea that—

IRVING PETLIN: No, there are all kinds of issues that come into play.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But—but for you it was this very tactile—

IRVING PETLIN: Tactile, the combination of those factors coming together in Arles, just made the pastels seem the inevitable material for me. In any question of dust, heat, light, that was the material. Instantly. This is not to say that, in painting, at various times have I not played with all those elements.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: But in pastel, it's more direct. Immediate. And it has a—it has a way of arriving at great risk. There's no going back. Once you commit yourself in a pastel, there's no going back.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, especially if you're putting pastel on, like, raw canvas.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, one can, and if one looks at—

IRVING PETLIN: I just have a cramp—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, sorry.

IRVING PETLIN: —I'm just going to stretch my leg out. Yep.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Degas, or—or Maurice Quentin de La Tour, whatever, and you look at their work really closely, you can see that they've taken razor blade here and there—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and sort of scraped it down to the paper.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But, I mean, it's limited what—what kind of back stepping is possible in that medium. It—not much.

IRVING PETLIN: No, there's almost none.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Almost none. And the thing is, when you begin to enjoy that risk, it—it heightens the whole process, in other words.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: It's not—it's not the—it's not the pleasure of gambling. It's the pleasure of arriving at something without—without losing it, you see.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: It's a activity against loss, you see.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's beautiful; "An activity against loss." Well, it's a knowing that—knowing that it's got this fragility, and at the same time this compelling physicality—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and that there is a certain kind of—um, struggle between, uh, sort of, the exploration that leads you to the opportunity then to make synthetic choices, that are going to pull the whole thing together.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is—you really need to be very much engaged, watching this thing evolve—

IRVING PETLIN: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —with every mark. Is that true, would you say?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, yeah. No, I just—she's playing with the wire.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The cat—this is actually a great time to pause, because we're at 90 minutes.

IRVING PETLIN: Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so, let's pause.

IRVING PETLIN: Okay.

[END OF PETLIN16_SD_1OF1_TRACK01]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We're resuming with Irving Petlin on Tuesday, the 13th of September, 2016. During the pause, we were talking a little bit about other aspects of your time at Yale, and I had asked you if you had had any direct contact with Bernie Chate. Because, you know, I would have imagined that he would have been sympathetic to your use of imagery, and you shared that you were not really in contact with him.

[phone ringing.]

IRVING PETLIN: My phone.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's fine.

IRVING PETLIN: [Inaudible]. Hello?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Pausing.

[Audio break.]

IRVING PETLIN: —and the specific was Bernie Chate, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Bernie Chate, and you had no real direct contact.

IRVING PETLIN: I had no contact with Bernie Chate directly; I never took a class with him. He may have known of me, I'm certain he was aware of me, but we never had any real contact when I was at Yale. And I understand that was odd, because he would've supposedly liked the fact that I was a painter of narratives.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yes.

IRVING PETLIN: But we never had any contact. The only person I studied with at Yale was Josef Albers.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was Albers.

IRVING PETLIN: And beyond Albers, the things that interested me were art history.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And I did take several graduate courses in the art history department. One was with Helmut Wohl in early Christian art, and it was during that time with Helmut Wohl that he gave us a significant problem as a kind of course-ending project, put together an altarpiece that had been broken up and distributed, and I chose—because the Yale gallery had the two Sassetta panels.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: I had chose to find the altarpiece that those Sassettas came from. And he said, "That's impossible, choose another project. The scholars have been trying to do that for a long time." I decided to go ahead. I went into the archives at Yale, looking at altarpiece after altarpiece until I found in Germany what I thought was an altarpiece that could have been the main altarpiece for the Sassetta. They were the Prédelle that are—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, at the bottom.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They were yeah, the Prédelle.

IRVING PETLIN: And I—the?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Prédelle.

IRVING PETLIN: Prédelle. [Laughs.] Anyway, I put it together, and I found other pieces and I brought it to our class when we were meeting for the presentation. And he said, "I don't think it's—but it's quite good, but it's not possible to be the actual altarpiece." Later I discovered he published an article in Burlington Magazine, in which he took credit for putting that thing together.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, college professors are paid so poorly—

IRVING PETLIN: Poorly! [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —they should get some compensation from their students, beyond.

IRVING PETLIN: I was listed as a research assistant in the reconfiguration of the Sassetta.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How generous.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. The other thing I did was study with Mr. Herbert, French Revolution—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, Robert Herbert.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, Robert Herbert.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, he was a big lefty, and in fact—

IRVING PETLIN: Oh, I liked him a lot, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —when he came to the art school, he would refuse to drink anything but Hull's Export or some very cheap beer, and he was—yeah, he was fascinating.

IRVING PETLIN: I studied 19th century French painting with him.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And it was a great course. And, you know, "Liberty Leading the People" was really the emblem of that class. [Laughs.] The other thing I did was, the house I rented on Orange Street had two floors, and I lived with a pianist from the music school who I had invited to share the house with.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: He also came with very little funds, and this was a way for us to economize. And we rented the top floor to some directors from the drama school, and they threw parties almost every night, and always invited us, and said come up, you know, for your free, you know. And one night I went up, and a director came up to me, he said, "We're doing readings for the next play at the Yale theater, and I want you to come and read, here's the script." Rubio, in the Garcia Lorca *Blood Wedding*.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: So, I said, "okay." I went downstairs, I read it, I showed up, I got the part.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long were you treading the boards?

IRVING PETLIN: It was like a week of performances.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's a lot of work for an artist.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, I know, but the first time—the first night, I was in a total panic. I'd never done this before, I had completely forgotten my lines, I thought I didn't know a thing, and I'm standing there waiting to go onstage. And I walk out, and it all comes back to me. I think it was four nights that it was performed, and it was well received, and I was called quite a decent actor, not bad, you know.

[They laugh.]

IRVING PETLIN: And I was approached by another director who wanted me to read for his play that was coming up next, and then I confessed, I'm not in drama school, I'm in the art school studying with Albers.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then they kicked you out, right?

IRVING PETLIN: No, no they still invited us to the parties.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good, that's good. Well, you had a good house for social events, yes.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, I mean, I hardly participated, because we were so busy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: We had so much work to do. And then I was also part of the group that—this was the year that The Lighted Schoolhouse, part of Lyndon Johnson's attempt to bring a social program to ghettos, it's called The Lighted Schoolhouse Program. It was passed by Congress and funded, where they would take a schoolhouse in a ghetto area, and turn it into a community center after school hours. They needed to staff the Dixwell school in New Haven.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Which was a notoriously difficult and murderous environment.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, the north end of town.

IRVING PETLIN: That's right. So they sent a flyer to be posted on all the graduate meeting boards, asking for volunteers to come and teach at the Dixwell school, and no graduate school volunteered except the art school. And the music school, literature, religion, nobody volunteered except the art school.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: And a group of us went and we set up an afterschool program without ever—none of us ever having done anything like that before. We were advised by the director to get a junky car, they'll help us buy it, because to go on public transportation to Dixwell at that time was too dangerous.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Show up with your junky car, come together, and leave together. It was really dangerous. And we ran a program there, and it was very successful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, a rattletrap car that no one would steal.

IRVING PETLIN: Steal, or think there was anybody worth stealing from in it, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right, right.

IRVING PETLIN: And the program was—went very well, this was a terrible moment in New Haven for crime. The black kids were just in the worst possible way, drugs were rampant, and violence was everywhere. And we did this for a year, and they were so grateful, the directors of the program. And then, I think two years later, or maybe even a year later, it was defunded by Congress. It was too successful. When it worked, it was tried—it was just tragic.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well it's like now, the whole, you know, conversation between STEM and STEAM, you know, in the cautious optimism of a lot of people towards the Every Child Achieves Act, which is a reauthorization of another Johnson era initiative.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Can you recall any of the names of the other people of the art school who were part of that program?

IRVING PETLIN: I can't, you know, I know we were four of us. There were none of my closest friends.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: There were three others, and the four of us went.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you remember which studio area, they were in sculpture, graphic design, or—

IRVING PETLIN: I think two were in sculpture, and one must have been in graphic design, because I think one of them ran the carpentry shop, and one of them ran, you know, we sort of set up a kind of an off-the-cuff program, just quickly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: I taught a kind of class in creative arts and drawing, and one of them did something with music, but he was a musician in the art school, and I don't remember who he was. But it was what we did for a living, because they paid us. I thought we were volunteering, it actually created a salary for us, and it was quite a good salary for what we were doing. I mean, it was not nearly enough for what we were doing, but it was a good salary at that time for doing anything.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you said you knew the painter Robert Birmelin? You know Robert?

IRVING PETLIN: Yes, I do. We knew each other over the years, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But was he at Yale at the same time?

IRVING PETLIN: He wasn't at Yale at the time that I was there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was—was he earlier, later?

IRVING PETLIN: I was there from '56-'57.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: '56-'57.

IRVING PETLIN: And I don't recall—I knew Robert Birmelin, and I think he may have been there one part of that time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He might have been overlapping a little bit later.

IRVING PETLIN: Overlapping, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because he said that—in a private conversation that I had with him—he was talking about how when he was there it was sort of, the folk music scene was heating up, and they would have these hootenanny type events, but that was—

IRVING PETLIN: I wasn't part of that, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There's another artist named Tom Cornell who was allegedly a trained opera singer, who horrified everybody by performing "They Call the Wind Maria" at one of these folk music gatherings.

IRVING PETLIN: It wasn't my time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I was, I guess, thinking maybe who was that musician in the art school?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, I don't remember, you know, the strange thing is I don't remember. I know we went together, we came back together, we saw each other on the way and on the way home.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what was the outcome of, you know, the program, how was it received?

IRVING PETLIN: The program was received at first very heavily by the kids. They were, like, still in their gang mode, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Then little by little, within three or four months, they were all busy doing stuff and the violence level went down.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And the program director was a very elegant black gentleman from Washington D.C. who was really a terrific organizer, and he was a wonderful moderator of disputes, he knew how to ease the way. And he was plenty ghetto-smart as well as elegant, you know. And I'm trying to remember his name because I liked him a lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And he was the principal of Dixwell?

IRVING PETLIN: He was the director of the program, The Lighted Schoolhouse Program, at Dixwell in '56-'57.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Interesting that there would be that kind of program that early on.

IRVING PETLIN: That was an early attempt to do something.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That would have been still in the Eisenhower administration.

IRVING PETLIN: You know, I'm not sure who was president at the time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It would have been Eisenhower.

IRVING PETLIN: You'll have to check that out, because I somehow thought it was Johnson, but of course it couldn't have been Johnson.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That would have been the '60s, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: No, it would have been '60s.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Eisenhower. Interesting, interesting.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I was unaware of that. A couple of questions back to your studio practice and your use of pastel. To what extent did you rely on direct observation for your material? You were talking about observing the, you know, the bullfight in Arles.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of course, in Arles they don't kill the bulls.

IRVING PETLIN: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They just sort of—

IRVING PETLIN: In the early stages of my involvement with pastel, I took a lot from where I was, south of France.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Paris. When I returned to Paris, the kind of mood. As I became more proficient in pastel, I needed less and less of the observation, and more of the invention. And they became—they went through a period of intense invention, without, seemingly, reference as if we were in a dream state. And then, more recently, they've gone back to being very—I did a series of pastels which are based on the rooftops outside my window in Paris.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: The rooftop becomes like a musical score, and I did Bach, "Final Fugue", all 18 of them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: Each one using the roof as a kind of musical score.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the rooftops of urban spaces are interesting.

IRVING PETLIN: Oh yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because they're very much like coral reefs.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or organic geological accidents where, you know, walking down the street you have this highly organized, intentional space, the presentation of the building to the pedestrian, but on the rooftop, it's—

IRVING PETLIN: Yes, and I also did in the series on the French poet Edmond Jabés, I did a street in Paris over and over again, the roofs in Étienne du Mont.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Which is the street he came upon, when he was exiled from Egypt and came to Paris, he came upon. And that street became a big part of the imagery around the Jabés series.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was the name of the street again?

IRVING PETLIN: Étienne du Mont. Rue Étienne du Mont. Étienne du Mont, it's right next door to the church, it's almost like the back alley of the church. And that was done—now you could get that catalogue, it was the show I did with Jan Krugier in Geneva, and that show is—the catalogue was quite beautiful and filled with the architecture of Paris. The other time that I have used the architecture, apart from the rooftops, was when I did a series called *Multitvarity*, which had to do with the vineyard, the landscape of the vineyard, and Italy in a sense of kind of coming together of Tuscany perhaps, and Martha's Vineyard. The whole *Multivarity* series was like we're somewhere in between those two places.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At that time, as you were exploring pastel, which I mean, in a way is like watercolor, it was not—I mean when Turner turned watercolor into a major medium for artists, it was sort used by mapmakers, and military topographers, and chorographers, and ladies and aristocrats painting things for pleasure or whatever.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Botanical illustration.

