

A TEI Project

Interview of Edward Biberman

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (NOVEMBER 24, 1975)

COREY

You were born in 1904, October . . .

BIBERMAN

. . . twenty-third.

COREY

Twenty-third. In Philadelphia. Your father owned a factory?

BIBERMAN

That's right.

COREY

What kind of factory was it?

BIBERMAN

A dress factory. As you probably know, a great deal of manufacturing in the garment industry came into the hands of first-generation immigrants, of whom my father was one. He and his three brothers operated what became a very successful business.

COREY

Is it a business that they started?

BIBERMAN

They started it; and until very recently, when it went public, it was a very important firm. None of the original four brothers, with the exception of a surviving brother who is no longer active, participate. They went public many years ago and, I understand, did very badly from that time on. [laughter] But my father and three brothers were the active owners, and they started it.

COREY

Your mother was also from Russia?

BIBERMAN

Yes.

COREY

Do you know where in Russia?

BIBERMAN

Both my mother and father came from an area near Kiev. I know that the little town in which my father was born was called Granov. I don't know the name of the town in which my mother was born. She was very young when she was brought to this country; she was, I think, eight years old. My father was sixteen when he came, and he came alone. He was a very adventurous young man and made the trip alone. But my mother, who was younger, was brought by her family. The town in which my mother was born was somewhere in the Kiev area, because I know that at a certain point both families went to Odessa, which, as you know, is an important seaport on the Black Sea.

COREY

You were the youngest of three children?

BIBERMAN

Yes.

COREY

You had a brother Herbert, and a sister . . .

BIBERMAN

. . . Rebecca.

COREY

Rebecca. Now at the age of eleven you moved from the city out into what you called in your book an "upper-middle-class suburb. " Did that move affect you in any way?

BIBERMAN

Yes, it did. You see, although you would not know it to look at me now, I was not a very healthy child. I was rather sickly. I also had the either fortune or misfortune of having been a very precocious student as a child, so that when we moved to the upper-middle-class suburb, it affected me in several ways. First of all, this was a very definite WASP community. I know that when I went to my last year of grammar school, I was the only Jewish child in the school. I was victimized—and I use that word advisedly--by a very, very open anti-Semitism. Also, having been precocious, I had skipped several terms in school, so that I was two years younger than my classmates. The combination of being two years younger and considered to be a very smart kid and also being Jewish had a very traumatic effect on me at that time. I know that I look back at that period with, oh--certainly with no sense of the usual euphoric quality that many children associate with childhood. For me, it was a very difficult and a very unhappy period.

COREY

Did you do any painting when you were a child?

BIBERMAN

Well, let me say this: I'd always drawn and painted. I had an uncle, Mother's youngest brother, who was only a few months older than I was. We were very close friends, and he was always very embarrassed at the fact that he was my uncle. He used to insist, whenever we went out, that I'd be careful to introduce him as my cousin. Anyway, both of us liked to draw, as children. And in those days, the popular magazines used to reproduce a little caricature — I think it was of Uncle Sam--and the caption said, "Copy this drawing of Uncle Sam and send it to us, and we will tell you if you have any talent." You know, this mail-order business! So we used to get all of the magazines that we could, copy the caricature, and mail it in. They would always send you the first lesson free, and of course they would also assure you that you had tremendous talent and that if you would send them whatever the tuition was, you would then receive the correspondence course. We early discovered that since we got the first lesson free, we would collect all of the magazines that we could lay our hands on and copy the caricature of Uncle Sam--which was very simple to copy, actually—and send them out and get our free lessons. But in answer to your question, the fact is that although all children draw, I suppose I drew more than most children. And I kept it up, which most children do not do.

COREY

You finished high school at sixteen?

BIBERMAN

I finished high school at sixteen, and I finished college when I was nineteen.

COREY

Nineteen. Was it [at age] seventeen that you were thrown from a horse and did the portrait of your sister?

BIBERMAN

Yes.

COREY

Was that the first time you worked in oils?

BIBERMAN

The very first time. As a matter of fact, it was my brother Herbert who bought me the set of oils. Up until that time, I'd worked in watercolor, and, of course, I drew with pencils, and crayons and so forth. But that was the first time I'd worked in oils.

COREY

And it was Robert Susan--is it Susan or Suzanne?-- who had seen that picture . . . ?

BIBERMAN

Yes, it was Robert Susan. Jacqueline Susann, the recently deceased author, was his daughter. Robert Susan was a very well known portrait painter in Philadelphia, working in the tradition of [John Singer] Sargent and [Eugene] Speicher. [He was a] very talented portrait painter who never achieved national recognition, but was very well known in Philadelphia. He was a family friend, so that when I began to think seriously about continuing painting in a more disciplined fashion, we naturally turned to him. He was the first professional to say, "Well, maybe we should do something about your interest."

COREY

When was it that you entered the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce?

BIBERMAN

I went there from 1921 to 1924.

COREY

So that was during the time that you had been laid up with . . . ?

BIBERMAN

Yes, as a matter of fact, it was about halfway through college that I broke my leg, an incident that we will discuss later. I'd gone into college when I was sixteen, so in the summer of my seventeenth year I was about halfway through college.

COREY

Why economics?

BIBERMAN

The plan was that both my brother and I were to go into my father's business, so that we both attended the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, which was a general preparatory school for anyone who was interested in a business career. And we were both considered very bright students, and were both elected to the honor fraternity, Beta Gamma Sigma. Since this was a business school, they were not permitted to elect to Phi Beta Kappa, but Beta Gamma Sigma corresponded to that. We were both A students all the way through college — not that we cared particularly about the courses, but we both had, I suppose, very good memories. And you know the usual academic situation: if you study for an examination and you've got a good memory, you get an A. And if you forget it the next day, that's unimportant! So this was pretty much our history, although my brother actually went into my father's business for about three years after school, while I did not.

COREY

You never worked there at all?

BIBERMAN

No.

COREY

You were offered a teaching position at Wharton?

BIBERMAN

Yes.

COREY

Did you ever consider accepting it?

BIBERMAN

Not at all. [laughter] I think I mention in the book on my paintings that by the time I was about to finish college, I had pretty much decided — and my family was pretty well reconciled to the fact — that I was not going into business. Since I'd had a very good scholastic record, and nobody knew of my hidden art vices — that is, nobody in the academic community- -the head of the

economics department, before graduation, called me into his office one day and said, "Biberman, what are you going to do when you get out of school?" I said, "I'm going to paint." And he said, "Paint? Paint what?" [laughter] I said, "Paint pictures." He said, "Well, I mean what are you going to do with your life? What do you plan to do?" I said, "I'd like to study art." He said, "Well, I wanted to offer you a teaching job here, but of course if you have other plans then there's no point to that." But I was actually offered a junior instructor's post. It was not a TA. They didn't have TAs in those days. But the last thing in the world that I wanted to do was to accept.

COREY

It never occurred to you as a child to be an artist?

BIBERMAN

No, it didn't, simply because this was pretty much out of the experience of our family. No people in our family were in any of the arts. Since my parents were first- generation people who had achieved success in their own way, with great difficulty, and since all of their friends and family and peers were people who had done the same, we were not in direct touch with anything in the professional cultural field. My mother and father both enjoyed the good things in life. They went to the opera in Philadelphia; they went to the theater, we had a nice library. As I recall it, when I was a child, we had one of the first phonographs on our street. And you know, we grew up with records of opera and good books. But the idea of any of us becoming a professional artist in any field was simply not even considered.

COREY

And then both you and Herbert went into the arts?

BIBERMAN

Yes.

COREY

Herbert went into the 47 Workshop at Yale? Was that something that you and he talked about? Or were your decisions to go into the arts fairly independent of each other?

BIBERMAN

Well, you see, my brother had always been interested in writing. He had collected a very good library of his own when he was a very young man and used to work with little- theater groups while he was in school. As a matter of fact, he was in a very famous student theatrical group called the Mask and Wig Club at the University of Pennsylvania, where he twice played the lead. He was always interested in the theater, and there were several little-theater groups in Philadelphia, so that both during the time that he was in college and after, he worked with them. But he never thought of it professionally until, after three years in business, he decided that business was not for him and he made the break. Once he made the decision, when it came my turn to make the break, it was much easier because--what shall I say?--the initial heresy had already been established.

COREY

And in 1924 you enrolled full time at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts?

BIBERMAN

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. In Philadelphia.

COREY

Why that particular place?

BIBERMAN

Well, as a matter of fact, the Pennsylvania Academy is the oldest art school in America—Philadelphia, as you know, being an old colonial city. Many of the cultural activities of that period had their beginnings either in Philadelphia or in New York. The Pennsylvania Academy, as the oldest art school in America, was also a very good school, so that although I had previously, before becoming a full-time student, gone to night classes at another art school in Philadelphia called the School of Industrial Art because they offered both night classes and summer classes—when it came time to enroll as a full-time student, it was very natural to go to the Pennsylvania Academy.

COREY

Was it a fairly traditional training?

BIBERMAN

Yes. It was an academic school, with the usual classic training in portraiture, landscape painting, life drawing, and so forth.

COREY

Was there any one person in particular there that you had wanted to study with, or was it just to go to the academy for itself?

BIBERMAN

Well, when I went there, I was not too familiar with the faculty. But once there, I found two men with whom I preferred to work. One was a very colorful painter named Arthur Carles, who never reached great national stature, although he did have a couple of one-man shows in New York. He was a very strange, very gifted painter, but a very strange personality in the Philadelphia community. He had a long black beard, and in those days not even the bohemians sported beards. He was a very colorful, slightly obscene man, who was, strangely enough, taken up by the socialites in Philadelphia. He was a good friend of Leopold Stokowski's, who already was a great figure in the music world in Philadelphia as conductor of the Philadelphia orchestra. Carles was a very charismatic person, a very interesting man. I worked with him and also with another painter by the name of Henry McCarter, who was also on the faculty. Henry McCarter, although known particularly as an illustrator, also had a great influence on many students. He, too, was a very interesting person. I spent the final summer before I went to Europe with him, working in a school that he conducted in Longport, New Jersey, just down the Island from Atlantic City. He had a group of students there who paid, you know, for board and tuition and so forth. But this was a very rewarding experience for me. These, then, were the two men at the academy who influenced me the most.

COREY

And in 1926 you went to Europe?

BIBERMAN

Yes.

COREY

Why Europe?

BIBERMAN

Well, by now you know the lore of expatriation in the twenties. The twenties were a very strange period in American history. This was the time of Sinclair Lewis and *Babbitt* and *Main Street*, and most of the people who were interested in the arts were convinced that the United States was a cultural desert and that the only artistic salvation was to go where the action was. And at that time, the action was Paris. In the literary field, as you know, it was the whole Gertrude Stein, Joyce, Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald attraction. In the field of music, young Americans also—like Marc Blitzstein, a friend of mine in those days--went to Europe. And of course, since Paris was the undisputed center of painting activity, all the young painters wanted to go to Paris. So I went, too, with a modest subsidy from my father, who at that time was able to afford it.