IRVING PETLIN: Yes, and medical illustration, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, all that interesting art form, I was just in CUE two weeks ago, and the—

IRVING PETLIN: The Turner watercolors are beautiful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: The watercolors he did on the tour of Italy.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Fabulous.

IRVING PETLIN: Fabulous because they're all this big, and you know, the box he carried with him in a carriage is about this big. I mean, it's amazing, what he did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But he was able to elevate something that was not really an artistic medium.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not taken seriously as an artistic medium, into you know, high art. You could say the same with people like Rosalba Carriera, La Tour, Étienne Liotard, people like that.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then of course, later Degas.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But for you, were there any other artists out there whom you discovered, who were kind of making a similar leap? I think about maybe someone like R.B. Kitaj.

IRVING PETLIN: Kitaj would be the one I'd say.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Kitaj took pastel—we were friends, we were good friends, very close friends, and we knew each other for all that time, from 1961 on. Kitaj to me was one of the really great post-war draftsmen, graphic draftsmen, in both the emotional and technical sense. The emotional line was so rich, he could say things, he had a voice in his—when he added color and pastel, that voice grew louder and louder, and more touching and tragic often.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: He and I shared a lot of things during that period. I visited with him in London, and he came when we were here. We remained good friends, and he's the only one that I could say transformed pastel into this, really a very big voice that could equal his paintings, you know, easily.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right.

IRVING PETLIN: Equally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And some really humorous work, some really erotic work, some really tragic work. I think of this portrait he did of John Ford on, you know, death bed.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: An interesting subject because John Ford claimed to have seen Winslow Homer painting on the rocks, because he was from Portland, Maine.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: John Feeney, Irish guy from Portland, Maine.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, this whole kind of, you know, intertwining of cinema and painting and so forth. I'm trying to think of other artists who kind of also had a powdery painting aesthetic, I think about Francis Bacon, in a way.

IRVING PETLIN: Francis Bacon?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Bacon at various times, not in the last works, but at various times, especially in the pope series —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —the paint became—it could have been pastel.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Because it developed a crystalline powderiness because of the speed with which he was applying it and the surface, the black surface receiving it was absorbing the oil immediately out of the pigment, thus leaving this crystalline structure. That's why they were covered in glass initially by marble.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Because they were fragile, the surface was fragile, because that surface absorbed the oil very quickly, and the way he put it on was so tentative and at sometimes forceful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: I mean those pictures are like, yes they're like that. The other painter in the world who I think transformed material was Antonio López García, who I think was the greatest realist painter of our time. I don't know if you—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm well acquainted with his work.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I visited him also, and I could not speak the same language, he doesn't speak anything but Spanish, but his daughter would sit—when she was just a teenager—would sit between us, and she knew the language of the studio so well that we could speak to each other through her as if we're talking to each other. It was amazing. I proposed to Betsy at *Art in America*, when he had his retrospective, that she send Max to cover it, and she said, "But he's not an American." I said, "It's a rare painter we should introduce to America." And she gave the commission to Max, and Max and I met in Madrid, and we spent days looking at López García, and Max wrote a wonderful article in America on López García. And I brought Max to his studio, and we had that same experience with his daughter. That was a wonderful moment for both of us, because we had time spent together in Spain. Neither one of us spoke Spanish, so we were dependent on each other [laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, I imagine by now you're pretty at ease with French, I would think.

IRVING PETLIN: I'm pretty at ease with French, but I'm not a French speaker, my wife is, she really speaks beautiful Parisian. I don't have a language facility, but I can get by, you know, I've been to some medical stuff, and I've been able to get through all of it in French, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well that's what—I mean, you really need to understand what you're being told when it comes to subjects like that, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Sometimes, no but I rarely don't know what's, yeah. And if I need help, Sarah's very helpful. She has a tremendous ear for language. We go to Italy and she starts speaking Italian.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: An idea that's beginning to take shape, for me at least, is that you know, that you came from Chicago, you sort of came up through this community of peers, of other artists who were working at the art institute, and you know, your teachers at that point were not so important. As you said, it was more the comradery, it was also a place that had a rich and long history in representational painting and imaginative painting.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You know, an all bright, a monstrous school. And you know, the genesis, you know, of Hairy Who later, and other things like that.

IRVING PETLIN: Later, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But all this kind of away from the center, the center being at that time of course—

IRVING PETLIN: New York, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —New York, and Abstract Expressionism. And then, your attraction to, you know, a place where R.B. Kitaj—Ron Kitaj—and like Lucien Freud, and Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach, all these guys, you know sort of, again they're sort of off in their own world, the role that Matta played in your awareness of art.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: These are all people who are kind of—not really marginal, but they were independent of what we were all told at one point in time was—

IRVING PETLIN: The canon.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The canon.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, exactly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So out of the canon.

IRVING PETLIN: I'm out of the canon.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: That's a good way of putting it. Because Max Kozloff, when he wrote about, says it somewhat similar. "You persist," he said [laughs]. For example, I took some photographs of trees in Paris, and he said, "Look at these photographs you took. It's Atget, there's nothing modern about them, but they're beautiful."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right, well if Atget were alive today, you know, what would he be—

IRVING PETLIN: What would he be photographing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: He would have had perhaps the same eye, but a different toolkit.

IRVING PETLIN: I don't see anybody—can we interrupt for a moment?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well I think we're at—it's now 5:00, perhaps this would be a good time to pause.

IRVING PETLIN: Okay, I'll get the door.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

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JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney speaking with Irving Petlin at his home in New York on Thursday, the 15th of September, 2016. Good morning.

IRVING PETLIN: Good morning.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, as we were warming for this, we were talking about a number of things you were—you were enumerating the other artists who were at work, of course, names everybody knows today. People like—in the Bay area, people like Nathan Oliveira, Manuel Neri, Elmer Bischoff, David Park, Joan Brown. What was the nature of your contact with them? You said you had more contact with Bischoff.

IRVING PETLIN: Bischoff, I had the most contact with. This is a period that I was in the Army, but three at night [ph] and took a room in the Monkey Block and Elmer Bischoff and Frank Lobdell and a number of painters had studios in the building. So, I had a lot of contact with—the most contact in terms of a painter in San Francisco with Elmer Bischoff, because he also worked at night and when I finished my day at the Presidio, I bicycled into North Beach—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —and sometimes late at night he'd tap on my door or I'd stop by his studio, and we'd have a cup of tea in the middle of the night.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And he was painting beautifully at that time. It was a great period of his work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, the other painters, like, Joan Brown and Park or—you would maybe encounter them in a social context?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, social context or a thing they're working in the galleries, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —not personally. The most personal with Elmer Bischoff, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what was that dialogue like? Was there any memorable conversation?

IRVING PETLIN: Well, Bischoff was painting these magnificent and romantic figurative paintings at the time. Sort of like tidal waves of color and I had come from another kind of figuration and we were comparing the two origins of the Chicago, sort of, imaginary world that had developed out of a kind of European bias. And his was definitively a West Coast in the sense that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How would you characterize that? What was, or—let me rephrase that. How would you characterize your perception at the time of what that meant?

IRVING PETLIN: At the time, I was—I was looking at Elmer Bischoff as a kind of wonderful romantic painter who reminded me very much of European painting of the 19th century and, you know, early 20th century in the sense that landscape and figure were involved in a kind of flow that was quite beautiful at the time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Some kind of Arcadian—

IRVING PETLIN: Arcadian—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: —flow. I was painting, at that time, the Battle of the Philippine Sea. A kind of harsh memory of World War II and pictures that I showed eventually at the Dilexi Gallery where the cover was much more of a Surrealist interest in dialogue with what I sensed was going on in Europe. I was very anxious to get to Europe and San Francisco was the period I had to serve in order to get my passport, in order to leave. I had already determined that I was going to Europe.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You had explained that on Tuesday—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —that you received a Ryerson Grant, but you couldn't use it because the Selective Service had other plans for you. [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: They did. It turned out—it turned out those plans were pretty interesting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it was interesting too that as you told us the other day that it gave you a chance to peruse now destroyed records of the Holocaust that had been—that had been compiled by the Allies and earlier too, you had—you had shared how, as a kid, you had like, followed the war very closely. So, we never got into

that in detail, but now that you say you did a painting of the—of the Battle of the Philippine Sea, were you more interested in the war in the Pacific or in Europe?

IRVING PETLIN: It happened sort of spontaneously. I don't know even why how coincidental it was, was my being on the West Coast, I don't know. Several pictures at that period were a kind of retrieval of naval childhood—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: May I ask you to—excuse me a moment. Can I ask you to just to—

IRVING PETLIN: Bring it closer?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Raise that—yeah, the mic up a little bit. Maybe you can try to pin it sort of halfway between where—yeah, there you go.

IRVING PETLIN: How's that?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Say again?

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, that's better—that's better.

IRVING PETLIN: Can you hear me better? Yes, oh, good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay, so—but—so perhaps being on the West Coast inspired you to retrieve more memories or home front experiences of the war in the Pacific.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. It was the period in which I met Robert Duncan and Jess, whose work had much more of a connection to my work than almost any other artist at the time. And it was later when I had—in the '60s when I was showing with the Odyssia Gallery in New York that I encouraged them to go see Jess' work and they fell in love with Jess' work and brought him out of his obscurity into the New York scene. And I remained very close to Jess all during his life and similarly with Robert Duncan also. The men who wrote so much about me, Michael Palmer, the poet, was Duncan's colleague and so there was a very strong connection between those three. There was no—there was no stronger connection in San Francisco than my connection to Jess, probably.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And Elmer Bischoff a little bit.

IRVING PETLIN: And Bischoff, during the time that I was actually there in the Army, yes, very much.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But not—that wasn't a durable—

IRVING PETLIN: No, it didn't go beyond, but I followed his—I always—there were about where he was going and on a visit later in the '60s to—when I returned from Europe, I was teaching at UCLA. I think I saw Elmer Bischoff once or twice on trips to San Francisco, but it was—it was that intense moment in the Monkey Block that we had real contact.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you moved—so you moved to Paris and then you begin—I mean, eventually begin exhibited it at the Galerie du Dragon, right.

IRVING PETLIN: Galerie du Dragon.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And in some of the biographical material that I was able peruse, it—there—that you're described as having influenced the movement known as—

IRVING PETLIN: Nouvelle figuration.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Nouvelle figuration and like, looking at the list of artists associated with that movement, there are only a couple that leap off the page. I guess one would be Garrett Boselet [ph] being—Baselet [ph] being more well-known today, but at the time, I don't know if he was—

IRVING PETLIN: We had no contact at the time, no. No, the people who—who began to recognize that there was another kind of painting going on in the United States other than New York, was the people around the Galerie du Dragon and that little circle. Matta was a member of the Galerie du Dragon, as was Ciggy [ph] and some other Latin American artists. And they were delighted when the Galerie du Dragon did eight painters from Chicago and it was the first time any of these artists had appeared in Europe. It was Nancy Spero, Cliff Westermann, Robert Barnes, myself and it was an incredibly successful—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, Leon Golub was—

IRVING PETLIN: Leon Golub was—June Leaf, not Leon was in the show—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: June Leaf.

IRVING PETLIN: —Leon was already showing with Iris Clert in Paris and Nancy and Seymour Rosofsky, this group of Chicago artists had a tremendous impact on the scene and collectors from Belgium and France and Italy came to see the show. It was a—it was a stunning exhibition of a new kind of art had appeared on the European scene. It didn't last forever, but it was—its impact was during those years and the years were the early '60s.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Clert and his wife, Ciciarella [ph] unfortunately did not continue very long together. They had struggles and the gallery faltered because of it, but it had been a real pioneering venue for other kinds of art, other than what was beginning to become the canon. That period was a very lively period in Paris, in general. The Algerian War—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —of Independence was going on, everybody was involved. There were demonstrations constantly. There were posters—wall posters that became well-known as a kind of collective. I probably did, if you want to call it basic training in political activism watching and participating in the protests against the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —French occupation at that point of struggle against the independence of Algeria.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Very different political culture in France that, I mean, I witnessed. I never lived there for a sustained period of time, but I had been there once or twice during a presidential election and seeing, sort of, the royalist people with the blue and white face paint and the Communists and everybody out celebrating their point of view. It's very different from here. Here, it's all media circus, but you don't—

IRVING PETLIN: It's a media circus, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —see anything on the street the way you—

IRVING PETLIN: No, the streets are very important and the major demonstrations were signals back and forth between the 300 [ph] contending party. The divisions in France go back way before World War II in between left and right. The fracture that occurred with the Vichy government was only a result of a fracture of that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you have, you know, the Commune de Paris, right?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It was a—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —terrible event—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —in the history of the country.

IRVING PETLIN: But the—but the rise of a kind of right-wing in France predates World War II. It became—it became incredibly evident between the collaboration of certain—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —portion of France with the Nazis and the—and the resistance, and that division existed before the war and it—it followed the war in the period in France which was called—and that was the '50s and the '60s, the period of the Upveger [ph] when France kind of began to return itself and art began to really play a role in daily life culture and return and so forth. People were not wealthy, yet. There was still a lot of things that needed doing, but there was a joyous atmosphere of resistance to the authoritarianism—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —and at the same time, a joy in—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure there must have been still a lot of grudges and people knew who *les tondu* [ph] had been, you know—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and the, you know, the people who had been—had been in league with the occupation and I'm sure that those—

IRVING PETLIN: They carried right into the post-war—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, into—up until the end of those people's lives, I've no doubt.

IRVING PETLIN: And the division in France over support for the continuing—continuing, broke down finally into the OIS—the secret army. They were an insurrectional group on the right that wanted to overthrow the government because they—they began to assess [inaudible] and things like that. They became really quite a threat in France and so anytime something happened, there was a reaction. And the reactions got more violent and then they ended in the Métro Charonne, and I was there and I almost got killed there. I was with the philosopher, Richard Jacobs, the two of us had gone and we were very close to the front of the march when the police attacked with heavy clubs. The lead centered clubs—with lead inside—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, real skull cracking—

IRVING PETLIN: Skull-cracking crack and the skull cracking went on and seven people were killed and that was a kind of moment that was a—what we call today, a game changer. Because what happened following the Massacre Métro Charonne was that a demonstration was scheduled and several million people marched through Paris in silence carrying gigantic pictures of the people who had died. The police had disappeared. There were no helicopters in the sky. The police had deserted—they didn't want a confrontation. When the police desert Paris, it's a sign the government's changing its policy. And de Gaulle then opened the talks at [inaudible] to settle the Algerian conflict and that's when the OAS threatened to jump into France with parachutes. There was a real attempt for them to get into planes and come to Paris and take over the government.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So who were the players in OAS?

IRVING PETLIN: The players in the OAS were the old right wing—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The old right wing.

IRVING PETLIN: —again, the military and so forth and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Vichy and—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, the Vichyites.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ex-colonial, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: All of it, all of it, yeah. Because they considered Algeria France—it was part of—they called it Metropolitan France abroad, you know. And the night that the threat of a parachute drop on Paris, we were all in the streets. The buses in Paris were placed on all the bridges crossing all the bridges in Paris with the tires deflated and people were armed and ready for the paratroopers. They never arrived because Kennedy intervened and this could never be proven because I was no longer—had access to anything. I was no longer able to just—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You no longer had your top security clearance.

IRVING PETLIN: No [laughs], but the—but the rumor was from people that I knew was that Kennedy had told the French military that if you fly to France with the intention of overthrowing the de Gaulle government, we'll shoot you out of the skies—American planes will shoot you down. And they turned around and went back to Algeria. And that was the end of the—of that insurrection, but it continued in bits and pieces and de Gaulle did go on and create a—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, was there any kind of rendition of these right-wing whack jobs? Did people—

IRVING PETLIN: There was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —were they—did they have like car accidents and heart attacks and were they [laughs] were they gotten rid of?

IRVING PETLIN: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They're still—

IRVING PETLIN: No, they weren't gotten rid of, but they were dishonored and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But they're still sort of embodied in people like Ms. Le Pen and so forth.

IRVING PETLIN: That is exactly right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Correct.

IRVING PETLIN: There is a carryover that has never gone away and it will—as far as I can see, it will never go away.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's not yet Marie in the same way.

IRVING PETLIN: No, it's not Marie the same way because she's much smarter than her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen who was a real—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thug, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: —just an out and out fascist, a racist-fascist, an anti-Semite.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But there is also in France—there are also these sorts of folksy xenophobes like José Bové, you know, attacking a McDonald's and so forth, but that's all part of that, isn't it?

IRVING PETLIN: That's part of the same thing and those people are not killers. They're not, you know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, not yet [laughs].

IRVING PETLIN: No, but that's not been the pattern. There hasn't been that pattern. Like here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: You know, right wing assassination is not unusual, but it would be unusual if it came from the other side. And that's true there too.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: It was a period for me, painting-wise, it was—I had four shows in a row in Paris. Practically sold out exhibitions—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —with the Galerie du Dragon and I had made a place for myself in France. The collectors at that time came to Paris from everywhere, including the United States and many collectors came from Chicago because their connection to the Surrealists and to the post-Surrealists—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —was very strong and Galerie du Dragon was the center of a lot of activity.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How important or how much was your political activism part of your legend at that time, or was it part of your reputation?

IRVING PETLIN: Somewhat, because I had done—after the Métro Charonne massacre in which I had done a show called the Hundred Fighting Men—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —and that show went on to Italy. And that show was one of those shows that tied me directly to events on the ground, yes. And the other show was Men and Dogs, which was when the Birmingham—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —riots started, I did series of paintings which were shown in Paris just before I left to go back to the United States, which were about those being let loose on black protestors in Birmingham, Alabama. And that

was another show that connected me to a period, this time in the United States.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: When I left France, my wife, Sarah, really wanted us to stay. She—we had a decent enough life. I was selling paintings. We were happy [laughs], but I said I felt I couldn't miss what was coming in the United States, socially and politically. It wouldn't feel right to me to be in France. I decided we would go back and a promise was made to Sarah that I will bring you back to France, that we will live here again. It took me 28 years before I could [laughs]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you kept your promise.

IRVING PETLIN: —I kept my promise.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How were you aware of what was go—I mean, obviously, people were aware of what was going on in the United States with, you know, the marches—the early phases of the Civil Rights Movement. How closely were European artists following that?

IRVING PETLIN: Watching carefully and reacting—reacting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like right now, everybody's watching this—

IRVING PETLIN: Everybody's watching us now. You can be sure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: Especially after this last weekend.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: At the time, what I also knew and this was the subtext for my move back to the United States. Having experienced what happens to a country, when they fight an unjust war, I can see Vietnam coming, and I predicted to a lot of my friends, Leon and Nancy Spero and all of them because we were all there still in Paris. I said, "What's coming to the United States is what happened here with Algeria, except it'll be worse. And I'm going back. And we better be aware that this is coming." And I went back, took the offer at UCLA to go to L.A. and that's when the Artist Protest Committee started and that was the first grouping of artists against the war in Vietnam.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was John Weber and Virginia Dwan—

IRVING PETLIN: At the John Weber Gallery.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: I called a meeting and it was very curious. It was a premise started at a little dinner party at my house in Santa Monica down by the beach—in the beach area there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where were you living? Were you living in the Ocean Park area?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, in the Ocean Park, not far from Divengyer [ph] was, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I know well. Actually, I spent a summer on Frasier Avenue right there and that was—that was quite a little enclave, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: I had studio right there on the—right next to the water, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: There was a kind of series of commercial buildings before you got to the Ocean and some of them were abandoned and I had a big studio there. We had initially lived in Venice when we first got there in a little kind of—[laughs] run down little house, but eventually, we found a place in Santa Monica because we had at that time, our daughter—a little girl and we wanted her to be in a more safe area. And I had found a studio down in Venice on the beach and we had a dinner at the house and I said to the people who were there, I said, "Would it be possible for artists in L.A. who are into their nirvana to be concerned about what's coming—the war in Vietnam." And everybody said, "I doubt it," you know. So, I said, "I'm going to do an experiment. I'm going to call two people and see what the reaction is." And so, I called Craig Kauffman, who I expected to say, "Are you kidding?" On the contrary, Craig said, "I'd be very interested in doing something. I see what's coming." I called

Ed Kienholz, the second person at the other—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —end of what I thought would be the spectrum and I said, "Ed Kienholz, would you be interested in getting involved in helping to stop the Vietnam?" He said, "Are you kidding. I'll denounce you people." And I thought to myself, "There's no way of knowing who's going to join and who's not in L.A. And I called a meeting at the Dwan Gallery.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: At Dwan.

IRVING PETLIN: John Weber. And John Weber was very enthusiastic and a lot of people came. More than I expected and they did see that something was coming because all the preparations for the war that was coming were on the West Coast. Oakland, Long Beach—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: San Diego.

IRVING PETLIN: —San Diego.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Where the places where things were being prepared and troops were being trained to go to Vietnam. So, that's how the APC was born—the Artist Protect Committee and then Mark di Suvero joined and various other artists from L.A. and we had a group and we began the protest against the Vietnam War. UCLA was not very happy about all of this, but they never really tried to stop me because, in a way, I was a visiting artist. I wasn't part of the permanent faculty—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —and so forth. And Diebenkorn was also on the faculty, but he did not join in this.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What was his hesitation?

IRVING PETLIN: It wasn't hesitation. It was he just—it wasn't of interest to him, period. He was just involved with something else in his mind at the time—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —and it didn't—it didn't—Llyn Foulkes was there at the same time and it wasn't his thing also. It was hard to know who would join and would not and the surprises were—were very evident that you never could tell who would be interested in joining and who wouldn't.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In hindsight, were the adherence to a particular style of polemic more inclined to become involved?

IRVING PETLIN: No, it became so far across the board. Larry Bell, who is more finesse, surface, interior glass—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —boxes, he was a participant. Craig Kauffman—everybody who joined was a surprise, but it was interesting that we had a very good group to start with and we had the support of Phil Leider, who was then the editor of *Artforum*. He later became politically very right-wing, but at the time was very, very much of a help.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: There was Walter Hopps who was a very big help behind the scenes. There was a lot of really powerful people who said, "This is a good cause and if it's led by us, why not?" Eventually, the New York group participated because they were invited to send pieces to the tower. They organized in New York. That was Leon and Rudolf Baranik and Hans Haacke and all those people, but when we first started, we were the first to push into this territory. And we did several demonstrations in L.A. that had a kind of set of pattern for how artists could function in this world of America. One was something we called a White Out. We persuaded some dealers on La Cienega Boulevard to let us come one night, on a Monday night when everybody would be making this tour of La Cienega Boulevard, cover all the pictures in white drop cloths. It's a White Out. What would America be like if we withdraw our art and so forth and it was a very successful evening? A lot of the galleries participated. We did a series of events all of which were getting covered and noticed, but were not having the impact that we wanted. So, that's when we turned to the tower. The tower would be a physical object that attracted—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A rallying point.

IRVING PETLIN: —point. It would be visible day and night. It wasn't going to happen and disappear.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just a quick question. How many of the participant artists were veterans and were any of those in visuals with combat experience?

IRVING PETLIN: From World War II, you mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or Korea.

IRVING PETLIN: —or from Korea, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: There were a few, but they were not—there were not many, no. Kienholz, I don't know if he was a veteran, but he was very identified with the war in the Pacific. Did not participate and one threatened to come and shoot me, came onto the lot when the tower was going upon his—in his pickup truck. He got out of the cabin, he said, "Where's Irving Petlin?" And I said, "Here I am." And he said—changed his mind. He said, "I came here to defend your right to do this, but I'm not in agreement. [Laughs.] And he got in his pickup truck and left. It was very odd, who was a supporter and who was not.

The people who supported it, especially when the tower got built and paintings came from all over the world, you know, and the called—the call that we published was printed in four languages and it went out everywhere and we got a postcard from Sark [ph], I mean, not a postcard, but telegram from Sark and all the people—I mean, people poured from all over the world and it was the beginning of the struggle against the war in Vietnam. It later went more center—more centered in New York, but it started there. And Mark di Suvero was a crucial participant. When he joined in he said, "Let's do a—I'll do the—I'll do the tower." He was showing at that time with the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles. And he was there doing some work, so we collaborated and we've been friends ever since.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, he engineered the structure itself?

IRVING PETLIN: The structure itself—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, right.

IRVING PETLIN: —and then all the panels came and we built the walls and the lots and the—held the—held the tower together for four months.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, was there a kind of committee to decide what—which piece went where on the tower or was it just a haphazard—

IRVING PETLIN: It was haphazard, but we didn't lose a single painting in all that time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I did read where it was attacked the first night.