COREY

Did you know anyone there, or did you just go and discover whatever you could?

BIBERMAN

Well, strangely enough, the wife of an uncle, my father's youngest brother, was related to a painter named Louis Kronberg, from Boston. Now, when I said a few moments ago that our family had no relation to the art field, this [relationship with Louis Kronberg] was very tangential. Louis Kronberg had quite a reputation at that time, and he was called the American Degas because he also painted ballet dancers. When I went to Europe on my first trip, in 1924-- this was my college graduation present, a summer trip to Europe--I went to see Louis Kronberg [in Paris]. We went to some exhibitions together, and when I decided to go to Paris in 1926, I got in touch with him and found that I could rent his studio, which was a very inexpensive rental. So I knew Louis Kronberg when I went to Paris, and then very quickly, I found that there were a number of Americans, both in the field of art and in the field of music, whom I knew or soon met, so that very quickly, I found that I was not alone there.

COREY

[Were there] people [there] that you had previously known in America?

BIBERMAN

Some whom I'd known previously, like Marc Blitzstein and a couple of fellow students from the academy in Philadelphia, who in turn had certain contacts. So that we had a pretty immediate circle of American friends. I say we--people like myself, in Paris.

COREY

When you went to Paris, did you plan to study in any particular school, or just to live there and paint?

BIBERMAN

I had decided at that point not to study, formally, in Paris. The strange thing is that outside of the very classic schools, like the [Ecole des] Beaux-Arts in Paris, there were no other very good art schools. There was no counterpart, let me say, to a school like the Pennsylvania Academy. There were places where one could study, but they were semiprivate. There was a painter named Andre Lhote, who was very fashionable as a teacher. And there was the Academie Colarossi, which was very informal, as was the Grande Chaumiere, which was also a very informal school. I suppose I was arrogant enough at that point in my budding career to feel that what I wanted to do was to work on my own, which I did, and to go to schools only to draw from the model, but no formal schooling. In that three-year period in Paris, it was all self-study, and as I look back on it, this was the best way to do it in Paris at that time. The art experience was so varied and so enormous that a young painter, if he had any ability at all, could really learn much more by looking than he could by enrolling in an art school.

COREY

When you say the experiences were varied, do you mean in terms of traditional things that had happened in Paris, or contemporary things that were beginning to happen?

BIBERMAN

Well, it was both. After all, you had the Louvre in Paris, and you had the tremendous number of galleries and large exhibitions. You had a coterie of

painters from all over the world working there with whom you could converse in the common language--French. So, the experience of being in an international milieu, with all of the people interested in the same things you were interested in, plus the fact that the theater was marvelous, and the experimental cinema, too: there was a total art experience which was unlike anything, certainly, that I'd ever encountered before or that I've known since.

COREY

Did you find that you tended to generate towards artists from a particular country, let's say, England, or Italy, Germany?

BIBERMAN

Well, unfortunately, [for] most of us, it was largely a kind of an introverted existence, because of the language barrier—although this was not true in my case because I spoke pretty good French even before I went there. This was one of the subjects that I liked best in college. I was reading novels in French in my university classes, so the language problem was no great barrier for me. Nonetheless, most of the Americans tended to stay with each other. We had some friends from other countries, but by and large, most of the foreigners tended to almost ghettoize themselves in terms of their contacts. The Scandinavians stayed pretty much within their own circle. The Middle Europeans stayed pretty much with their own groups. There was a certain amount of crossing over, but in general, the foreign groups tended to remain fairly intact socially.

COREY

What about artistically? Was there any exchange of views?

BIBERMAN

Artistically, there was a great exchange. This occurred because the possibilities of seeing exhibitions and of showing our work was very much on everybody's agenda. But socially, the contacts were a little bit more isolated.

COREY

Artistically, who were your main contacts in Paris? The people that you spent most of your time with?

BIBERMAN

Well, I had a very good friend, a Scotch painter named George Owen, who, so far as I know, never achieved any great stature, but I saw a great deal of him when I was in Paris. A very close friend of mine in Paris was Isamu Noguchi, the sculptor, who of course has become very well known. Man Ray was already a prominent figure in the art world. Some of the other American painters — like Marsden Hartley, Adolf Dehn, Ernest Fiene, Stuart Davis, Emil Gauso, and others— were in and out of Paris then. I saw a great deal of Alexander Calder, then doing wire sculpture, only later making his mobiles, his stabiles, and all of the other things that he does these days. Marc Blitzstein, I've already said, was a friend of mine. He was also from Philadelphia. George Antheil, who was very well known, of course, as an enfant terrible in the field of music, was a friend. Hilaire Hiler, the painter who later wrote some very definitive books on painting techniques, was a friend. Also, the English graphic artist, Bill Hayter, whose school, Atelier, later became world-famous. It was a large group of people with whom we were associated.

COREY

In 1927 you sent two paintings to the Salon d'Automne?

BIBERMAN

Yes.

COREY

How did that come about? Were you encouraged to do that, or was it your own decision?

BIBERMAN

Both. In the summer of 1927, I was in the fishing village of Concarneau, painting. My brother was with me that summer. He was preparing to go to Moscow to study with [Vsevolod] Meyerhold, and he came to Europe, and we spent the summer together in this little fishing village. In our hotel, there was a French critic-writer named Charles Fegdal, and Charles Fegdal was interested in me as a young American painter and wanted to see what I was doing. So I took him to the little studio that I'd rented in the village, and he expressed great interest in my work and said, "You should, of course, send some of your

paintings to the Autumn Salon this fall." And it was largely at his suggestion that I did, and to my great surprise and pleasure, the two paintings that I sent were both accepted. This then became my first public exhibition. Every day I would go there as soon as the exhibition opened — I think this was in either the Grand Palais or Petit Palais--and I would stand within earshot of my painting all day long [laughter] to try to find out what people were saying when they saw these two works of mine.

COREY

What was the response?

BIBERMAN

Oh, it was varied, obviously. You know, the first time a young painter exhibits his work, he's terribly concerned about how it's going to be received. So I eavesdropped.

COREY

One of those paintings was *The White Gladiola*?

BIBERMAN

The White Gladiola, and a portrait that I had painted of the daughter of an English artist who was in that little fishing village with his family at the same time. The English artist had a name which was fantastic. His name was Sir Frank Spenlove-Spenlove, R.A. Sir Frank Spenlove-Spenlove, R.A. looked like a Peter Arno cartoon. He was very big, florid, [with a] great white mustache. A charming man. The painting of his daughter, incidentally — I don't know where it is, or what happened to it. Somewhere in my moving, that painting has been lost. It just disappeared, and I have no sense of what happened to it.

COREY

You spent the summers of 1926 and 1927 in Concarneau. Why there?

BIBERMAN

I mentioned a little while ago one of my instructors at the academy in Philadelphia, Henry McCarter. As a young painter [he] had spent a lot of time in France and had gone to Concarneau. That whole part of Brittany, including Concarneau and another little town called Pont- Aven, were the places to

which many of the early French impressionists went. There was a great school of painting called the Pont-Aven School. Gauguin, among others, worked in that area. So the little fishing villages and the town of Pont-Aven — which is inland--had, for many years, a great reputation as the area to which painters went in the summer. And it was a very beautiful part of Brittany. The little fishing villages were very colorful--the boats and the sails and the sailors. So I went to Concarneau, primarily on the recommendation of my old instructor. And I loved the place, so much so that I went back again the following summer.

COREY

With all the colorful environment, why did you choose primarily to paint human figures? It seems that the majority of the works that you did then were of people.

BIBERMAN

Well, you see my first and greatest interest was then in portraiture. At a very early age, I had a certain facility in getting likenesses. Some people have to work hard to do it, and some people don't. I happened to have that knack, and I became interested, very early, in painting people. Furthermore, the early association with Robert Susan, the portrait painter, reinforced this desire. When I went to Brittany, most of the artists were painting the boats and the sails and the water, although some also painted the sailors and the fisherwomen. I did a few things that had to do with the sea, but most of my time was spent on canvases of the people because my work was going in that direction.

COREY

Was there a large group of artists who were also in that general area? And was everyone following the same tradition?

BIBERMAN

You mean, were there a lot of people in Concarneau painting?

COREY

In Concarneau painting, or people who left Paris for the summer to go to Brittany.

BIBERMAN

Oh, yes, and again, a very international group. I mentioned a Scotch painter, George Owen. I first met him in Concarneau. He had come to this village from Edinburgh. There was also a young French painter, whose name escapes me at the moment, and a few Norwegians. The town was quite small, and everyone knew everyone else very quickly. Since there was very little to do in the evening, one night we decided to play cards. The group that sat down consisted of myself, an American; George Owen, who was Scotch; a young painter from Austria, whose name I don't remember; one Frenchman; and two Norwegians. The problem was, what game did we all know? Interestingly enough, everybody knew how to play poker. So we all played poker! But actually, there were a great many people, both tourists and artists, from all over the world. There were several art schools, summer schools, transplanted from other places, too. There was an American painter named Sigurd Skou, who took a group of students there and ran his summer school.

COREY

Getting back to Paris, what was the atmosphere in Paris when you were there?

BIBERMAN

I'm sure you're speaking now of the cultural atmosphere. Fascinating — frenetic but fascinating. This was the period when cubism had already been pretty firmly established as the avant-garde mode. Surrealism was just beginning to become an important force. The Surrealist Manifesto was written, I believe, in 1924.

COREY

Who wrote that?

BIBERMAN

Andre Breton, I believe. The surrealist movement in the art field and also the field of the cinema was very important. Musically, there was great ferment. This was the period of Darius Milhaud, Ravel, Stravinsky. An American, Edgar Varese, was also in Paris at that time. [There was] a great deal of experimental work being done in the theater--not the Comedie Franchise or the other

established, old, classic theaters, but the avant-garde theaters. So that in general, there was a tremendous amount of ferment in all of the arts, and it was a very heady atmosphere to be in. You always felt that you were in the froth, on top of something which was bubbling, and very exciting. It was a tremendously stimulating atmosphere for anybody, in any of the arts. Which is why all of us flocked to Paris.

COREY

Your portrait of Betty--she was the daughter of an American family living in Paris. In one of your books you said it was through her that you became familiar with many French artists and writers.

BIBERMAN

Yes. Let me tell you how that happened. The family was from Cincinnati. They were quite wealthy, and I think the father stayed home to make the money while the mother and two daughters decided to lead a literary, bohemian kind of life in Paris. The mother had been very close to French literary circles. She had been a friend, and still was, I believe ... I don't remember whether Anatole France was still living at that time, but in any case, she was a friend of Anatole France and knew many other literary people, so that the whole family grew up close to the literary circles in Paris and also to the art circles. And since they were completely bilingual at this point, they had no language barriers. It was through the daughter, Betty--her name was Van Ness Lippelman — that I first met some of the then very well known French painters. Well, they weren't really French, all of them. For example, [Moise] Kisling, who was a member of the so-called school of Paris, was a Pole, a Polish Jew. But he traveled in a circle of some of the better-known painters at the Ecole de Paris. So this friendship was interesting for me because it threw me into contact with a group of people whom I might not otherwise have encountered.

COREY

Such as?

BIBERMAN

Well, such as [Moise] Kisling, whom I've just mentioned, a group of young French architects, and some musicians whom I met through that family also.

There was a Hungarian painter--Tihanyi was his name—whom I met, the art critic Eugene Teriade, a few Czech painters, Andre Cenes, the cartoonist, for one. But in substance, the fact is that this contact opened certain avenues which otherwise simply would not have existed.

COREY

You returned to Philadelphia in 1928?

BIBERMAN

For the summer.

COREY

For a visit, or any particular reason?

BIBERMAN

Yes. I'd been away for two years. I hadn't seen my family--they wanted to see me, and I wanted to see them--so I came back to spend the summer. [I] painted all through that summer. I did a portrait of my niece, Anne-- Anne Strick at that time. She was then a child of almost four. I did some landscapes and a few other paintings during that summer period, but I was terribly anxious to get back to Paris. I had the feeling that Paris was going to be a continuing part of my life, that I just, somehow or other, had to stay there. But when I went back for the third year, I began to have a sense of dislocation, even though I had the good fortune to have had in that year [my] first one-man exhibitions in Paris and Berlin. My work attracted the attention of a very important French critic, and I was advised to stay in Paris and told that if I stayed there, I would be guaranteed an international reputation in ten years. This was the promise held out to me by Eugene Teriade, of the *Cahiers d' Art*, a very important French art journal. But I began to have the uneasy feeling that I was enjoying the cream of a situation, but that the base really did not belong to me, that I could never really be totally assimilated- that I could never really belong to Paris, although the temptation was great, opportunistically, to stay there and see if the promise of an international reputation in ten years was valid. But the feeling persisted that I had to go back to a place where I felt my roots lay and where I could honestly spend whatever creative energies I had, rather than to remain in a very pleasant but ephemeral and unstable situation.

COREY

Did it frighten you at all to think that you were going back to America, the great cultural desert?

BIBERMAN

Yes and no. It frightened me because, number one, I decided I wanted to go to New York, where I had very few contacts, so it was again going into a new atmosphere. It frightened me also because I had no sense of what I would encounter as a young painter in a new area. On the other hand, I did have the advantage of having already had two one-man exhibitions in Europe--not only at the Galerie Zak in Paris, which you asked about, but also in Berlin.

Therefore, I had a certain trepidation, but at the same time, I was bolstered by the fact that there had already been a little bit of recognition and, hopefully, there would be some more when I came into another situation.

COREY

How strong was the decision to move back to America connected to your concept of where you wanted your art to go? Did you feel that you could not do what you wanted to do in Paris, that you would not develop in the manner that you . . . ?

BIBERMAN

No, it wasn't really a matter of my development as a painter, because I was torn, feeling that maybe my development as a painter might be speeded up by being in Paris. It really wasn't that. It was a sense of sociologically not being able to see myself as a part of what I then realized, no matter how beautiful, was really an alien culture. It was a question of my place as a human being in a given time in history. And I decided that it had to be America and not Europe.

COREY

Well, saying that, then how strongly do you think one's physical environment affects what they paint or how they paint?

BIBERMAN

I think it depends on the individual. For example, [Alexander] Calder, whom I mentioned a few moments ago, still spends most of his time in Europe. Well,

it's apparently fine for him. But I have found as I've looked not only at painters but people in the other cultural fields- who, at a certain point, threw up their hands in horror at what they considered the philistine quality in this country and who went off to Europe or to Mexico, or some other place--that after x-number of years, with few exceptions, returned to this country, feeling that, for better or worse, this is where they had to be. Now, there are exceptions. I mean, Henry James lived very happily in Europe for a long time, as did John Singer Sargent. Bernard Berenson lived very happily in Italy. There are exceptions. But I think that in general, most Americans in the cultural fields, at a given point, have felt a kind of compulsion — I can put it in no other terms--a compulsion to, you know, be the salmon that swims upstream. But you gotta go home, even though Thomas Wolfe says that you can never go home again.

COREY

Do you think your art would have been any different had you stayed in Paris?

BIBERMAN

It probably would have. I don't know whether that's good or bad, but I think that it would have been different. I think that it would have been more closely influenced by an international attitude had I remained there. Now this becomes one of those iffy questions. You can't have it both ways. You don't know whether it would have been better or worse. It would have been different, I think, because the atmosphere out of which it came would have been different. But there's no way, in retrospect, of wondering whether it would have been better, worse,

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (NOVEMBER 24, 1975 and DECEMBER 8, 1975)

COREY

You were talking about how it would have been different. How much do you think you were affected by what went on in Paris?

BIBERMAN

I was affected a great deal by it, I think, both positively and negatively, in finding some of the things that I did want and also finding about some of the things that I did not want. I indicated a moment ago that cubism was then the

current mode in the avant-garde field and that surrealism was becoming increasingly important. Most of the young painters embarked on one of these directions or both. I did a little experimental work for a short time in a cubist idiom, and a little bit also in a kind of surrealist tradition. When I say that I found both, what I did want to do and what I did not want to do, I very quickly decided for myself that abstraction was not for me. I just didn't like it. On the other hand, I would have to say in all honesty that some of the structural aspects of nonobjective painting were very important to me then and have remained very important for me. I'm talking now about the purely formal, structural elements of design, which are, of course, very important in the whole cubist approach. However, the absence of associative content became something that I could not accept. In terms of surrealism, I appreciated the fact that the basis of surrealism, of course, is the antithesis of nonobjective art. Surrealism deals with situations, associations, ideas, personalities, persons, although it places them in unfamiliar context: the subconscious, the unconscious, the associative. So in surrealism, I liked the idea of considering relationships which were not necessarily optical truth; it could be emotional, subjective, or psychological truth. That I appreciated, and that, again, I have stayed with up into my present work. Although the Freudian aspects of surrealism, which were a very important part of the initial impulse, had very little validity in terms of my own work, I had no objection to Dali or anybody else doing whatever they wanted with the Freudian concepts. But I rejected them, just as for me, the absence of associations or concepts or ideas in non-objective painting became something which I did not accept. So as I say, there were pluses and minuses in the situation; but being exposed to the ferment and the discussions, both verbal and visual, became very important at that time and is one of the things for which, as I have indicated, I feel nothing but great gratitude. Even if one rejects a concept, the fact that one talks about it leads to a more firm crystallization of one's own ideas and concepts. If you have to talk about it and argue and either accept or refute, then your own position is bolstered. And this is what happened. This is, I think in general, true of the entire period, to get us back to your question about what was the atmosphere in Paris. This was the atmosphere. It was frenetic, but it was also very exciting because it made you declare your allegiances.

COREY

Were there serious factions?

BIBERMAN

Oh, of course. You know the story of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* causing a riot when it was first played in Paris. Now we hear *Sacre du Printemps*, and, you know, it's exciting, but nobody would consider tearing up the seats in a concert hall. But this was part of the atmosphere. This is part of the thing that, as I say, made it very exciting.

COREY

When you returned to Paris in 1929, you had a one- man show at the Galerie Zak?

BIBERMAN

Yes, the Galerie Zak. [Eugene] Zak was a painter, and the gallery was run by his widow, Madame Zak. Zak was, oh, I would say, [a] middle-echelon, accepted artist at that time. Everybody knew his work, but he was never one of the more important in the school of Paris. The gallery was run by his widow, Madame Zak, and that's where I had the first one-man show in the spring of '29, just before I came back to the States. At that time, I had some American friends who had been living in Germany, a woman named Mrs. Stella Simon and her son Louis Simon (with whom I'd gone to school at the University of Pennsylvania) . They were in Berlin during that period making a film. They would come down to Paris periodically, and a friend of theirs, a German named Max Dungert, who was a cinematographer, came to Paris just at the time that I had my exhibition in Paris. He saw the show and said, "Why don't you have an exhibition in Berlin?" I said, "Well, I don't know anybody in Berlin, and I don't know how I would even go about doing it." And he said, "Well, I can arrange it for you if you would like." So he did. He went back to Berlin, arranged the exhibition for me. I had the exhibition in Berlin, at the Neue Kunsthandlung, which means, as I recall it, the "new attitudes about art"—Kunst being "art" and neue of course being "new." Kunsthandlung: the new dealership or new relations in art—I guess that would be a general translation.

COREY

It was the same show that had been at Galerie Zak?

BIBERMAN

It went intact from Paris to Berlin. That experience in Berlin was very interesting. I stayed at a little German pension with Sandy Calder. He was having an exhibition at another gallery in Berlin at the time — the Nierendorf Gallery, I believe it was — so we went to Berlin together and stayed at the same pension. And I later discovered — I spoke very little German, so that I got along very badly that way in Germany--but I found out many years later that the pension in which we stayed was a Nazi stronghold. And this, in retrospect, always amuses me. I used to see these strange scar-faced men in the pension and sort of hatchet-faced women. I didn't know what they were talking about, but I learned later that this was a real Nazi nest, into which we, as a couple of innocents, happened to fall. We just didn't know what was going on there. But Germany was — Berlin, rather, because I didn't see anything else in Germany. Berlin at that period in 1929 was unbelievable. I would say that its overt decadence made Paris--which, you know, had the reputation of being a very decadent city- made Paris look like a little country village. And in retrospect again, I can see how some of the beginnings of the Nazi movement came out of not only the frustrations of the German people and their terrible economic condition, but also showed up in the strangely perverted quality of life in Berlin--strange city! For example, in 1929, the amount of homosexuality and lesbianism which was just all over the place--and not covert, not concealed, not the closet kind of living but all around. That, coupled with the fact that very recently they'd gone through a terrible period of inflation plus the disgruntled attitude of the militarists in Germany after the defeat of the First World War, the whole city, to me, was absolutely macabre. And I didn't like it at all. I didn't know why I didn't like it, really, because, although I did not understand the political situation, I just had the sense that something strange was happening. Interestingly enough, the motion picture *Cabaret* - -which I'm sure you've seen— very closely paralleled the feeling of Berlin at that time and showed a very canny understanding of all of that growing horror. For example, I went to nightclubs in Berlin, and they were very much like the Joel Grey, Liza Minnelli *Cabaret* settings. It was fascinating for me, but I can't say that I was comfortable with it. I am glad to have experienced it because, again, in retrospect, I think I can understand the growth of what happened only a few years later in Germany.

COREY

Paris decadence was not quite as destructive?