IRVING PETLIN: It was attacked a lot, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But what were the nature—what was the nature of the attacks? What was the nature of the attacks?

IRVING PETLIN: La Cienega Boulevard—Los Angeles has various jurisdictions in terms of policing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh yeah, where was it actually physically?

IRVING PETLIN: At the top of La Cienega Boulevard and Sunset.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, wow. I know that.

IRVING PETLIN: When La Cienega comes up—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —that's it. It was right there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was there an empty lot there?

IRVING PETLIN: There was an empty lot and we told the owner of the lot, I was the one that negotiated.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who owned the lot?

IRVING PETLIN: A Greek businessman—a Greek American who wanted to bring attention to his lot. He was trying to sell it, so I told him, "We're going to do an art event here. A lot of people will come and there'll be wonderful—people will come and see your lot." He said, "Great." And he rented it to us. And we had done exactly what we said we were going to do. We put art up there and a lot of people came, but it wasn't what he had in mind.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And today, that would be impossible. You need a million-dollar insurance policy and, you know—

IRVING PETLIN: I know [laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —but were any of those issues addressed. Was there insurance or—

IRVING PETLIN: No, we had—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —security or—

IRVING PETLIN: —there was security, but the security came voluntarily without our asking for it. It came from Watts.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, do tell, do tell.

IRVING PETLIN: Okay, what happened was we were attacked right away and we were not street fighters, but people were jumping over the wall and trying to get to the tower and, you know, we were pushing them away and so forth, but several of our people got hurt. Somebody lost his eardrum being kicked in the head by a marine, you know, one of the bases and so forth. We called the sheriffs. Sheriffs had jurisdiction over—over Sunset Boulevard, not the L.A. police. And the sheriffs were very right-winged. They hated what we were doing. They arrested the guy who got attacked and the—a couple of nights later, we had, in anticipation of being attacked, we rented a little office in a building adjoining like a hotel almost, residence. We rented a little office to watch and to photograph what was going to happen on the lot down below and on the second or third night after it was in the news that people had tried to attack, a bunch of really tough, black guys arrived from Watts and they said, "We'll stay here tonight." And they stayed all night and from then on, we never got attacked. They were there every night. Very tough black guys came on their own. We had—we had—we didn't pay them. We couldn't. We had no money to do that. We were raising money to get people out of jail who were being arrested unfairly by the sheriffs until finally, there was a very wonderful civil rights lawyer in L.A. who called me up and said, "Do you have a jacket and a white shirt and a tie?" And I said, "Yes." And said, "Get into it. I'm coming by in a half an hour to pick you up. We're going downtown." I knew who he was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You remember his name?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Sarah, do you remember the lawyer's name in L.A., the very wise guy?

SARAH PETLIN: [Inaudible] what lawyer? In reference to what?

IRVING PETLIN: In reference to the tower, the peace tower, where we went to visit the sheriff. A.L.—

Sarah Petlin: No, I've forgotten.

IRVING PETLIN: I've forgotten. Okay. Anyway, here's what he did. He was the leading civil rights lawyers in L.A. at the time. And he—he came by in a car and in the car, was a very distinguished man and we went downtown. We had a meeting—the sheriff was a Greek American at that time of L.A.—of the sheriff's police. In the car was the chief of the Supreme Court of Greeks—was the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Greeks. He had called the sheriff and said, "How would you like to meet the Supreme Court Justice of [inaudible]?" "Of course, I'd be so honored." Picked me up. We went in the car together. We entered the sheriff's office and the supreme—the Greek Supreme Court justice says to the sheriff, "How come you're not protecting these people? They're doing—they're exercising their constitutional right. Free speech." They immediately changed their policy. We were protected at that point. That was—can't remember his name, but he was so brilliant.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was there some kind of connection between the man who owned the lot and the—

IRVING PETLIN: The sheriff?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —no and, you know, the chief justice.

IRVING PETLIN: No, it was—it was the lawyer who knew he was visiting the United States and visiting L.A., called him up. Told him what was going on and said, "Can you help us out?"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's brilliant.

IRVING PETLIN: It was brilliant. It was brilliant. That's why he said, "You got a white shirt and jacket and a tie [laughs]?"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] So, it's interesting jurisdictional—

IRVING PETLIN: I can't remember his name, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —yeah, well, it'll—it's something that can be researched.

IRVING PETLIN: It'll come up. Yeah, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The jurisdictional issue of L.A.P.D. had jurisdiction over the lot and—

IRVING PETLIN: No, no. The sheriffs had jurisdiction over the lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Over the lot.

IRVING PETLIN: Because it was on—it was on Sunset Boulevard. They were—on Sunset Boulevard. La Cienega was L.A.P.D.—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

IRVING PETLIN: —up until—up until, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Then you're out of L.A. County at that point.

IRVING PETLIN: No, you're—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're in L.A. County.

IRVING PETLIN: You're in L.A. County, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're out of the city.

IRVING PETLIN: —the city, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Got you. Got you.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. It was really weird, but that's how it [inaudible].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, no, no. So, is it like right down the middle of the street, so it's the north side—

IRVING PETLIN: Right, it's something like that, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting.

IRVING PETLIN: That was brilliant move and if his name comes back to me, I'll get back to you, but he was pro bono. He never asked for anything from us for any reason and he stepped in quite a bit during the period that we had the tower.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And—

IRVING PETLIN: We also had the help of several women who volunteered, who showed up—they were—one was the widow of one of the Hollywood 10 writers and she started fundraising for us. We had all kinds of help. It was a wonderful kind of outpouring of the good part. The more humane part of that culture out there, and there were plenty of people like that. The Center for Constitutional Rights in Pasadena—when we couldn't renew the lease. We had rented it for four months and they wanted us out, you know, the tower. The Center for Constitutional Rights in LA, there was a well-known collector, Jans, who was part of the—he was on the board of the center and Walter Hopps were working to get the Center for Constitutional Rights to take the tower by helicopter, literally,

you know. And bring it there as a permanent monument. And they had to turn it down because they were a tax-free organization and they could not participate in the political issue openly. And they had to—even though they all wanted to do it but the law of their tax status would change if they took the tower.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Could they argue that it was a work of art and that it had been purpose-built for four months and then after that four months it was there hither to a work of art?

IRVING PETLIN: I'm sure they thought of that but it didn't work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They probably tried everything.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, they tried everything. Anyway, we had to dismantle the tower, and Mark di Suvero came up with this idea that for all the people who worked on the tower, what we'll do is, with a special machine he knew, we will make pillows out of the metal—out of the aluminum. He cut them on both sides and created a pillow and passed out the pillows to all the—so we all have a pillow of the tower. A little—about this big section of the tower. And that ended. I left LA at that time and went to New York and began to be—participate in the activities in New York. The Art Workers' Coalition, The Artists and Writers, and so forth. I rejoined my old friends from Chicago like Leona and Nancy and—'66 is when I returned from LA and lived from '66 to '90 in New York City. In this studio that we're in right now, is where I did most of the big pictures that I did over that period. I was showing with the Odyssia Gallery at that time and I brought Jess to the gallery and from Odyssia I went on to show a great deal in Europe again, but through them—through Rome.

And a lot of my pictures are in Italian collections still. And I continued to work with the remnants of the Gallery du Dragon at that time, but it was very difficult. They had split the—divorce was terrible—it was a terrible kind of breakup of the gallery. And at a certain point I was invited to join Marlborough Gallery by Kitaj, and that was a period of six years. And then I, when Doug Walla left the Marlborough Gallery, I decided to go with him into his new gallery. I wasn't comfortable at Marlborough. In one sense, it was so completely money oriented towards, you know, selling was the only—it stabilized our life because I had two young children at the time and I had an income that was reliable and it was good for the years I was there. It really gave us a little bit of a foundation. But I decided when Doug left, because that's who I worked with at Marlborough was Doug Walla, I decided to go and leave. And I joined Kent and I've been with him ever since.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long have you been with Kent?

IRVING PETLIN: Since 1986 to the present. And I also, at that time, when I got to Europe in 1990, became—I went under contract for Europe with the Young [inaudible] Gallery in Geneva, which was a great gallery and I had a contract there. That was a very stable period; the period from 1990 on to about five, six years—when [inaudible] died, the gallery closed. That was a very long, very fruitful period. I worked very well and did a number of important exhibitions around World War II. Starting with *Primo Levi*, I did a series of pastels based on the periodic table. There was a time when there was attempts to keep all of it together for the new museum that was opening in New York, The Holocaust Museum. And it was determined that because of my opposition to the occupation of the Palestinians, that I wasn't fit to be in that museum. I was a—I taught in Israel at Haifa University for a summer and I toured the West Bank and was convinced that there would be an intifada and there was six months later after I left. And I was opposed to the settlements and to the continued occupations of the Palestinians. It was a difficult—it made for all kinds of difficulties for me.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Do you think the presence you've had, at times, about sort of the coming of the Vietnam War and the way that would affect American society when you came from Paris and had witnessed and been part of the protests against the suppression of Algerian independence and other things? Do you think that in a way that your tour duty and Army intelligence kind of gave your mind a particular sensitivity to these things that you could see the signs perhaps that others didn't see?

IRVING PETLIN: I think so, but I can't be certain how much a role—what was the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: But I think you're right in pointing this out because I see things—for example, when I'm sitting, talking with Max Kozloff, or anybody else, and I bring certain things up, it's sometimes because I kind of anticipate what's going to happen.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And sometimes, there are people, even who I consider tremendously perceptive, say, "How could that be?" And then in turns out to be often the case. Not in every single case, but very often. I, with a lot of New York writers including Neil, Dr. Owen, Grace Paley, and so forth, we sent—we became a group against the Israeli occupation and appealed to Israel in mass and held meetings and so forth. And all this was based upon

what I had seen with my own eyes and I knew what was coming and I predicted quite accurately what was coming. It has changed Israel tremendously. It is a different place than it was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What year were you there?

IRVING PETLIN: '87

JAMES MCELHINNEY: '87. So now of course—I mean I'm not Jewish, but I have a lot of friends who are and my perception is that there are much deeper divisions within the American and Jewish community about the conduct of Israel vis-á-vis the Palestinians then there was, let's say 1967.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Israel has changed dramatically and the American-Jewish community, which was tremendously supportive, is now splitting. No question about it. But they're splitting in not a good way because the dialogue is not a good dialogue. It's like the dialogue in our own political system between the people who want Trump to be president and people who don't. It's like irreconcilable. There's no like—there's no way to even dialogue. It's a totally unworkable division. We have witnessed over the last 20 years, the Congress of the United States becoming more and more of an assembly of ignoramuses, complete ignoramuses in terms of the world. Their ideas about who we are and where we are in this world are like medieval. I mean it's like we're dealing with a kind of a—another period of time. I think that's happening everywhere and it's also happening in Europe and it's so disquieting. I've been never as, how should I say, worried about the immediate future as I am today and I've been through a lot of stuff and I have never felt so toxic—the atmosphere is so toxic that it's not going to be recoverable within a long—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Something terrible is going to have to happen.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I was just in London, and many people there are terrified of the consequences of the Brexit vote. Of course, the further you get out from London—

IRVING PETLIN: The less that's so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The happier people are about it because there's a perception like there is with New York vis-á-vis New York state, that everything comes to this city and nothing comes to the country. And rightly or wrongly, this is a perception and I think that the British also, at least a lot of people I spoke to in London, were horrified by what they were seeing. In the news, the French police forcing a Muslim woman to undress on the beach. This kind of action is signaling the rise of European nationalism. I mean, you were there during the transition to the EU and you know that every European state decentralized certain ministerial authorities in order to avoid research and nationalism but they didn't count on European—Pan-European nationalism and that's—

IRVING PETLIN: Germany and Spain were the most enthusiastic Europeans when the EU was created. Why? They wanted to be protected from themselves, desperately.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good point.

IRVING PETLIN: [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good point. Well the Germans, as you know, have an extreme burden of guilt that they're —

IRVING PETLIN: So, do the Spanish.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And the Spanish too.

IRVING PETLIN: Wherever there was overt fascism.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right

IRVING PETLIN: That's the most Pro-European population and that's still the case with Germany, even despite the immigration crisis. Merkel was the only one. Angela Merkel was the only one in Europe who had the courage to say the West created this monster, we have to help solve it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Now she's being punished for it, perhaps, which is unfortunate. However, what Bush, with the invasion of Iraq, did; it will not go away very soon. The consequences, the repercussions are going to continue to

reverberate for a long time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And we spoke about Sykes-Picot last time and sort of that sort of aggravating the durable consequences—

IRVING PETLIN: That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —of that hundred-year-old mistake.