BIBERMAN

No, Paris was sort of frivolous. For me there was, oh, a kind of more simplistic decadence in Paris, if you like. [laughter] I don't know, it was just there. It was obvious and accepted. But in Germany, in Berlin, it had a different quality. I can only use the word "macabre" again--it was creepy. It was not a healthy decadence; it was an unhealthy decadence. But it was an interesting experience.

COREY

In terms of that, what was the response to your show?

BIBERMAN

In Germany? Nobody paid very much attention to it. There were a few critical reviews, but I was a completely unknown young painter. I had the show there, and it got a couple of middling-to-fair reviews. But that was all. Nothing happened.

COREY

What about the response in Paris?

BIBERMAN

In Paris it was better, I think largely due to the fact that I had already had a couple of things exhibited in Paris. Although it didn't get a great deal of attention, it was better received, I would say, on the whole, in Paris than it was in Berlin. But it was important for me to have had both shows. It was a very good experience for a young painter.

COREY

How would the organization of a show like that develop? Would you go to a gallery and say, "I'd like to exhibit," or would someone come to you?

BIBERMAN

No, this was an overture that I had to make. There were certain galleries where a young painter could exhibit, and there were certain galleries where a young painter could not, so there was a choice of a rather limited number of galleries. The procedure was that I went to the Galerie Zak and discussed the possibility of an exhibition with them. The arrangement was that I had to undertake the cost of the catalogs and whatever little advertising we did, and I had to guarantee a certain revenue from the show. If there were no sales out of the show, then that was my problem — I had to pony up whatever the guarantee was. And since there were in fact no sales out of the show, I ultimately had to make up the guarantee. However, it did not involve any great amount. But I'd like to establish the fact that you simply couldn't buy a show. It was not a vanity gallery. You couldn't walk off the street and say, "I want to have a show here. How much will it cost?" The point is, the gallery did have a professional reputation which it wished to uphold. It had to also, from its own point of view, be sure that when it undertook to show the work of a new person, that it [was able] to pay its rent. I felt that this was eminently fair. They would not take on an exhibition by a new artist unless they felt a certain confidence in the competence of the work, so the fact that they were willing to put on the show, I thought, was a point in my favor. The fact that I had to guarantee them at least their rent if there were no sales, I felt, was certainly a perfectly fair situation, since they knew that I was going back to America and there would be no chance of their recouping out of my subsequent exhibitions.

COREY

What about art dealers in Paris in the twenties? Were there any people who were particularly helpful to young, unknown artists?

BIBERMAN

I'm sure that there were. I had no first-hand experience of that sort. The more established galleries, of course, were dealing--as they do anywhere else--with the accepted people. Whether you're talking about Madison Avenue in New York, or La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles, the more accepted galleries handle the work of those people whom they feel they can successfully sell. There are also, in all of these cities, galleries that are willing to [take a] chance with a relative unknown. The situation in Paris, in that direction, is one that I

had no firsthand experience with. [There had been,] for example, the phenomenon of the dealers who first began to show French artists before they became well known — like, for example, a Cezanne, or van Gogh, or other early impressionists and postimpressionists . That kind of dealer relationship, vis-a-vis American artists particularly, did not exist. As a matter of fact, one of the reasons, I think--as I look at it in retrospect--why Teriade was anxious to foster me and why he wanted me to stay in Paris was the fact that, at that time, there was no well-known American painter other than Man Ray who had any great reputation in Paris. Apparently, he felt that I could be groomed for this position. But he was a critic and not a dealer.

COREY

And there were no collectors, either?

BIBERMAN

Well, the collectors were actually buying the French School. For example, Gertrude Stein was not collecting the work of Americans. As you know from all the things that you've read about Gertrude Stein and her coterie of friends, she was the great collector of Picasso and Matisse and others of the French School. So far as I know, she was either unaware of, or uninterested in, any of the American painters in Paris, young or old. I know of no American painter of that period who was in Gertrude Stein's collection. Similarly, I know of no French collector who was interested in the work of Americans. That probably came later--I'm sure it did — but long after I left Paris. For example, at the present time, as you know, there is a great vogue for American painters all over Europe. People like Jackson Pollock and [Willem] de Kooning and the whole New York School are eagerly sought out by French collectors and dealers--and by Swiss and Scandinavians. This was not true in the period of the twenties.

COREY

Within that context, then, did you have to find most of your support from fellow artists?

BIBERMAN

Support in what terms?

COREY

Support in terms of believing that what you were doing would eventually be accepted.

BIBERMAN

I would say yes. But of course, once we came back to the States, the situation was entirely different because then we were on our own turf, so to speak. But at that time, in Europe, the American painters largely had to bolster each other's egos, because we didn't get it from the outside.

DECEMBER 8, 1975

BIBERMAN

This is a digression. When I was painting in New Mexico, 1930, a lot of Texans used to come there. There was one family of Texans who had a little girl of about ten, who apparently developed a great crush on me. She used to follow me all around and really became quite a nuisance. One day she said to me, "Mr. Biberman, will you talk to me?" So I said, "Fine, what would you like me to talk about?" She said, "Well, it really doesn't matter. I just like to hear your voice." [laughter] She was ten years of age.

COREY

Were you ever going to act?

BIBERMAN

I used to do a lot of amateur theatricals.

COREY

Prepainting or postpainting?

BIBERMAN

Both. As a matter of fact, in high school I belonged to the dramatic club; in college I played Shakespeare with the college dramatic club; and after college, when I was in art school, there was a little theater outside of Philadelphia, in a place called Rose Valley — a very beautiful suburb of Philadelphia. There was a little theater [there] which was run by a man named Jasper Deeter, who was

of the old Provincetown group. In college I had done a play called *The Yellow Jacket* --I don't know whether you're familiar with it or not — by Hazelton and Benrimo. I had done the part of the property man, which is a lush part because it's all pantomime and no speaking. They were going to do it at Rose Valley, and somehow or other, they got wind of the fact that I had played this part in college. They asked me to come out there to do it, so I did. That began an association of about two years. As a matter of fact, that was where I first met Paul Robeson.

COREY

At Provincetown?

BIBERMAN

No, at the little theater in Rose Valley. He had come down to do *The Emperor Jones*. In that particular play, I played the part of one of the supernumeraries who, after the emperor is shot with a silver bullet--if you remember the play--has to carry Jones on stage and then dump him down in front of the footlights. I was a grown young man and pretty strong. I had one end of Paul Robeson, and another young man, of about my same build, had the other end, and we could barely carry this man in and dump him on the stage. But I never thought of doing acting seriously. I enjoyed it, but with all deference to your own family's background, [laughter] the last thing in the world I ever wanted to be, professionally, was an actor, so that was the end of my acting career.

COREY

To get back to your painting career, I was reading through the reviews of your show at the Galerie Zak in Paris, and one of the reviews had mentioned that there was something sculptural in your earlier works. Had you ever thought of sculpting?

BIBERMAN

Not at that time, but I did one piece of sculpture in my career — and this is kind of an amusing story. As a matter of fact, the sculpture, although it won't record on your tape, is sitting right out there in the hallway. In 1929, after I came back to the States, from Europe, I had a studio on Fifty-seventh Street. Isamu Noguchi, who had been a close friend of mine in Paris, had a studio in

the same building. One day I knocked on his door, and I said, "Isamu, I'm tired of painting. I want to do some sculpture." And I said, "I've never done it before, so I want a modeling stand and an armature and some clay, and show me how you get started." So he gave me the modeling stand and an armature, and he showed me how you coil the clay around the armature so that you can build on it. I took all of that stuff back into my own studio, and the first day, I made five complete pieces of sculpture. I said, "It can't be that easy. [laughter] There's something silly about this." Each time I would make a piece of sculpture — and there was only a certain amount of clay--I would mash it all together and do another. The first day I did five. And I thought to myself, "This is really ridiculous." I said, "Tomorrow, I'm going to get up nice and early, and by dint of great self-control, I'm going to force myself to spend an entire day on one piece of sculpture." So the next day, I got up, and by really stretching it out, I spent the entire day doing a head. Along about late afternoon, when I thought that I had done all that I could to it, I took it to Noguchi, and I said, "Well, Isamu, what do you think of it?" He looked at it and said, "Well, it's not good, but it's not bad." He said, "I'll tell you what. I'm casting some of my own stuff tomorrow, and I'll cast your piece also." So he cast it, and that was 1929, and I've not touched a piece of sculpture since--because I have enough respect for every discipline to know that nothing is easy. If something seems to be easy, it's usually a kind of a surface facility, and I distrusted that in myself. So I decided that if, at some future time, I wanted to be really serious about sculpture, I might try it. But I've become too engrossed, continuously, with painting, so that is the only extant Biberman sculpture.

COREY

Was it very much different from the five you did the first day?

BIBERMAN

I really don't remember. It was probably different in the sense that I spent a little more time on it, and it was more carefully considered. But as I recall it, at least two of those five pieces were heads. I don't remember what the others were. They were probably small figures, because I was working with just a limited amount of clay. But the point is that I found working in a three-dimensional medium just fantastically--I won't say easy, but fantastically different than trying to create the illusion of three dimensions in a two-

dimensional medium. And since it seemed so simple--because one didn't have to create the third dimension; it was already there--I decided that I was not being very serious about it and said, "That's the end of my career as a sculptor." I have, on occasion, sort of toyed with the idea of doing something again, but if I were, I would probably not work with clay. I would probably want to carve, and that requires all kinds of equipment and so forth and so on. I just never got going.

COREY

I have a question that I almost hesitate to ask you, but it was something that also came up in the review from the show at the Galerie Zak. One of the reviewers said that Edward Biberman was the logical outcome of Aubrey Beardsley .

BIBERMAN

Good Lord, I don't remember that.

COREY

It's in your scrapbook.

BIBERMAN

That I am the logical outcome of Aubrey Beardsley? Well. [laughter] That kind of stops me. First of all, I don't remember it. Secondly, I don't know what the reviewer could have meant. I've never thought of myself as— you know, I admire Aubrey Beardsley 's line and so forth, but the kind of fin-de-siecle decadence of Aubrey Beardsley and the *Yellow Book* and all of that whole atmosphere--I just don't know what they're talking about.

COREY

It sort of stopped me, too.

BIBERMAN

Well, it stops me. I'm going to have to reread that and see in what context that occurs. I have no recollection of that at all.

COREY

In 1929, you returned to the United States and spent the summer with your family on the island of Mount Desert.

BIBERMAN

Mount Desert Island — we were near Bar Harbor, in Maine. I went there for two reasons. First of all, having been away from my family for almost three years, with the exception of a time the summer before that, I felt that I wanted to spend the summer with them. And they wanted to spend the summer with me. I had heard through friends of mine, some painters, about the area around Bar Harbor. Bar Harbor, at that time, was a big social center. But the islands around Bar Harbor, and the country near there, I was told, was extremely beautiful--very rocky coast and a very dramatic confluence of water and terrain. I drove up with my mother to sort of look the area over, and we found a little farmhouse, several miles out of the town of Bar Harbor itself, which we rented for the summer. Through that summer, my sister spent a lot of time with us; my father and my sister's husband would usually come up from Philadelphia on weekends. It was a very beautiful summer in the sense that it was the kind of landscape with which I was not very familiar. My recollection of coast had mostly to do with the part of the Jersey coast which is very sandy, [with] scrub pines, and [is] not at all rocky. I found the whole quality of the New England coastline very exciting. I painted quite a few landscapes that summer. I also painted the portrait of my mother which is reproduced in my book, *Time and Circumstance*. And in all, it was a nice transition from Paris to going to New York, which I'd planned to do at the end of the summer. Also, at the end of that summer, my mother and I drove up to Quebec, which proved to be very interesting for me— I'd never been in Canada before. Nothing came out of that trip so far as my painting was concerned, but it was simply, again, another pleasant interlude before returning to New York.

COREY

How did your mother feel about your painting?

BIBERMAN

She was very partial to my decision not to become a businessman and to continue painting. She was always a very supportive person, in terms of my

work--not that my father wasn't, but there was, in his case, a great sense of disappointment, in the fact that I had not gone into his business, nor had my brother. So that I think that his role was more tolerant than supportive.

COREY

And you went back to Paris at the end of that summer?

BIBERMAN

No.

COREY

You stayed?

BIBERMAN

No, the end of that summer was the end of three years in Paris, and I went back to New York.

COREY

You went back to New York . . .

BIBERMAN

I say "back to New York"; I went to New York, because I had never lived there prior to that. As I may have indicated, the problem of being a young painter in Philadelphia was very difficult. It was just too close to New York, and all of the young painters felt the strong attraction of New York and wanted to leave. So anybody that could possibly manage to leave Philadelphia and get to New York did so.

COREY

What was the attraction to New York?

BIBERMAN

Well, the fact of the matter was that the art activity in the United States, at that time, centered in New York. The galleries were there, the art publications, the major museums, and, of course, the Metropolitan was there. And Philadelphia, by contrast, in terms of the art field, was very provincial. Unlike the music scene— where Philadelphia ranked very high with the Philadelphia

Orchestra and the Curtis Institute — in terms of visual art, Philadelphia suffered from being only ninety miles from New York, and had, in comparison, a much more, again, provincial quality.

COREY

Had the art scene in New York changed very much in the three years you were in Paris, or had your attitudes changed so that New York felt more comfortable?

BIBERMAN

Well, you see, I had never lived in New York before, but I was fairly familiar with what was going on there. You know, I'd make occasional trips and so forth. And I would say that a great change did occur for a two- fold reason. First of all, by the period of 1929, the great return of all the expatriates had already started when the stock market crash brought back all of us who were living on little stipends from our families, and the whole expatriate scene, in terms of art, changed. Most of the American painters whom I knew in Paris were back in America, and most of them were from New York. In addition to that, there was the fact that we were embarking on the whole period of the Great Depression after the crash. In 1929, it hadn't yet manifested itself to the degree that it would in a few years, but already there was a great sense of unease because of the changed economic picture. So in answer to your question, I had the feeling that New York artists, for purely economic reasons, had to divorce themselves physically from Paris. [They had to] look around and try to assess their position of no longer being expatriates, try to locate themselves, both physically and emotionally, in the American scene.

COREY

When you say "economically," what exactly do you mean?

BIBERMAN

Well, of course, you know that the fact of the matter is that certainly, in this country, art is, and always has been, a luxury item. It's the last acquisition in most people's budgetary outlook and, therefore, the first casualty when a need for economy comes in. So that although it hadn't manifested itself as stringently as it did in a few years, already there was a sense that the galleries

were not going to be selling paintings as they had in the period prior to that, which as you know, historically, was a great boom period. In a boom period, people go to nightclubs, they buy expensive cars and luxury items, and if there's anything left over, they buy art. So that art became a casualty of the period.

COREY

How did you live in New York?

BIBERMAN

Well, since my family hadn't as yet suffered too much from the effects of the crash, I still had a small subsidy from my family. I also began to sell my work, and although the sales were not spectacular, there was a certain income that I derived from these sales. So that between what I had from selling my work and the fact that I never was cut off completely from family help, I managed to get through that early period.

COREY

How did the sales of your works occur?

BIBERMAN

Well, in what was for me a rather interesting — and, as I look back on it, a very strange — fashion. When I was in Paris, I'd met a number of the American painters who were already established on the New York scene — or in the scene, I should say.

COREY

Such as?

BIBERMAN

Well, people like Adolph Dehn, for example, who had come to Paris to work. And Mahonri Young, who was a painter and sculptor. And [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi, and Stuart Davis—I could go on. But these were people who were already pretty well established in New York. In addition to that, in Paris I had met a woman named Ruth Green Harris, who was the second art critic on the *New York Times*. She was very interested in the work of mine that she saw, and when I came to New York—I don't recall whether it was through Ruth Harris or

through another woman whom I had met-- I was introduced to a man named George Hellman. George Hellman had been the owner and the director of an art gallery called the New Gallery in New York. He was no longer in business when I first met him, but he still had very firm and solid connections with the New York art dealer community. Hellman became very interested in my work and bought several things from me. We had a very involved exchange deal at one point which involved my taking over a painting by Kisling in exchange for a painting of mine. But in any case, he introduced me to the director of the Montross Gallery. The Montross Gallery was a very old and established gallery in New York, and the old [N.E.] Montross — I say "old" because he was a man who I would say was in his late seventies — also became very interested in me and in my work. I had two exhibitions at his gallery, and I also, at that time, through someone — I can't quite recall the connection— met Jere Abbott and Alfred Barr, who were just at that time beginning to start the Museum of Modern Art. They too saw and liked my work, so that I very suddenly found myself-- as I look back on it, it's kind of strange, but at that time I simply took this as a matter of course — taken up by a very good gallery, in contact with the people who were directors of the Museum of Modern Art, and also [in] contact with the Whitney Museum. I very quickly, by these rather fortuitous circumstances, found myself very closely involved with the New York exhibition scene, so that through these contacts, I began to make sales. Not spectacularly, but I was getting exhibitions, and I was beginning to sell my work.

COREY

You were part of the "Forty-six under Thirty-five" at the Museum of Modern Art?

BIBERMAN

That's right.

COREY

Was that one of its first shows?

BIBERMAN

It was an early show. I don't recall the exact date of the founding of the Museum of Modern Art--I think it was about 1929, 1930. But one of its early shows was the show called "Forty-six under Thirty-five"--the title simply had to do with the museum's choice of forty-six artists whose work it felt showed promise and who were not yet thirty-five years of age. I was very fortunate to have been chosen for that exhibition because already the Museum of Modern Art was, even in its beginnings, a very prestigious New York gallery, so that my inclusion in that show meant that very early in my career, I was getting a lot of exposure, I look back on it now with a kind of amazement because there were so many friends of mine who had been on the art scene a great deal longer than I had — and who, I must say, were certainly as talented as I was--who did not happen on this series of, as I would characterize them, fortuitous encounters and I would like to think that the encounters were not only fortuitous but [that] they were based on some sense of empathy with the things that I did. Nonetheless, in retrospect, I'm quite astonished at the speed with which I suddenly became involved in the New York art scene.

COREY

Do you feel that the move to New York affected your painting?

BIBERMAN

Not so much the move to New York as the mood which began to develop, not only in New York but all over the country in that period. This was the period which, as you know and as I've already indicated, was the start of the Depression, and I don't think it was so much the move to New York as it was my acute awareness of what was happening all over the country that made me reconsider, reassess, and question a lot of what was going on in art. In particular, there was the phenomenon of the great mural movement in Mexico, which we were all very, very conscious of. In that whole period of the early thirties — although this is kind of jumping your question a bit — but in that period of the early thirties, [Diego] Rivera was in New York for a long time, [Jose] Orozco was in New York, [David] Siqueiros was in New York, in addition to which, we knew of the work of all of these people in Mexico. The fact that Mexico, a very poor country, was subsidizing what had already become and proved to be one of the world's really great mural movements made many of us question, in this particular period, the role of the easel

painter who, after all, was dependent upon the largesse of those people who had enough money to buy paintings, which — let's face it--were usually considered to be items of decoration for their homes.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (DECEMBER 8, 1975)

BIBERMAN

In answer to your question, I don't think it was the move to New York that occasioned a great change in my work, but it was, rather, the mood of the whole country that made me begin a very critical period in my examination of my own work. A lot of that, as I've said, had to do with the presence and the awareness of the Mexican movement. In terms of the things that I was painting, I was still continuing what I had been doing during this period of gestation. I was still painting portraits. I painted Martha Graham in that period, I painted Katharine Cornell, [and] I painted views of the city. I began what has become a long love affair with architectural thematic material, which meant that I was painting some of the architecture of the city and the George Washington Bridge. So that although I kept going through the motions--and I say that advisedly--of what I had been doing, I was in a very critical period of self-examination. And this culminated, in a little time, in the fact that I joined a kind of a cooperative group of young painters, all of whom, because of their fascination with the Mexican movement, started to study the fresco techniques. There was young Italian-American painter named Conrad Albrizio, who had been trained in fresco in the American Academy at Fontainebleau, who was our mentor. We didn't pay him, but he worked along with us because I think he was anxious to develop a school of fresco painting. A group of about a dozen painters, none of whom had a particular reputation but all of whom were anxious to study the technique, began to work in fresco. We had no idea as to where this would lead us in terms of commissions, but at least my own feeling was that this was a technique that I wanted to learn, hoping that sometime, somewhere it might be applied. It never was, incidentally, as a technique. [I] never had occasion to use it because, jumping in time, when I painted the murals that came to me many years later, I was not permitted to paint them in fresco. However, I enjoyed the fact that I was studying a new technique.

COREY

What was it about the Mexican movement, simply the technique?

BIBERMAN

No, fresco, as you know, has a long, honorable history as a technique. But it was the combination of a technique which was hallowed by time and, most importantly, the uses to which the technique was being put. As you know, the entire Mexican mural movement was predicated on the fact that this was a public art. Going into public locales. It had to speak directly to the people [and to] the country. Therefore, its language could not be esoteric, since the audience was a totally new audience. And I think the best example of what I mean is the history of Diego Rivera, who, living in Paris, before the overthrow of the [Porfirio] Diaz regime in Mexico, was a very talented abstract and cubist painter. [He was] a friend of Picasso's, and of Juan Gris and of the whole group that was investigating the cubist and the abstract premise. And Rivera was then a very able abstract painter--you may know some of his work of that period. But when he found out about what was happening in Mexico and returned to Mexico, he, in a very short time, it seems to me, abandoned his abstract style and began the historic, narrative painting style for which he is best known. There was no point in being a cubist painter on the walls of Mexico because this was not the way to speak to the Mexican people. And since art became a very direct means of communication, not only the technique but the motivation changed. This was less true of a man like Orozco, who had never been attracted to the abstract idiom, and a little less true of Siqueiros, who had only a small flirtation with the abstract concept, and as the youngest of the three never had to break with a crystallized past aesthetic attitude. So that, to come back after this rather circuitous route that I've taken, I had enormous admiration, particularly in this period, for the motivation that drove these artists to do the work they did. And although I had no sense of how this might happen in our own country--because this was prior to the whole New Deal art period — I had the feeling that something had to give, that the premise upon which we had all been operating in the past was no longer valid.