IRVING PETLIN: That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So let's go back to talking about some of the artists you were interacting with at this time. Did you feel, perhaps this is a rhetorical question, but did you feel that the Peace Tower invigorated a kind of durable activism by artists on the West Coast?

IRVING PETLIN: As well as on the East Coast.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As well as on the East Coast.

IRVING PETLIN: Yes, I do. And I think it was a kind of—people like Jim Rosenkranz, Frank Stella, Rauschenberg, Johns, all of them participated in ways where they—my theory about all this was if we are, and I'd spoke about this at the time in meetings, if we can submerge our egos and recognize what is really at stake, we can have a very large voice. A much larger voice on the American political stage as artists. And that happened with the Vietnam War. American artists submerged their egos, joined with others, didn't care who they were showing with. It wasn't suddenly a high and low art question. It wasn't anymore a question of style. It wasn't anymore a question of who you showed with and so forth. It was a period where American artists were able to work together wonderfully and that period was the Vietnam struggle. It didn't repeat itself with Iraq because the Iraq happened in a different way and it didn't involve a drafted Army.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: That was a big difference.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Professional army as opposed to a citizen army.

IRVING PETLIN: That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There are some people who think that the United States should return to conscription to make the military more of a reflection—

IRVING PETLIN: Of the country.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Of the country.

IRVING PETLIN: It would be nice. It's not going to happen unfortunately. We've gone too far the other way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's like TSA. They've created this monster. And you can't put people out of work. The obvious other thing too is the enormous cost of all of these services. So among the artists whom you've found electrified by, you know, the tower and LA and what it achieved; when you arrived in New York, who did you find —

IRVING PETLIN: I found a group of people who had—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Welcoming you with open arms?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. The—some of the critics like Lucy Lippard.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Max Kozloff who I knew previously and so forth. John Hendrix, Hans Haacke, of course Leon, and Nancy and so forth. Rudolph Baranik and so forth. The artists of Paula Cooper. All of them were very instrumental in the forming of the Art Workers' Coalition. The Art Workers Coalition was the central kind of body that fought the war in Vietnam, in New York City. Frazer Dougherty, John Hendrix, and I created *And Babies*, the poster. It was an idea that I had initiated. I saw the cover of *Life* magazine, the My Lai Massacre, and John Hendrix had friends who worked at *Time* magazine and I said, "This is the iconic poster of the Vietnam War. We have to get permission to use it with a text that we will add to it." And I found the text in the New York Times interview of one of the soldiers by Mike Wallace. He said to him, "And then this happened and this happened and

you killed all these people, and babies?" And the answer was, "And babies."

And I took those—we took that out of *The New York Times*, Frazer Dougherty knew how to do that stuff, and just out of the page in there—it was this big and we kept blowing it up, blowing it up, blowing it up, and read on the picture and that became *And babies*. But we didn't have the c-print in order to print it as the poster. We knew that Time Life had used it for their cover. That's why we saw it. I ask John, what can we do to get it. We called Haeberle in Cleveland, the photographer. He was the soldier that just happened to take that photograph. And I called him and I said, "Ron, we want to do a poster against the war and the poster we want to do is your photograph that appeared on Time Life's cover. Did you give them one-time use only or permanent ownership of the image?" He said, "Only one time only." So we went to Time Life and asked them could they release it to us, and of course they refused. But John Hendrix, and this is now possible for me to say, knew somebody at *Time* magazine and we stole it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] John Hendrix was here on Tuesday.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. And he's a curator at the Museum of Modern Art for the Fluxus Collection.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: But we have collaborated on so many things together over many years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So somebody purloined the photographer—

IRVING PETLIN: Purloined it, let's say.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, purloined is a nicer—

IRVING PETLIN: And we started to produce the poster and it came out that the Museum of Modern Art, at various meetings of the Art Workers' Coalition—Museum of Modern Art—Drexler, at the time, was the director of the museum and he was at the meeting and I posed a question to him and I said, "The museum claims that they want to be the temple of American art. The synagogue. And that you want to have an association with events of your own time. Would you agree to join with us in producing a very powerful anti-war poster?" And Greg said, "Of course we would. That would be great."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: [Laughs.] Well, John and I and Frazer were working with a wonderful designer at the Museum of Modern Art and it was moving along. They were going to—we were going to jointly issue the Art Workers' Coalition poster, *And Babies*, when at the last minute Drexler came in, and we had the mock-up, everything was ready to go, the red letters, you know. And he said, "Let me run this by somebody. Hold on." And he went. There was a board meeting going on. Rockefeller, all of them, and they said—they scrummed at him, "Go back and cancel that!" And they did. They canceled. But we had a benefactor. The man who published art in America, Brant.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Brant.

IRVING PETLIN: Brant had access to paper and he said, "If you can find a lithographic studio in New York that will print it, I'll supply 50,000 sheets of paper." We went to the Union of Print Trade, The Black Star Press, and said we need a shop to print this where they won't kill us.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: And he said, "I will talk to the heads of the union and we will get a shop for you to do this poster." And they did. They got a shop on Barrack Street. A big multiple press. And Brent supplied the paper and we did 50,000 copies of *And Babies*. It went all over the world and it became the icon of the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you distribute it?

IRVING PETLIN: Everybody carried it under their arm and went off.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Stapled to telephone poles? I mean what were you doing?

IRVING PETLIN: It went everywhere. It showed up in demonstrations in Europe. It showed up in demonstration in

America. Everywhere. And then the Museum of Modern art and all the museums of the world wanted a copy of it, you know and so forth. Years later of course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Years later?

IRVING PETLIN: Years later.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: David Rockefeller is still alive and well. Actually, looks pretty good for 100.

IRVING PETLIN: I don't know him.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Met him once.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. I don't think it was him. I forget who it was. It was Paley I think, had a fit.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That makes sense.

IRVING PETLIN: Paley had a fit. And Drexel came back white, ashen white, to where we were putting the final touches, you know, getting ready to go to the press and he said, "We can't do it."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, what was the blowback from the art world? Were there other reactions apart from support?

IRVING PETLIN: Oh, yes. There was picketing of the Museum of Modern Art by Art Workers' Coalition that went on. There were photographs of it in the press. And then there was sit downs in front of the *Guernica*. I mean there were a lot of—with the poster, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Now it was—their refusal to go through with what they said they would caused a tremendous storm in New York in the art world. Led to the Guerrilla Girls and people like that forming groups and then taking on other museums.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, these activities were sort of apprenticeships for—

IRVING PETLIN: A lot of other things.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A lot of other things. Like apart from the Guerrilla Girls?

IRVING PETLIN: There were all kinds of groups that sort of went after various issues involving—it wasn't just women and museums. It was also minority issues that were being raised because of the way museums were behaving, you know. And, I felt that the artists, if I had to make an assessment of what all of the activity—what did it result in? I'd have to put it this way; and Leon Golub and I discussed this at the end of the—when the war finally came to an end in 1975. I—Leon felt that unless the protests continue or unless the organizations that had been formed continue, we have not succeeded. And I said, "I'll tell you what my assessment is. We have held back the worst that the US could have done to Vietnamese people." That was quite an accomplishment and we should not be afraid to say so. That the activaties of the anti-war movement held back the full might—there were the Curtis LeMays that wanted to turn Vietnam into a parking lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And we held—by our activity, we held that fist back from landing on the Vietnamese people. That's how I characterize it. Leon said, "Ok, I can maybe go along with that." Anyway—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you're saying, anyway, that there was a durable legacy in terms of, you know, people who had worked or who had engaged in the protests during the Vietnam era. Essentially—

IRVING PETLIN: Went on to Central America, for example.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Learned the skills. Right. El Salvador.

IRVING PETLIN: That's right. Because [inaudible], for example, did that wonderful poster when we organized against El Salvador. We continued to exist. We didn't have the same impact though. It wasn't the same. Vietnam was so—because American soldiers were being drafted.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Against their will.

IRVING PETLIN: Against their will.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Against their will.

IRVING PETLIN: And coming back totally damaged because they all went, became potheads and drug addicts and killers. The guilt that followed was tremendous.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And also, the fact that when they came back, they were not thanked for their service the way—

IRVING PETLIN: No, no.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The way World War II vets were. The way Iraq War vets are. I mean I have a brother-in-law who was in the military and did five tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Collectively, I think four or five tours. And when he came back from his last one and flew into Bangor, Maine, he was met by Vietnam vets, giving them gift cards for food and cell phones and, you know, making them feel appreciated. Vietnam vets were coming back and being spat on and insulted in the streets.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah and that had a terrible effect.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A lot of guys—I know an artist who was combat wounded there and he said, you know, when he came home it was just—the first thing he did was like lose the uniform.

IRVING PETLIN: America was embarrassed by its war.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And it didn't treat the people who had been rounded up to fight it well. They didn't do that and that was a terrible, terrible mistake. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How many of the people with whom you've worked over the years were in Vietnam, under arms? I mean with whom you've worked—

IRVING PETLIN: A few, but not many. I don't have a name that I can give you but I have—when Lucy and we all had a certain kind of gatherings, there always was a few people but they would come, tell their stories, say keep going, do this, do that. But it wasn't like there was a—the vets organized by themselves and had their own organization and their own way because they're only comfortable with themselves. Not with others. The reason they were comfortable with themselves is they all knew why they were hanging out together.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Why they were damaged.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. And so the vets against the war, like John Kerry, before he, you know—when he threw his metals over the fence. He is still quoted by saying, "Who wants to be the last one to die for a mistake." You know. The last soldier to die for a mistake. Well, you know, that was John Kerry after the war and then he got slimed by the—when he ran for president—terribly by those miserable creatures called—I forget that group that organized the attack on Kerry.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: I mean—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's, you know, everything seems to be about the money, not about the principle. Well, getting back to activism and to, yeah, the work that you did against, you know, the Vietnam War. Did you find that there was some intersection with the African American struggle to—?

IRVING PETLIN: There was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Get the civil rights passed.

IRVING PETLIN: There was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Civil rights amendment—

IRVING PETLIN: There was. But it was evident also at the time, I mean, that the black civil rights movement had its spectrum. There was the Black Panthers and then there was all, you know, NAACP—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Urban League.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. You had this spectrum and, again, American society is still so segregated, basically. We had all kinds of contact with black artists early on, but it wasn't something that dominated the meetings. It was

there but it wasn't like—there was a kind of division inside the Art Workers' Coalition. Something like this; there were people who wanted to change the art world and there were other people who said the primary task is to stop the war. And the people who wanted to change the art world were the minorities and the women and kind of as a separate kind of circle within the Art Workers' Coalition. Their issues were more women in museums and the minority members of the Art Workers' Coalition. There has to be more blacks and more Latinos. And so all of the issues were being circulating but when it came to what we actually did, the priority was; stop the war.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That was the—

IRVING PETLIN: The priority.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But didn't—I guess that Golub understood that once that had been achieved, there was going to be a lot more still to do.

IRVING PETLIN: Of course.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So I'm just curious to discover what kind of role was played in the Art Workers' Coalition by the black activists. And it was the same time that, of course, you have, you know, the formation of NOW. You have the Cesar Chavez out of the West Coast organizing farm workers.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean there was a lot of activism regionally, nationally. So you're saying that basically the Art Workers' Coalition focused on—

IRVING PETLIN: That was the argument.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: That all of these issues were there and they were always being discussed but when it came to action, the things that actually resulted in—the emphasis was on stopping the war and that overcame all the objections that our real job was to reform the art world, you see. And my feeling was that stopping the war was our priority. Stopping the war or holding back the worst that could happen. These other issues are going to be taking priority, but first we have to stop the war. And the pity is that after the Art Workers' Coalition sort of dissolved and other things, you know, that it got revived only during the struggle against the Central America, El Salvador. Because then there were a lot of Latinos and many of them were black and we did things—the man who was very integrated all of these issues was John Hendrix at the time. John was part of the church on the village. What's the name of that church? The peace church?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The tip of my tongue.

IRVING PETLIN: [Laughs.] You know who I mean.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I do.

IRVING PETLIN: There was a great pastor that welcomed the anti-war movement and the black movement and so forth. There were many avant-garde productions that were done there—name of the church, you know. And that was a center for where a lot integration took place. The flag issues that were being debated during that period, you know, when the attacks were made on Marc Morrel. His sculptures, which were covered with American flags like, you know. All of that stuff was going on at this church that we can't think of right now. And John Hendrix was very central in that area. I was less so at that time. And my issue was still Vietnam and then in '75 we had to end all of the—when the war came to an end, we had all of these documentations. I had a gigantic—before this was a living loft, it was just my studio.