COREY

What do you mean by "no longer valid"?

BIBERMAN

Well, the business of being an easel painter and producing what the economists call a "commodity" in the hope that somewhere, sometime, someone would buy it. This is what I mean by the premise. The premise of public art is totally different. You don't paint an enormous wall in the hope that someday, someone will build a building for it. In public art, you have a building, you have a premise, you have an opportunity, and the opportunity and the audience are both public. Therefore, it seemed to me at that time, and I still feel [it is true], that given a different premise, one arrives at a different conclusion--in art as well as in logic.

COREY

Did the development of the idea of the mural have anything to do with what was happening architecturally in New York, with skyscrapers or large buildings?

BIBERMAN

No. No relation at all. There was the hope that this would occur. One of the other exhibitions in which I participated under the aegis of the Museum of Modern Art was based on this hope, which proved to be false. The argument was that since we were in a new architectural period in the United States, a period with the development of the skyscraper, a new mural movement, which would be housed in the new architecture, would emerge. The Museum of Modern Art invited artists and staged an exhibition of mural solutions to hypothetical problems, which was designed to induce architects and builders to think about incorporating murals into their new buildings. The idea was very good and pious, but it really never bore fruit, although the exhibition itself was interesting, and there were some rather good theoretical solutions made. But all of us were designing for nonexistent conditions, which is kind of a contradiction in mural art. In mural art, the whole premise is that you're working with a given set of architectural conditions, and if you have to invent both the condition and the solution, it becomes a kind of strange pursuit. Nonetheless, this is what happened at that exhibition in the museum. It was good for me, because I received good reviews, and it led to other things, but the hope which is at the heart of your question was never really fulfilled. The murals that now decorate the big skyscrapers in the East and here, and the sculptural works that embellish them, came about under different

circumstances entirely. Nothing happened in that early period to parallel the Mexican movement. The parallel came later with the development of the various art projects under [Franklin Delano] Roosevelt.

COREY

How did you become aware of what was happening in Mexico?

BIBERMAN

Two ways. First of all, the movement was very well publicized in all of the art magazines. A lot of Americans had gone to Mexico, and some of the Mexicans themselves, as I indicated, came to the United States. So there was a kind of cross-fertilization. We could not be unaware of the Mexican movement when Diego Rivera was painting his big mural--subsequently destroyed—in Radio City, when Orozco was painting the murals in the New School for Social Research, and when Siqueiros was in New York lecturing at the New School for Social Research. We all met these people, so that it would have been almost impossible to have been unaware of the Mexican phenomenon. Incidentally, as you may also remember, the first major exhibition of Diego Rivera's in the United States was held in the then-new Museum of Modern Art. I don't know whether you're aware of that or not.

COREY

No, I wasn't.

BIBERMAN

So, as I say, you could not be unaware of this phenomenon. It was the big, hot thing after the school of Paris and, for many people, carried much more validity.

COREY

You were doing murals and portraits at the same time?

BIBERMAN

Mural projects, not murals.

COREY

Right, mural projects, but you were also painting cityscapes and painting portraits. You mentioned before that you and Noguchi were good friends in Paris and in New York.

BIBERMAN

That's right.

COREY

You did a portrait of his sister?

BIBERMAN

Yes. He had a very beautiful sister who was a member of Martha Graham's dance company--her name was Ailes, Ailes Gilmour. Both, you see, were of mixed parentage, The mother was Scotch-Irish and the father was of pure Japanese ancestry, so that, as very often happens with two racial strains, the result was quite phenomenal. Noguchi himself was a handsome young man, and his sister was a beauty. I still have the painting which I did of her, which is one of my most cherished paintings of that period. I have no idea what happened to Ailes; I've lost contact with her completely. But it was through Noguchi and through Ailes Gilmour that I first met Martha Graham. I became very enamored of her work, and it was because of that interest that I painted a large portrait of her. [It] got a great deal of favorable publicity at the time. She was beginning to be the most talked-of figure in the dance world, and the portrait that I did of her, I exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy in Philadelphia. It received a great deal of attention and was reproduced full-page in the *Theatre Arts* magazine. Later it was again reproduced in Merle Armitage's book on Martha Graham.

COREY

Was that a portrait that she requested?

BIBERMAN

No, no. She had the graciousness to allow me to come to her studio while she was working. I did the painting from a great many drawings and sketches and notes that I made. She didn't pose, in the formal sense. What I did, or at least what I tried to do, was to distill the quality of her early work. It was very severe, very geometric, very--I don't know how to best describe it in words:

very contained, very precise, very evocative. It was this quality which I tried to instill in the pose in which I finally painted her. There was a kind of tautness in her body which was very much like the way she held herself in those early dance numbers. The portrait is not a pose from any one dance but rather an attempt to crystallize the quality of her figure in the dances that she was doing at that time. The more lyric quality came into her dances much later, when she was doing things like *Appalachian Spring*, and so forth. It was a totally different idiom. I found it very moving. I was very excited by it. I tried to go to all of her concerts in addition to making drawings of her in her studio while she was teaching, working.

COREY

Do you think you would have gotten a very different type of portrait if she had sat for you?

BIBERMAN

No, I don't think so, but frankly, I felt no need to ask her to pose. I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted her to do. I would not have asked her to, you know, sit, because I wanted a standing pose. [laughter] I would not have asked her to pose for me simply because this would have been, from my point of view, an imposition.

COREY

About that time, you also did the portrait of Gale Sondergaard .

BIBERMAN

Yes.

COREY

Had she and Herbert been married by that time?

BIBERMAN

They married just before I returned from Europe in 1929. It was really very interesting because Herbert used to write to me, saying, "In a lot of the figures that you have been painting"--and those were the invented figures that I had been painting in Paris--"although you don't know it, you have really been painting Gale, whom you will meet." And later I knew what he meant because

one of the last paintings that I had done in Paris was that of a Canadian woman whom I knew in Paris. It's a painting that I had exhibited at the Salon des Independants . (Incidentally, it was slashed in that exhibition. We never knew why or how or by whom, but while it was on exhibition, somebody walked past it and carried either a knife or a razor blade and, at about hip height, put a long gash through the canvas.) Anyway, there was a great similarity, I found, between the way I had painted this Canadian woman and what I saw in Gale, and I then found out what Herbert was talking about. I was very interested in Gale, both as a person and as a potential sitter. And she actually sat, because this is a sitting portrait. [laughter]

COREY

Was Herbert writing or directing?

BIBERMAN

He had begun to direct at that point. He did a series of directorial stints for the Theatre Guild, and he was already well embarked on his career. Gale, of course, was already an actress, and had appeared in one of the plays in which Herbert played a small part. He also did a directorial stint, or a co-directorial stint— I don't quite remember what the circumstances were. But Gale was already embarked. She had no schizophrenic problem. She was an actress then, and she's remained an actress. Herbert had done a lot of acting at Yale, but he really wanted to go into direction, which he did very shortly after that. To get back to Gale's portrait, I've always had a great love for portraiture, all through my painting career. There were times when the accent was heavy on portraiture, and there were times when the accent was light. But there has been no period in my career in which I completely stopped painting portraits. This has always been too important a part of my impulse as a painter. In New York at that time, through the fact that Herbert and Gale were in the theater, I had the opportunity to meet and paint Katharine Cornell. I met her through Lee Simonson, who was with the Theatre Guild and who convinced Katharine Cornell that she should sit for me, which she did. This kind of contact into the world of the theater started then and, of course, continued many years later, when we all found ourselves in California.

COREY

From the reviews, the portrait of Katharine Cornell created quite a stir.

BIBERMAN

Yes, and I, again, [laughter] in looking back on it--well, let's say that sensibilities change. I remember an incident when I was hanging the exhibition in which this painting was first shown in the Reinhardt Gallery. My first dealer, Montross, had died, and I changed over to the Reinhardt Gallery. I was hanging the exhibition, and the door was open--the exhibition was not theoretically open, but the door to the gallery was open — and a rather elderly gentleman walked in and looked around and saw the portrait of Katharine Cornell. He snorted and said, "The man who painted that picture ought to be hung." He thought I was the handyman, just taking things off the floor and putting them up. But the portrait did create kind of a furore, which rather surprised me because I didn't feel at the time, and I don't feel now, that it should have evoked quite the kind of outraged cries that it did in certain circles. A lot of people considered it a caricature of Katharine Cornell, which certainly was the farthest thing in the world from my mind. Other people liked it enormously. John Mason Brown, for example, who was then one of the top New York theatrical critics, wrote me a very, very beautiful note after he'd seen the portrait, in which he went out of his way to compliment me on what he thought was a splendid characterization of someone whom he considered a great actress. And Katharine Cornell's secretary, a woman named Gertrude Macy, came up to my studio to see the portrait when it was finished and came up with a classic line. After she looked at the portrait, she said, "You know, that portrait of Katharine Cornell is more like Katharine Cornell than Katharine Cornell is like Katharine Cornell." Which I thought was a great comment. I thought of it in those terms, but some people felt that it was a caricature. So that when Gertrude Macy said it was more like Katharine Cornell than Katharine Cornell was like Katharine Cornell, a lot of people carried that thought one step farther, and said, "It's a caricature." A couple of the New York art critics got very exercised about it but, from my point of view, for no very good reason. Now, for example, many, many years later, this reaction would not occur. But apparently at that time the portrait raised the hackles of a few people. During that exhibition, a rather interesting thing happened which relates to something which bore fruit a little time later. I went into the gallery one day after the exhibition had opened, and the young man who

worked in the gallery, named Freddie Lake, said, "Oh, by the way, Joan Crawford came in here, and she saw your portrait of Katharine Cornell, and she absolutely flipped. And she wanted me to tell you that if you ever came to California, she would love to have you paint her portrait." So I said, "Well, that's nice. Maybe someday, if I am in California, we'll do something about it." So, a few years later, when I came to California, I got in touch with her. And I painted her portrait, which she subsequently bought. But anyway, this all relates to some of the brouhaha that occurred around that Cornell portrait.

COREY

The Crawford portrait created some of that itself, didn't it?

BIBERMAN

Yes, but in a different sense. The Crawford portrait elicited a lot of comment from a press agent type of publicity. I suddenly found that a very innocuous comment that I had made, saying that there was a very Egyptian quality about her, was given to the press as a story that I was painting Joan Crawford as an "Egyptian goddess." This was pure press agency! No, the reaction to the Joan Crawford portrait was quite different from the Cornell reactions. Nobody was outraged — let me put it that way-- by the Crawford portrait, but a lot of people were outraged by what they thought was a caricature of Katharine Cornell.