We had half of that whole section was posters. All the things that were left over, we had a sale on West Broadway. We sold a lot of—to fund new things and so forth. I was phasing out of that. And we were the—John Hendrix and I and Öyvind Fahlström were the curators—or the fiduciary of the poster collection and we gave that—finally John, after Fahlström's death, I couldn't keep it here anymore. We finally arranged the International Center for Photography, became the trustee of the poster collection. We gave the entire collection to them with the proviso that they make it, they catalogue it, and document it, archive it, and make it available to the public for the political research of the period and they have done so. It's been terrific.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Were there any objections to what you were doing from the art world?

IRVING PETLIN: No, they were happy that, for example, there were original works by John Morris. There were Rauschenbergs. There were Johns. There were posters of all kinds and Tony Smith and so forth.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I didn't mean the ICP. I meant during all of the efforts and activities of the Art Workers' Coalition, were there any within the art world who objected to what you were doing—

IRVING PETLIN: I don't think so.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —apart from Albert Paley?

[They laugh.]

IRVING PETLIN: I don't think so. I think one of the most cooperative galleries, apart from Paula Cooper, was Leo Castelli.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting.

IRVING PETLIN: He was really wonderful. Leo never turned any proposal we made. We held fundraisers at Leo Castelli. We did a show called, you know, an auction where artwork was wrapped in a package and you bought a number and you never knew what you were going to get and a lot of artists contributed. We raised thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars. Leo was terrific. Leo and Paula stick in my mind as two ends of the spectrum at that time. They were very, very good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How about Weber?

IRVING PETLIN: Weber was also—continually, but Weber didn't have the drawing power or the kind of space in New York that he had in LA.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. He was over at 421.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: And Leo Castelli's gallery and Paula were scenes of things that we had to. We did a lot of things to raise money and to keep the activity going. And one of them was, we held a meeting when the Berrigan Brothers were accused in Washington DC of planning to blow up the central heating system. We thought that was so ridiculous that a number of us planned a meeting and sent out postcards, that we never touched with our own hands, but rubber stamps, announcing a meeting to discuss the kidnapping of Henry Kissinger. And this went out in postcard form, mailed from about 25 different mailboxes all over the city of New York. And these postcards were received and people showed up. We rented a gigantic space on West Broadway. It was an empty space, and about 400 people showed up and there were 400 people in the street and the FBI showed up.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: Numerous members of the FBI circulating the crowd, "Who organized this?" I ran the meeting, and I'll tell you what the most contentious question was all evening. Came from the floor. "While Henry Kissinger is our prisoner, should we feed him?"

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: And I called a vote and we voted not to. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You could seize his credit cards and charge the food. Or you could just send the bill to the Century Club where he's probably having lunch right now.

IRVING PETLIN: Right now, yeah. Anyway, it was a contentious evening of fun in honor of the Berrigan's.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: It was their kind of stunt, you know. And the FBI has kept that case open.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're kidding.

IRVING PETLIN: It's still open because to send the card threatening the kidnapping of a federal official through the US mail is a felony and they have never, as far as I know, closed the case. And the participants were many, many people but there's no evidence of who they were.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And they all forgot who they were. [Laughs.]

IRVING PETLIN: And they all forgot who they were. I don't mind telling you this now. Why not? What's the

difference?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Well it's a good story. It's a great story.

IRVING PETLIN: [Laughs.] It's a bit of Americana of a certain kind.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] A little—well there were the dirty tricks, you know, and this is sort of a—

IRVING PETLIN: Counter-dirty trick.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, kind of counter-dirty tricks.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you remember—I mean I'm just reminded of sort of the poster culture of the '60s. How all of sudden there was this whole culture of multiples in the art world. That was, I guess, the genesis of Marian Goodman Gallery too, was with, you know, multiple markets of artists making prints and remembering all kinds of artists whose work was getting out there. People like Victor Vasarely or Bridget Riley or whatever.

IRVING PETLIN: They were just flooding the world.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Exactly.

IRVING PETLIN: It was a flood.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And of course, there was a parallel because in Poland at this time too, there was a huge poster movement.

IRVING PETLIN: And a very interesting one, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And was there any dialogue between—

IRVING PETLIN: No. Not that I know of.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They were over in Poland having the same idea.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Not that I know. There might have been but I wasn't part of the multiple world myself.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

IRVING PETLIN: When we had the collection, the poster collection, because we did other posters beyond—John Hendrix and I, we did other posters. We did, *We Begin Bombing in 5 Minutes*, which was the Reagan poster with the atomic clock, *5 Minutes to Midnight*. We did that one. We did a number of other posters but they all ended up in this studio here and finally we decided we couldn't maintain them properly and I and John were left of the three who were the fiduciary caretakers of the poster collection. And John negotiated the gift to the International Center and it was the right thing to do. They're going to spend years collocating it and archiving but it's available.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, for an archivist or researcher, an art historian, who wants to—

IRVING PETLIN: See the period.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —see the period—

IRVING PETLIN: Visually.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —ICP is the place to go?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, that whole culture, as you're speaking, it's all coming back to me. I remember now we're in the midst of this inexplicable circus of, you know, the presidential campaign. I remember this poster from 1968 of a pregnant, very pregnant, African American woman looking—standing profile, looking out of the image and the motto underneath was, "Nixon's the one." You remember that poster?

IRVING PETLIN: [Laughs.] I do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] And also there was this psychedelia and—

IRVING PETLIN: Psychedelia was a big part of all this because of the rock music scene that had grown up and drug scene. Also, there was another wonderful series of things done by Yoko Ono, you know, when she and John Lennon put out this, *Peace Now*, or I forget.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: But she was terrific all through this period. And she and John Hendrix remain very close because he is her curator of her worldwide shows and he travels a lot for her when he's not at the Museum of Modern Art. And she was a very big contributor to all of this.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Just curious, to sort of tie up a few loose ends here. So, the Art Workers' Coalition existed from 1965, '66 too—

IRVING PETLIN: '66—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —to around 10 years, nine years.

IRVING PETLIN: —10 years, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: During that period of time, were there a lot of cooperative or any efforts with other organizations that were opposing the Vietnam War?

IRVING PETLIN: There were on all kinds of levels by individuals within the Art Workers' Coalition and various universities.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like writers—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. The writers—there was separate group of the Artists and Writers and we did a portfolio, which was used to raise money and so forth, and that included a lot of well-known artists. Including, you had Ad Reinhardt and—it was published in New York. It's a very beautiful collection of anti-war posters, and that was used to raise money for demonstrations for things. You know, we did the Venice Biennale thing out of a gallery uptown. That time was 30 some American artists had been invited to Venice Biennale. I forget what the number was. It's all written up—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Grace Glueck did a series of articles in *The New York Times*. And I organized, along with John again and others, but especially with Louise Bourgeois, who is a member of the Art Workers' Coalition. And we decided, because she was invited to put a print in there, and she said, along with some other people—I said, "Why don't we ask artists who agreed to be fig leaf for the United States at the Venice Biennale withdraw their work." Say publicly that they're withdrawing their work. They don't want to be a fig leaf, a cultural fig leaf, for the United States. She liked the idea and she started calling her friends. Joyce Kozloff did the same thing. A lot of the women artists who were invited—I forget who the curator was, but it was like a big, big, you know, beginning of a refusal to show.

And the State Department kept inviting new artists quickly and I got into a big fight with Grace Glueck because I said she said no artists have withdrawn and the same number is showing and you're claiming that—and I said they're just substituting new artists constantly. And we proved to her—and Louise Bourgeois was the one who did the poster on the Venice withdrawal. So that was an outgrowth out of the Art Workers' Coalition. There were many like that. I lost contact with some of them because they happen—I was involved in forming that and we were worked out of a gallery. Klaus Kertess was the director of the gallery. It was a—I forget the name now. But that was our office and we just ran from there using the long distance lines of the gallery.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where was the gallery located?

IRVING PETLIN: Upper East Side and it was—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Madison Avenue?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah it was on the side street off—and I'm trying to remember now because it was the beginnings of a very well-known gallery now. What's her name? She's a very beautiful little person? She was recently in a controversy over a painting that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Ann Fabian?

IRVING PETLIN: No. I can't think of it right now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Meredith Ward?

IRVING PETLIN: No. Klaus Kertess was the director of her gallery. She had just started it and later went down to SoHo and it became a very known gallery and still exists.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Angela Westwater? No.

IRVING PETLIN: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, she worked for John Weber.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well we can look it up.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Ok.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So how many artists do you recall actually withdrew from the Biennale?

IRVING PETLIN: Almost half. I think it was very close to half and they replaced them with other artists. And we wrote to these other artists quickly and we said, "Don't," but many of them were so happy to be invited.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, of course people are trying to make livings and careers.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. But in any case, it was an event that was know because Grace Glueck mistakenly felt that we were claiming more than what was actually happening and it turns out we were not claiming more.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, was there ever an exhibition of the people who removed themselves?

IRVING PETLIN: I don't think so. But there was a lot of celebration when anybody did. I don't remember whether there was ever an exhibition. It doesn't appear to me—I don't recall it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that's fine. So yeah, I'm just trying to see if there are ways to connect the Art Workers' Coalition to other activism at that time like Hispanic or African American or—because about that time too, you're looking at the formation of Studio Museum of Harlem [inaudible].

IRVING PETLIN: That's right. There was a gallery on Broadway that was formed for Latinos at that time, I remember. And, you know, the names of all these galleries have disappeared from my—but there was a lot of activity that was spawned at this time. People who had been to the Art Workers' Coalition went off and did other things and I'm not the best source for what happened. I think Lucy Lippard is the better source. She was writing about all these events and if you were to locate – she's in New Mexico now, somewhere. Lucy in her capacity at the PAD, you know, which was on Lafayette Street. Lucy had PAD before it closed. Before it had, you might say, the most complete reference of all the things that were going on. I haven't been in touch with Lucy in many years but, you know, we actively worked together at that time and then I went to Europe, she went to New Mexico, and so forth. But she would be a great source for this information.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Should we take a break?

IRVING PETLIN: Take a break.

[END OF PETLIN16_SD_1OF1_TRACK03]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We're resuming with Irving Petlin on September the 15th, 2016. This is James McElhinney; so, I had asked you during the break how your years of activism in Paris, L.A., and New York shaped your work and changed your work. And you shared that you had become absorbed or influenced by the work of Primo Levi. You—could you expand on that a little bit.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. When I touched on the Primo Levi, literally the first passage, the first paragraph of the *Periodic Table*, was like an explosion in the brain. I saw visually all the 21 elements of the *Periodic Table* as a kind of invitation. And I decided then and there that I was going to do a series of pastels to accompany the Primo Levi *Periodic Table* which started in 1989, 1990. And was shown in Paris by Doug Walla of the Kent Gallery because it was the year the American galleries were invited to FIAC in Paris. And it was at that moment that I made the connection with the Jan Krugier Gallery. He came to see the Primo Levi pastels and decided to buy many of them and to invite me to join the gallery. It was then that I knew that I was going to definitely stay in Europe. The year that had begun was going to continue.

The *Periodic Table* opened a different chapter in my painter's life. And in the sense that what was suggested here was a project that would go on for many years. The project was I wanted to surround World War II with the writings of poetry of people who were touched by that period, just as my family had been terribly—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —touched by that period. And I wanted to do it by entering the work of poets who I felt a resonance with. So, it went from Primo Levi to Bruno Schulz, the Polish writer who was called the Kafka of Poland who died in 1942 in Drohobycz, to the—to the poetry of *Edmond Jabès* who was an Egyptian Jew who lived the war in Egypt. And came to Paris after the war and came upon a wall inscription [inaudible] and then realized he had missed the entire experience of World War II. He was safe in Egypt while this was going on and began to write this epic poem called, "The—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hold that thought.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

[END OF PETLIN16_SD_1OF1_TRACK04]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We had a brief interruption. We're resuming again as Irving Petlin wanted to gather up a few publications. You had ended by saying that another influence at the time was Edmond *Jabès*, who had been an Egyptian Jew who came to Paris after the war and saw the graffiti that had not yet been removed, "Death to the Jews," and realized that he had had escaped something significant. And I guess before you answered that question we should also just enter into the recording that the book by Bruno Schulz that was influential to you was, *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. We're looking at a copy of the book, a Penguin—a Penguin paperback edited by Philip Roth with an introduction by John Updike, in case anyone's interested in looking that up. So, you met Edmond *Jabès*.

IRVING PETLIN: Yes. And *Jabès* had been a poet whose work I knew. But it was at a certain point that a relative of his brought me to a ceremony at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris where he was donating his papers to France. And she knew something about him that I didn't know, which was that he had turned down a heart operation and was given only a few weeks to live. And she brought me in front of him and pushed people out of the way and said, "Edmond, this is Irving Petlin. He wants to do your portrait." And I had totally been taken by surprise. And he said, "When?" And so I then came into contact with Edmond *Jabès* at the very end of his life because after having drawn him and wanting to come and show him what I had done, that's the portrait you have seen. That was the day he died. And then I decided to do *The World of Edmond Jabès*, the book of questions being the central text.

And this was an exhibition that ended up at the Jan Krugier Gallery. And that was followed by an involvement with another poet, Paul Celan, who came to Paris after the war having himself been a refugee. And so what I was doing was enclosing World War II inside the work of four literary artists. The poetry of Celan being the most percussive and intense of all because of the definitive reference he makes to the events of Europe. All in all that whole period took me through a period in which I was doing many portraits of poets and writers in Paris, as well as some American writers and artists. It was a period of intense work with the figure. I did portraits of John Ashbery, Max Kozloff, Dominic Wilcox, various poets of—contemporary poets of France and America.

The collection of portraits now measures something like 35 or 36. They were shown periodically in small groups but await some sort of eventual publication or resting place. We've kept them together with the exception of the *Jabès* portrait, which was purchased by one of his relatives so. But this whole period was a period of intense drawing and intense examination of the way art and it's the life depicted meet through the narrative of a third party. And all of these series were ultimately shown with the Krugier Gallery in Geneva. And now represent the definitive period of some, beginning in 1991 and ending in 2004, so a period of 15 years, really, in which other work was going on. But this was the core, you might say, interest. And I believe this was influenced by my earlier experience in the world of trying to influence the—through the anti-war activity and so forth of the politics of our —of our living—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —moment.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I was wondering if there were other artists whom you either met through your social activism or through your, I should say, political activism on behalf of social causes who had pursued, or were pursuing, the same kind of synthesis in their work. Because it—

IRVING PETLIN: You must—yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. Because at the time, you know, it's an unusual thing.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. The most consistent was, of course, Leon. And we remained close all during this period. From afar, I have always been a great admirer of Antonio Lopez.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: His work is not specifically political, but his—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or literary.

IRVING PETLIN: Or literary. It's very, very of its time and of its moment [laughs] second by second literally.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's very empirical and yet there is something perhaps—well, there's something obviously something very poetical about it. And his early work is very different—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —than what comes later. These paintings that almost anticipate someone like Gregory Gillespie who comes along in America. And a sort of, you know, a deserted Spanish kiya [ph] with a couple engaged in coitus in the middle of the street. This kind of—this surreal—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —but maybe his work, even today, is engaging like a—like a reality on an almost surreal level.

IRVING PETLIN: Other artists of the—that I—that I dealt with were the Polish artist Maryan [ph]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —who came to New York in '63. We became friends in Paris through Allan Frumkin, the dealer in Chicago who when I left for Europe said, "You must look him up." And we were—we were very close in Paris during the early years and then later in New York when he lived in the Chelsea Hotel and that's where he died. And his experience and his tales of his own life were very real to me beyond anything I've heard directly from a survivor as he had been.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because he had been—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —through—

IRVING PETLIN: Through Auschwitz and everything, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. My attachments in Europe have been mostly to poets and writers rather than to painters.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Interesting.

IRVING PETLIN: And our friendships in Paris are varied, but painters have not been the main ingredient.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: When you—when you undertook this magnum opus of sort of exploring the Second World War through the works of four writers, was four an important number? I mean sort of cardinal—were points of the compass or did it just happen that—

IRVING PETLIN: I think it just happened.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: And it came upon just the discovery of their work. And the immediate voice that emerged—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —was a visual voice out of the word that I saw in the page. It gave me a—it gave me a shock always that I recognized something that I was—that I knew without having known it to; and many of those—many of those moments where like almost accidental and yet probably not. But they felt almost accidental. It

was as if I happened on them. I wasn't searching and yet I found them. And they became important immediately and—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you were looking for writers, you were looking for different kinds of voices to visualize this event in history.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You weren't looking for four but when you got to four you didn't look for a fifth.

IRVING PETLIN: No, because I followed—I moved into another territory after finishing the Paul Celan. The *World of Paul Celan*, I decided—and I did a long series of works based on the art of a few good Bach. I used the rooftop in front of my studio [laughs] as a kind of music page and did a series of pastels on the 18—its always controversial how many fugues there were.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: These are—

IRVING PETLIN: And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —wonderful.

IRVING PETLIN: And these pieces were—this—a great distance from where I had been and yet it felt like the natural way to go on with my interest in the third party entering the dialogue with the work in myself and the world. I also, you know, felt in doing the fugues that I was doing a kind of analysis of the way things can be the same and not the same. Kind of [inaudible] idea of the same is not the same idea. And the fugue was a perfect vehicle for the last few Bach, the art of a few.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is wonderful. It's—to describe it I would say it's a—it's a folder, a portfolio, a kind of—you wouldn't say a calne [ph], but kind of envelope with a number of loose leaves. It almost feels like a book—an unbound book.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But an unbroken book too.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, it's interesting the book form or forms of drawing or painting that don't require a vertical support.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: We spoke about that last time.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But this really invites kind of—invites perusal by hand. How large are the original pieces?

IRVING PETLIN: They're about maybe three by four feet. That's another series of pastels.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, the paper, let me ask you about your paper, because one of my trips to—in my checkered career in my past—

[They laugh.]

—life, a previous marriage, I had gone down to the Da Tania where there is a wonderful—

IRVING PETLIN: Paper maker.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —Moulin Larroque along the Dordogne River's watermill, and sort of troglodyte houses, and this great wheel turning, and people making this wonderful paper.

IRVING PETLIN: I used that paper.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, I was wondering if you did [laughs].

IRVING PETLIN: I did.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's pretty—

IRVING PETLIN: I do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's pretty wonderful.

IRVING PETLIN: Pretty wonderful paper.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Pretty wonderful paper. But that's sort of the imperial—or not the imperial, what would you call it? The 30 x 44 inches, I guess. But I guess the size is—

IRVING PETLIN: They have different kinds of paper.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. They make a paper, which I use for the portraits of the poets, it's called The, The.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The, T-H-E.

IRVING PETLIN: T-H-E.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh—

IRVING PETLIN: And it was the basis of the paper I used for the whole series of portraits, the Edmond*Jabès* is on the the. It's the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: On Larroque paper.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No kidding. That's great.

IRVING PETLIN: That's two sheets.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And how large is this piece? This is a single—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, this is two sheets. They break at some point here because this particular paper can only be made in—by centimeters, 50 x 65. So this is 100 x 65.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It seems—it seems like—

IRVING PETLIN: Wait—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —it's laid on—it seems thinner, this.

IRVING PETLIN: Oh yes. But it's very strong because it's made from a mixture of linen and cotton that have been —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. And—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it—yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: It's wonderful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's laid on a kind of screen—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —consisting of—

IRVING PETLIN: Lines.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —reeds or something.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Lines, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Very beautiful paper.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I know exactly what you mean.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's wonderful. So how important—I mean it's an obvious question, I mean, let me rephrase, mind's racing. How do you feel about the physical materials? Because one of the things, if you'll allow an observation, is that your work strikes me as being both very physical and ephemeral at the same time; that the surfaces feel very fragile somehow.

IRVING PETLIN: Exactly. And I have something that I'll—I'd like to enter into the record, if I may.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: *Bien sur* [laughs].

IRVING PETLIN: I was asked to write a little note on how I make pastels. I'm actually considered in Europe as a master of the pastel, a kind of the—a living master. There are very few of us who use the pastel to the extent that I do. There's like a handful of artists who the pastel has—comes out of the 17th century and it goes through —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —Degas, Redon, Liotard, you know. And it's almost disappeared. There's a very, very small number of artists who use it as a major, major medium. So I was asked when Doug did the show in New York could I write something about pastel. And it's actually a fairly decent description of answer to your question.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm dying to hear it. I'm dying—

IRVING PETLIN: Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —to hear it.

IRVING PETLIN: Can I read it?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: By all means.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Please.

IRVING PETLIN: "When the hand moves holding the stick of pastel it may hover, but when it lands to spread the crystalline color of the stick, it is all improvisation; weight of hand, tooth of paper, shock of color next to neighboring color. Pastel is the unforgiving medium. There is no going back, every move indelible. Although known earlier, the medium fully developed in the 18th century as in the work of the master Jean-Étienne Liotard. Later, as Modernism dawned, artists such as Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, and Odilon Redon explored pastel's qualities in new ways. Today, pastel survives in the hands of very few artists.

Color radiates from a pastel in a remarkable way. My favorite sticks are those made by Isabelle *Roché* of La Maison du Pastel. *Roché's* pastels are made to exactly the same specifications as those used by artists of the late 19th century, including Degas, who was a client of the *Roché* Family, which has been producing pastels for almost 300 years. The purity of the colors, their luminosity, never fails to feed my eye as my hand roams above an area of the surface ready to strike. Even when cross hatching one color through another in swift movements you can see the submerging color still holding its own, recognizable as an echo of itself.

In the studio when all the colors are so intense and concentrated it is magical. It takes days to dare to spoil this beauty by beginning to work, plucking one stick then another, to launch a new series on the sheets of paper that have been waiting on the wall. On the waiting sheet a very slight drawing in charcoal stands by until the first touches of color land to 'set the table' for what's coming. The hand plays a kind of game of leaving little points of color here and there defining the spatial distances between things, and the overall scale of the world—of the world coming into being on the sheet. This charcoal template of hints, lures, and openings guides the work. The sheets of paper may vary in size but these first faint marks tell me the scale of the work to be.

The crystalline structure of the brilliant color against the paper's light-throwing capacity creates a particular kind of space, a universe huge on a surface small. These traces of charcoal also herald the subject of the work. The genesis of this current series after Redon was mysterious to me. The first faint marks were made by my hand moving faster than my mind. As the series progressed, accumulated intuitive energies were released with little conscious deliberation. With pastel color vibrates and heaves as it navigates the complementary relationships.

The chromatic expansion, even of a small dot, has to do with the utter crystalline dryness of the material, which transmits the glow far out of proportion to its relative size on the sheet of paper. And which guides the hovering hand in finding the next place to land.

Pastel, as I use it, is a form of dry painting. It's subtle brilliance colors—covers nearly all of the paper's surfaces. Its absence in some passages is a deliberate choice that offers some rest in a surface teeming with color. Intense color and its absence sets surprise in motion as an element in the picture. By surprise I mean purposeful rupture to keep the eye challenged and engaged, no matter what is being depicted. The interruption of spreading color is part of the visual theater of the work. I am attracted to pastel as a medium because of the gamble involved in its execution. There is a fascination with the processes of control and risk enacted on a surface. A surface building towards the last plunges of color that bring everything already developed there into its focus; the color bolt that finishes the picture. Irving Petlin, Paris, September 2012."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Brilliant.

[They laugh.]

No, that's great. That really—now, I've got—I've got a bunch of questions for you.

IRVING PETLIN: This is the work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Beautiful. You know this is going to—I don't—I don't want to strain to painter talk. But because I don't know if the—if the—if the listener, or the reader, would be interested. But, you know, I see also in Turner, you know, how he—how the color is really just basically primary.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And then he just—he just riffs on it. He just, you know, you have a red, a yellow, and a blue. It might be an oak or a sienna and black diluted with water that reads as blue or something.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or it could—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —be actually—but, you know, we exist in a—in a material world where you have literally hundreds of pigments.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But you don't need all of that to make sense out of things.

IRVING PETLIN: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs.] And just sort of, you know, a question again about, for instance, the, you know, the "Book of Questions"—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —which I guess this is. It seems like your color in these works is much more earth pigment based. And how do you feel about—I mean how does—how does color work its way into the narrative? How do you make your color decisions?

IRVING PETLIN: A good example would be here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Where the wall—the waldodeswig [ph] this is almost absent in terms of color. It's almost all drawing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Color enters as a—as a punctuation mark here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: As an accent.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you—if you go to the Sala del Maggior Consiglio [ph] and the Palazzo Ducale in Venice and you look at the Veroneses and the Tintorettos. But mainly the Veroneses of that sort of history of the city, they're all basically coniyour [ph] monochromes with hits of color.