COREY

Is it outrage because of her, or outrage because of style?

BIBERMAN

I really don't know because I never quite understood it. The color, although I didn't feel it was particularly daring — I painted her in a very intense kind of a claret-colored dress which I made up for her because I just felt that with her black hair, and the pallor of her skin, and the very red makeup that she used on a very generous mouth, that I wanted this kind of deep claret-colored costume. So I invented the costume. It was probably a combination of the fact that some people sensed caricature in the features, and others felt that there was an overemphasis on the color approach that occasioned this.

COREY

Previous to the Cornell portrait, you had spent the summer in Taos, New Mexico?

BIBERMAN

Yes. The summer of 1930, I had gone to Taos. And again, I went there because, number one, I had never been West; number two, I had heard a great deal about the quality of Western landscape; and, very frankly, I was very curious about the Indians. I had the sense that this was a piece of the country which would appeal to me enormously, and it certainly did, in truth, have that quality. Fabulous.

COREY

In what way?

BIBERMAN

Well, the country was fantastic beyond my fondest expectations. The Indians were there, and they were very paintable, and the other people who were there were very exciting. The landscape appealed to me enormously. I found the Indians very exciting, [and] the company, particularly of people like John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe, Paul Strand, Lady Brett, and the whole body of D.H. Lawrence legends — and in 1930, the legends were still very fresh. All of that made it a very memorable summer. I came back with a lot of paintings and a great love for the Southwest, which has persisted to this day. I returned to the Southwest the next summer, not to Taos but to Monument Valley. At the end of my stay in Taos, two painter friends of mine, two young ladies from the East, came through Taos and by pure chance came to the hotel in which I was stopping. They were very anxious to go into an area called Monument Valley, which at that time was very, very little known. They were rather timid about going themselves and wanted to know if I would consider teaming up with them and taking the trip. I was most anxious to do so. I had a little Model T Ford which I wouldn't dare to have taken more than ten miles out of the town. They had a very serviceable car, so we used theirs, and we went to Monument Valley together. One of the young women was not well known as a painter, but the other was very well known. She was a painter by the name of Marian Greenwood who had already begun to make quite a reputation for herself in New York and who later went to Mexico and painted murals. So I

saw Monument Valley at the end of the summer in Taos and found this even more exciting than Taos itself. The following summer, I went directly to Monument Valley, where I spent, oh, better than two months. I did a great deal of work that summer.

COREY

When you say "exciting," in what ways?

BIBERMAN

Well, again, two of the three components were very exciting. I eliminate the third because there was no Marin, there was no Strand, there was no O'Keeffe. There were only Indians and traders. But the country was the most dramatic that I have ever seen. It's become popularized since because it's been the location for so many Western movies. But to see these fantastic red stone monoliths, and to be in the middle of a very active Navajo Indian culture! The Taos Indians, as you know, are a Pueblo tribe. They're an agricultural people, and as an agricultural Indian community, they grow corn and squash and they live sedentary lives in still-existing pueblos. The Navajos, on the contrary, are a sheepherding people [and] are nomadic. They have no fixed abodes. They live in temporary houses called hogans, which they live in while the sheep are grazing, and then they move to another location. They are a much more dynamic people and, visually, very fierce looking. They almost live on horseback. They are very colorful in their costumes — not that the Pueblo Indians are not colorful, but the Navajos seemed to me to be even more handsome in their dress, and their nomadic life gave them, physically even, a different look entirely than the Pueblo Indians, who were more likely to be shorter and heavysset. The Navajos, particularly the young men, are very lean and very wiry. They practically live on horses. I found them very, very wonderful, visually, and I painted many of them. The country, too--it was fabulous.

COREY

Did you find that you needed to make any adjustments in your painting of the Southwest, as opposed to New York or Paris?

BIBERMAN

It was a totally different kind of painting idiom. I'd never had the experience, for example, of having to cope with country which was semi-arid and, in the case of Monument Valley, red ochre. I remember a very amusing story that relates to John Marin, who one day, when we were talking, said, "You know, this country really frustrates me." He said, "You know, all this pink and green. I never know whether to paint everything pink and put in green spots or to put in the green spots and paint pink around them! " [laughter] Well, it didn't frustrate me, since I'd never really been a devoted landscape painter; but it certainly posed entirely different considerations than, let's say, the kind of country that I painted the summer before in Bar Harbor, which was Eastern, lush, green, cool in tonality. To suddenly find myself in red sandstone country, with great rocky promontories and monoliths, with wiry, beautiful dark-skinned Indians, was very exciting, very provocative. And I had to lay out a new palette because I'd never had this particular visual challenge before. But it didn't present any insurmountable problems. It was simply a change- over from one color key to another color key. But it didn't pose the kind of trauma that Marin apparently faced when he didn't know which to put in first, the dots or the foreground.

COREY

You did some very literal paintings at that time, and then there's *Desert Light*, which is much — well, I don't want to define it, but

BIBERMAN

Yes, I think that's a fair characterization. Most of the landscapes I did were literal in that they related to very recognizable formations even though the treatment could not be considered literal. Nonetheless, they were figurative in the sense that if you could see the particular buttes and if you saw my paintings, you would say, yes, that's this particular spot. A couple of the paintings that I did-- the *Desert Light*, which you mentioned particularly, was much more of a mood painting. There was no such optical phenomenon as a sky with horizontal slits of light. Nonetheless, the feeling of the desert at night was powerful, and it raised a kind of a need, at a given point, for me to create a mood painting which was not figurative. Stars do not look like horizontal blips on a radar screen, yet, in a sense, I feel that that painting probably carries the feel of the desert, as I look back on it, more than the literal

paintings. That particular canvas, I have not seen for better than thirty years. It was purchased in the middle thirties and is somewhere in the East — I don't know quite where.

COREY

Do you feel that the choice of painting Indians in the Southwest is in any way attached to the development of your idea about the mural? It's very different than painting a Katharine Cornell or a Gale Sondergaard.

BIBERMAN

Well, let me put it this way: I have often thought about the fact that, well, you know they say that a painter always paints, and this is true. I mean, a painter always paints. When I found myself in New York, I painted the things that related to that setting. When I went into another atmosphere, the desert, I painted that particular setting. When I found that instead of figures out of the New York theater, I was painting Indians on horseback, I painted them. I've always found that I can usually relate to the place that I happen to find myself in, and if I am happy in that place, I paint my reactions to whatever the visual stimuli may be. Therefore, again, I had no mental gymnastics that I had to exercise in order to turn off New York and turn on the Southwest. However, the following year in New York, I did paint a proposed mural composition based on my experience with the Navajo Indians. This composition was shown in another big exhibition directed toward a mural program for the city, which, like the previous one, did not take place. Again, we're leading up to — and I'm sure that we're going to be talking about-- the whole public arts program, but all of this is prior to that period.

COREY

There was a traveling show with the College Art Association. What exactly was that? In some of the catalogs and newspaper interviews, it mentions the Blue Four. What was that?

BIBERMAN

Yes. Well, number one, the College Art Association was — and has since remained — a very important part of the art scene in this country. As you know, they organize important traveling exhibitions, and they hold art

conferences. In this earlier period, they were less well known. Nonetheless, they were an important part of the art scene, particularly in New York. I had met, and I don't remember through what circumstances, two of the ladies who were very important in selecting the exhibition material. One was Mrs. Fran Pollack, and the other was Mrs. Audrey MacMahon. Mrs. Pollack was a devoted art lover, as was Mrs. MacMahon, the wife of Professor Philip MacMahon, who was, I believe, on the faculty of NYU. I had met them and they had become interested in my paintings and included my work in many of their exhibitions. The other exhibition which you mentioned, having to do with the Blue Four, had no relation to the College Art Association. That was an exhibition in which I found my work cheek by jowl in Chicago with an exhibition by the Blue Four. This exhibition was staged by the Arts Club of Chicago, which had large quarters in the Wrigley Building. I didn't go to Chicago to see the exhibition, but apparently their gallery space was large enough so that in one room there was the work of the Blue Four, and in another room an exhibition of my work. The reviews, many of them, contrasted the Blue Four exhibition with my exhibition, but this was pure happenstance.

COREY

It wasn't intentional?

BIBERMAN

No.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO (FEBRUARY 12, 1976)

COREY

Specifically, I'd like to start with the time right after Monument Valley, when you came to California, and how that came about.

BIBERMAN

I had never been to California. I had great curiosity about it, and I had friends who lived in California- as a matter of fact, they lived very close to where we are now. They lived down off of Cheremoya [Avenue] . They knew that I was in Arizona [and] Utah, and they suggested that before I returned East, I might

visit them. So I did. I had a car — a new little Ford--and I drove and spent about a week with them here in California and was fascinated by the country. Then I decided that before I returned East, I would drive up the coast. I was particularly eager to see San Francisco. I took Route 1, which at that time bore no relation to what it is today. It was a very difficult, winding dirt road in many places. I stopped over in Carmel and met Edward Weston there. I'd known his photographs, and I saw a shingle outside of a little frame house one day, and I took the liberty of knocking at his door. We spent a very delightful time together. I stayed in Carmel for a couple of days and then went on to San Francisco, which I found fascinating. I was there for about a week, I believe, and then sold my car and took the train East. But I really fell very hard for California. I remember particularly one experience on the drive up the coast which, for me, was so fascinating that I remember it even today very vividly. At that time, as is true now, if you want to make a stop on the drive north, the logical place to do so is San Luis Obispo. I had driven north, and of course in those days you didn't drive as fast, both because of the cars and the roads. I reached San Luis Obispo late in the afternoon — this was in September—and I remember the fantastic experience of driving up a steep grade and seeing the fog rolling in from the Pacific and the sun still shining down on the hills. The combination of the fog rolling in and the sun and the Pacific and the mountains—it was just a shattering visual experience, one that I'll never forget. But in general, the whole Southwest and California was a really provocative experience in relation to my feeling about where I wanted to live from that time on. So, although I returned to New York after leaving San Francisco, the memory of California stayed with me as a very, very rich experience.

COREY

You said both the Southwest and California had a certain appeal to you. Why, then, California over New Mexico or Arizona?

BIBERMAN

Well, the point is that being by then a city-based person, I found— and this is still true — that I liked to spend time in isolated areas if there are things there that attract me professionally. But the sense of being completely isolated from

all the things that I enjoy in an urban center weighed against my staying permanently in a place like New Mexico.

COREY

Even with the appeal of the Taos artists like Georgia O'Keeffe?