IRVING PETLIN: Hits.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. That happens when the—when the narrative—when the narrative is a—is like a storyline of line. The color acts as a shocker to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —the eye.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: To keep the eye interested in following the line, sort of like a click. It happens in certain things and not in others. In the *Jabès,* it was—it was for moments that needed jump.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. Well, the other thing too is that when people think about figuration, or they think about representational painting, a lot of it is conditioned by photography. And people are thinking about the frame, you know, the monocular Cyclops worldview.

IRVING PETLIN: This is a Paul Celan, for example.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And so what—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —you're doing is—really each drawing has multiples of sight and—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —it's not the least bit, you know, co-optically coherent.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's an anamnetic [ph] form of—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —drawing. Would you agree?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's quite stunning. And I can see—I can see a sympathy with a person like the late Ron Kitaj. Who else—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who else have you—

IRVING PETLIN: Kitaj was—Kitaj was my colleague. This is a painting actually.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But here you're using—we're looking at a detail of a street—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —with a man on a white horse.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But the horse also seems to view some aqueous media like Chinese white or gouache.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. But it's all paint in this case. This is a painting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, this was all painting.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: This is all paint.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you ever combined—

IRVING PETLIN: Somewhat—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —you know, the—

IRVING PETLIN: —but it doesn't work technically forever. And it shouldn't—it shouldn't become a permanent. It—pastel has its own—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —real qualities of—it has to be sustained in shadow, it can't be in bright light.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And paint is all about—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Light.

IRVING PETLIN: —light. So, it's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did you ever have any—

IRVING PETLIN: Same. See this, again—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I see.

IRVING PETLIN: —the same is not the same. I can take something like this—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Es kommt ein mensch.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The number two.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Es kommt ein mensch is like, in Paul Celan, is like it keeps recurring, you know.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And so—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, the pale horse too has—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —other references.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But it's—I'm curious also about, you know, materials if you've ever made your own pastels.

IRVING PETLIN: No. That—the most—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Too easy [laughs] to buy them.

[They laugh.]

IRVING PETLIN: The most beautiful pastels in the world are made by the *Roché* Family in—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —Paris.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And they're counting on me to live a little longer because they—in four years when I'll be 85, or three years now when I'll be 85, will be the 300th anniversary of the Maison du la Pastel.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Wow.

IRVING PETLIN: Same family. And they won—they have been given the status of, what do you call it, the—they are part of the heritage of France. It's a kind of honor of being a—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sort of like a living—

IRVING PETLIN: Living—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —national treasure.

IRVING PETLIN: —treasure.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: And they're going to be awarded some great, you know, recognition and so forth. And Isabel, who's now the current *Roché* said, "Irving, I want you to live to be 85 so you can be there. [They laugh.] You're amongst a handful of artists who really use our pastels as a complete medium, as if it's a painting, you know." And I said I'll try, but I'm not, you know, [laughs] can't be certain.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You can't make any promises.

IRVING PETLIN: I can't make any promises [laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I was wondering if in—

IRVING PETLIN: This is—this is, for example, their red is like no other red, you know, unimaginably—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is that cadmium?

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. It's a—it's a red which is just incredibly powerful.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you ever had any experience, any prejudice, against pastel as a minor medium?

IRVING PETLIN: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I raise the question because, you know, there's this little show of Turner's whaling paintings at the Metropolitan, it may still be up. And one of his buyers apparently returned an oil painting of a whaling ship at sea when he discovered that among the techniques used to create this painting was the inferior medium of watercolor.

[They laugh.]

IRVING PETLIN: Well, pastel took on a terribly decorative and sketchy aspect. It was used by amateurs for—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Still, yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's still very—

IRVING PETLIN: It still is.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —popular.

IRVING PETLIN: A lot—yeah. But I have, from the very beginning, used it as a major, major medium. And because Kitaj and I and Sam Szafran and a handful of others are—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who else?

IRVING PETLIN: Avigdor Arikha.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Absolutely. Well, he would have been—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. He was a friend of ours as well as Kitaj, Avigdor. And he used pastels very, very well. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, he was—is it true that all of those pictures he did in one sitting?

IRVING PETLIN: If he did a portrait it was in one sitting.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Because he had all these nudes and all of these portraits and it was just one sitting.

IRVING PETLIN: One sitting. He just had this obsession.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This one-shot painting.

IRVING PETLIN: Had to do it in one session.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think Alex Katz saying it—

IRVING PETLIN: Like—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —72 strokes and no more.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah, or something like that. I—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's an interesting—

IRVING PETLIN: When Jewish artists get obsessive beware.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: That's it. Yeah, I'm curious I mean now that you bring that up we were talking about Antonio Lopez and how his work had, and still does have, a kind of surreal or a hyperreal quality. There's a quote I'm probably, maybe apocryphal and I'm sure I'm paraphrasing it, where Joan *Miró* was asked if he regarded himself as a Surrealist. And his reply was, "I'm Spanish. All Spaniards are by—or for virtue of being Spanish—

[They laugh.]

—Surrealists." It was kind of a waggish reply.

IRVING PETLIN: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm sure he answered the question that way many times.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But I was wondering I mean as, you know, a Jewish artist with very close roots to eastern Europe and probably strong identification with, you know, the diaspora from Spain and then afterwards from eastern Europe.

IRVING PETLIN: Let me correct one thing—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Sure.

IRVING PETLIN: —you just said. I don't think of myself as a Jewish artist.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

IRVING PETLIN: I really don't. And Marion, who was a survivor of Auschwitz—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —definitely did not want himself considered as a Jewish artist. The—well, the feeling always has been that when I refer back to that, it's part of—it's part of the history—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —of my person, but it's not who I am.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Not your identity.

IRVING PETLIN: That's not my identity.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: See the thing is that people think about Soutine—

IRVING PETLIN: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —hearing how Chaim Soutine was beaten for drawing, you know, and—

IRVING PETLIN: Yes. Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —or people like Marc Chagall—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —whose work, you know, addressed directly his being part of a community—

IRVING PETLIN: His shtetl mentality, yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right. And—yeah.

IRVING PETLIN: This is why that generation was the first to emerge from a non-visual history of Eastern Europe. And they were—it was the explosion of Jewish energy out of the—out of the prohibition against images and the restrictions on their education that allowed that generation, Chagall, Soutine—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —to be Jewish artists you see because they were emerging from a kind of past which had denied —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —not just prevented but denied them. I am part of a generation that has already had that freedom—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —for a—for two generations so it—it's not in my identity. I have a history which I am referring back to.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: You see that's the distinction I'm making.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, you could also juxtapose somebody like Chagall against Modigliani—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —who was coming out of western European—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —heritage didn't have that—

IRVING PETLIN: No. We don't think of Modigliani as Jewish.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No.

IRVING PETLIN: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But he was.

IRVING PETLIN: He was.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the—yeah, I guess the—as you're talking I'm beginning to wonder if you might feel that in some way, that your attraction to poetry and your feeling like you're wanting to have a literary element in

your work might in some way allude back to deep in the genome, you know, people of the book.

IRVING PETLIN: Yes. Yes, because that's what *Jabès* called the people of the book.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: The people of the book.

IRVING PETLIN: He refers to the people of the book.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I had another interview with an art critic I won't name because I don't know the status of that interview in terms of his accessibility. But she said that—she posed the question, "How do you think Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and Gottlieb and all these guys were able to stay home all day and paint?" And, of course, I didn't have an answer. She said, "Well, their wives were all librarians and school teachers." And again, I didn't have an answer being a gentile. And she said, "Well, they were people of the book that these men might be lefties and atheists but they were doing—basically they were behaving like Talmudic scholars—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —and the wives were going out and—in the community and the men stayed home and did God's work." [They laugh.] And I'm thinking that explained a lot. That explained a lot about a particular culture that existed in the art schools at a particular time—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —where painting, especially, was taught as a quasi-religious activity.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I don't know if you ever encountered or—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. [They laugh.] Well, you know, I do believe that there is a—there is a—there are many layers here. You have text, subtext, subtext, subtext. The people you mentioned, especially Rothko, worked with many of these subtexts more so than maybe Barnett Newman or so forth. But certainly, in the case of Rothko there is a—there is an underlying, I don't want to call it religiosity, but a kind of connection to—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —another kind of spirituality.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And I think that is true in certain cases with myself.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: But I can't define it. Nor do I even try to. The point is, when it shows itself, it shows itself in ways that have to do with the way I use light. The way things sometimes become detached from their base and float through the picture. There's a way that they cross each other and leave traces.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: Many figures kind of disappear into each other in this sort of way in certain works. I think that is what comes closest to what we're describing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Newman, of course, used to speak about onement, you know, as his—sort of his—the, you know, the monotheism of art.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A kind of non—it's not non-religious—but, yeah, the whole idea of onement was his sort of rhetoric, his personal sort of—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —oddball rhetoric.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But this desire to portray the world or to present a reality that abides with the ephemeral

is difficult because, you know, we're a culture that values concrete—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —material—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —things, measurable things. Things you can stick in a shopping bag. Do you think that—I'm trying to find some way to connect that to your morality as a political activist.

IRVING PETLIN: I have a tendency to work in series. And Michael Palmer characterized it as having a—having a tendency never to feel that something has been completely expressed. There's an in—unexpressed part to every image and thus I continue to search for a more complete expression. I'm attracted to series. In almost all my work they come in groups of paintings that follow one another. Or in a pastel series where one piece leads into another, folds into another. All of that has to do with the elusiveness which I feel is a part of our life. We cannot close down a subject, issue, a fact. It's not there to be—

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JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, the battery just died. I was very absorbed in [laughs] what you were saying. I wasn't paying any attention to the equipment.

IRVING PETLIN: But I don't remember what I said [laughs].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, we were talking about I had asked what your—how your aesthetic capacity to accept, you know, the ephemeral within a concrete world how we exist in a culture that certainly—the art world culture right now—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —is both a materialistic culture and very ephemeral in terms of well, in other ways—

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —not so fascinating ways.

IRVING PETLIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In other words, like smoke and mirror kind of—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —ephemeral.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But yeah, I was asking if there was—if you saw some kind of connection between your political morality, your call of activism, and your—the approach you take to your work. You were saying that you work in series.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And that there is some kind of acceptance of—

IRVING PETLIN: That—the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Rothko and—

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. The—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —spirituality.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. The series concept it's not so much a concept as a—as a pattern that I have followed for a long time because of a—of a sense that nothing is ever complete, neither in our real world nor in our imagination. And that the repetition and in French they use the term repetition as—for the—to mean rehearsal.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: That you're always rehearsing your thought for another picture.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: And that one repetition follows another in a way that is a recognition that the world doesn't have a ending fact—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —for any issue or any situation. And the series accommodates that mood of repetition for the purpose of rehearsing the next thought.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So the idea that the work of art—that any work of art you do you walk in the studio and the outcome at the end of the day is research or masterpiece. But then when you walk in the next day, you know, the masterpiece of the day—

IRVING PETLIN: Is the research.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —before becomes the research.

IRVING PETLIN: Yeah. Something—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So that's a wonderful thought. I'm wondering if there is anything else—we've been talking for a long time and I don't want to wear out my welcome. But—

IRVING PETLIN: Your welcome is welcome.

[They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I was just wondering if, without opening the can of worms, Pandora's Box, of your opinion of, you know, the condition of the art world right now. But what do you see—I mean if you had another 50 years to work what would you—how would you fill your time? Have you—have you been intrigued at all by any of, you know, the new media or like what it can do and—

IRVING PETLIN: There's a lot of—there's a lot of absence in my life now of looking at other art. And the reason for it is problem—physical problems with my legs not being adequate to going to see more of the things I used to see on a—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —continuous basis. But there's another element and that's a curtailing of my curiosity because of recent experiences with current art. I seem to have a reel in me that needs unreeling still. The energy level that I have now is reduced. I'm going to be 82 years old soon. I use my time to unreel the last reels that I have still in my person—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

IRVING PETLIN: —and in my head. And I have not seen, since stopping going to many, many things, that much new art. I am happy to see the emergence of—recently of some black artists. And that is welcome. Kerry Marshall, things like that—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

IRVING PETLIN: —that are happening now are good for me to see. But I haven't been able to actually see them. I've only seen them in reproduction. I get to the museum very rarely now. I did see things up until about two or three years ago. But since then I've been pretty much confined to my own studio, and I miss that. I enjoyed looking at things and I had many, many wonderful experiences looking at new art. For many years when I did do graduate gigs or critiques at various places, it always was exciting. And I always found things that I wanted to impart because what I feel like is giving people some sense of what has been rather than what will be. What will be is for them. What has been, I can tell them something about. Something like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you so much for your time.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]