BIBERMAN

Yes, but that's seasonal, you know. These are mostly summer people. It was fine for a couple of months, but I could not see myself "holing up" for a longer period of time, even in a slightly more urban setting like Santa Fe. Taos, you must remember, was a village then. Santa Fe had a little bit more of a general cultural allure, but even that, I felt, was not sufficient to hold me. Plus the fact that from a purely practical point of view, the associations that I found necessary for the presentation and furthering of my work were not present in those places. I had to have a more urban setting.

COREY

Were they more present for you in California than in New York?

BIBERMAN

No, much less. But at that time, it was for me a question of drawing up a balance sheet. There were certain things that I very definitely missed when away from New York, and there were certain definite things when I was in New York that I missed in recalling the Western experience

COREY

Such as?

BIBERMAN

Well, let's take each one in turn. New York in the thirties was obviously a much more active area for the art experience than California. So there were certain things lacking in my relation to the art community in California. On the other hand, New York obviously did not have the thousand-foot sandstone bluffs, painted red, and it didn't have the great spaces of the West which I dearly loved. And it didn't have the other special visual qualities that so excited me. I had therefore to decide where the greater virtues lay, and I

found that, for me, the decision was that they lay heavier in California. And, quite honestly, I've never regretted that choice.

COREY

This is a time when your interest in mural painting was very intense, and it seems as if New York, as a city environment, would somehow be more appealing than California. Los Angeles, although being a metropolitan city, still didn't have the environment of the great bluffs and the ocean, and all you mentioned about the natural environment being appealing.

BIBERMAN

Well, there's no question of the fact that in the early thirties--this was before the period of the government art projects — the general interest in mural painting and my own was very much in evidence in New York, I frankly didn't know whether at that time it was or was not important here in Los Angeles because I hadn't been here long enough to find out. Certainly my original interest and essays into the field of mural painting took place in New York. However, by the time I left New York and came to California, a totally new factor had entered, and that was the federal sponsorship of the arts. This meant that the possibilities in California were just as good as the possibilities in New York.

COREY

Possibilities, but what about the artistic environment in California, the artists who were here, and the ideas about art that were here? How were they different from New York?

BIBERMAN

Much more provincial. And as I said, this was one of the minus factors in the balance sheet. [It was] much more provincial in the sense that: (a) there were fewer artists, (b) there were fewer galleries, (c) there were fewer museums, and (d) there was less interest generally in the field of the visual arts. This was then a movie- oriented community. But again--and this is skipping several years--by the time I decided to move to California, the very absence of what I had begun to feel as a kind of incestuous quality pervading the art scene in

New York--the very absence of that in California became a plus factor, so that minus turned into plus.

COREY

Was there anybody here in the art world that was particularly appealing to you, of the few "provincial" artists that there were?

BIBERMAN

No, as a matter of fact, when I first came here, the only two names that I had heard of in the East who were working in California were Millard Sheets, who had already begun to show in New York; and Stanton MacDonald- Wright, who was kind of a cosmopolitan figure--but at that time, at least, he was based in California. Outside of Mac Donald-Wright and Millard Sheets, I had not known of any California painters. However, I was, very frankly, not interested in whether or not there were California painters whose work I admired. I was really much more interested in my feeling that this was for me a time of stocktaking, a period of gestation and the presence or absence of a large body of spectacular talents really didn't enter into my thinking. There was a very interesting group of younger painters whom I met when I came here to live in '36, but that, again, is jumping several years — I don't know how much continuity you want to follow in your questioning. I'm talking now about a span of five years — from 1931, when I first saw California, to 1936, when I came here to live.

COREY

What happened in the interim of those years? You went back to New York?

BIBERMAN

I went back to New York in the autumn of 1931 and continued my easel painting. I also continued a very active exhibition career. In that period I first began my practical interest in mural painting and my actual efforts to study the fresco technique. Studying the fresco technique came about because of the great interest in this country in the Mexican mural movement and the fact that in the period that we're talking about now, the years in New York between my California visit and my final settling in California, the big names in Mexican art had come, at various times, to New York. This was where I first

met Rivera, where I first met Siqueiros, where I first met Orozco. As a matter of fact, I spent a weekend with Orozco in Dartmouth when he was painting his frescoes for the university library. This was a period when, as I say, I was very active as an easel painter, both in exhibitions and in productivity. I also began to experiment with fresco techniques and also entered what few competitions were open in the commercial mural-painting field prior to the entrance of the government into this area.

COREY

What kind of competitions were these?

BIBERMAN

Well, there was one which was sponsored by a commercial ... it wasn't a paper company; I think they manufactured labeling devices and logos and material for the visual field. They sponsored a competition which I didn't win, but my sketches got a great deal of attention. It was largely on the basis of the sketches which I made for that exhibition and for two exhibitions sponsored by the city of New York and the Municipal Art Gallery of New York and also those for the Museum of Modern Art. They were reproduced, and critics talked about a "budding new mural talent." I don't remember exactly what the phrase was. So, although I entered actively into competitions, none of which I won, it was on the basis of those competitions, even though I had never painted a mural, that I was elected a member of the National Society of Mural Painters, which was then a very prestigious organization. And strangely enough, on the basis of this kind of accumulation of critical acclaim, I became a guest critic of mural painting at the Beaux-Arts Institute in New York, which was strange, since I found myself in the anomalous position of being invited to be a critic of the work of aspiring mural painters without myself ever having painted a mural! This was the kind of mixed-up situation in which I found myself in that period in New York.

COREY

How do you think the interest in mural painting affected, if at all, your easel paintings?

BIBERMAN

Not directly. I would say only indirectly. The interesting point, of course, is that there's a great philosophic difference between easel painting, which is a very private kind of endeavor, and mural painting, which is basically a public endeavor. In easel painting, you are painting the things that you want to paint, and you exhibit them, and there's no way of knowing whether they will ever find another location other than the walls of your studio-- and if they do, under what circumstances. The entire procedure is completely individualistic, both in terms of production, as well as the painting's relation to an ultimate-- one wants to use the word—consumer of the product. Mural painting poses a totally different set of problems. You are designing for a specific wall in a specific place for, presumably, a specific purpose. One's thinking about the material undergoes, I think of necessity, a very drastic change. [For me, it was] the first time I considered factors other than my own desire to paint a rather small area directed into an unknown void. [It was] the difference between this very private world versus a public place, a public audience and a given sponsor. The knowledge of what this had done to the thinking of the Mexican muralists began to bring a subtle change in my own work, leading me to a consideration of social factors in my work. In that sense, the mural influence was indirect because, although it didn't manifest itself overnight and wasn't as yet a major factor, it raised questions that easel painting did not pose.

COREY

Then in 1936 you made the final move to California. Did you intend that to be a permanent move?

BIBERMAN

No, I had come to California again in 1935 but just for the summer. My brother and his wife had moved here the previous winter, and my mother — who was then living — and I wished to see them. They had a large house and suggested that we come and spend the summer with them, which we did. I took that occasion to have my first one-man exhibition in Los Angeles. I shipped out a number of paintings that I'd exhibited in the East, and I had my show at the old Stendahl Gallery. Also at that time, I painted the portrait of Joan Crawford. It was not done as a commission, but when it was completed, she purchased the painting. She, at that time, had either just separated, or was about to separate, from Franchot Tone. With the exhibition that I had here, and the

fact that I was a young, fairly well known Eastern painter exhibiting in Los Angeles, plus the fact that the portrait of Joan Crawford received a great deal of publicity gave me a bit of an entree into the art scene in California. However, 1935 was simply a summer visit. I went back to New York, the year between the summer of '35 and the spring of '36 became the period when I really had to weigh the question: did I want to live in New York, or did I want to live in California? I finally came to California with the feeling that I would probably want to stay here, but there was no complete commitment. I was not married at the time, so I had relative flexibility, and it was an open-ended decision. However, obviously it became, in forty years, a closed- end decision. The fact is, I never returned to live in New York.

COREY

When you came to California, you continued portrait painting. Was that by choice or a need for livelihood?

BIBERMAN

Well, it was a combination of several factors. You see, I had already, before leaving New York, started to enter the mural competitions that the government had instituted. They had started in New York around 1934, as I recall it. In any case, prior to moving to California, I entered a competition for a mural for a courthouse in Newark which, I found out later, got me a runner-up position. When I came to California, I immediately started following up on other mural competitions. I continued, however, to paint portraits for a couple of reasons. First of all, I always enjoyed portraiture — and I still do--so that it was quite natural for me to continue; but I also painted landscapes. And at this period — this was the transitional period which goes back to your question on the influence of mural painting on my easel painting-- my work began to reflect a concern with topical [and] social problems. The early period of my painting in California had four facets. I was working on mural competitions, I was painting portraits, I was painting the California landscape which I loved, and I was also doing paintings which had a very pointed reference to social considerations. This was obviously a very varied but very fruitful period in my work.

COREY

Did the concern or the interest in the social aspect of the painting stem from the Depression?

BIBERMAN

It stemmed from several factors: the Depression, number one; the very obvious worsening political situation all over the world. This was the beginning of the Hitler phenomenon. The Mussolini adventure was already a little bit older, and very shortly, by 1937, came the Civil War in Spain. It was pretty difficult in that period to exist on the economic, the political, or the sociological level without being very aware of these conditions, and I became very aware of all of them. There was the very personal tragedy in our own family. The suicide of my father in 1933 in the bottom of the Depression was a shattering blow. All of these factors combined to begin to turn my work increasingly into the social areas, in which I felt a deep concern and out of which I felt I wanted to make some kind of a statement in my painting.

COREY

In 1937 you did your first mural. Was this with the WPA?

BIBERMAN

No, these were Section of Fine Arts programs. The WPA was a relief program, and we — I'm talking about my whole family--we were not in the position of either qualifying or wishing to qualify for a relief status. The competitions which I entered were not competitions conducted on the basis of relief qualifications. They were competitions conducted by the government and paid on the going mural scale. They were open competitions, juried by professionals, with the competitors masking out their signatures on their sketches, in order to rule out any possible favoritism. Incidentally, there was a provision in the WPA setup--that is, the relief setup--which entitled them to hire, I believe, personnel up to 10 percent of nonrelief artists. This, very frankly, was done in order to enlist the talents of recognized painters to help beef up the quality of the work which it was felt might suffer since the only qualification to be an artist on WPA was to be broke. I did not investigate that area, but several friends of mine who were very talented artists and had already arrived at a certain status did enlist in this particular part of the program.

COREY

Let's go back briefly to the portrait painting. It's interesting that you talk about California and the murals, with a feeling of social responsibility, and at the same time, you are in the middle of Hollywood and its almost unrealistic star-infested--I mean, it was the peak of Hollywood and there were the Joan Crawfords, and you did a portrait of Dashiell Hammett.

BIBERMAN

Well, you see, the interesting fact is — if I may interrupt--most of the people whom I painted at that time were people who, although members of the so-called "glamour industry," were also people who had a very strong social conscience. Let's look at the people whom I painted at that time: Dashiell Hammett, whose obvious interests in what was going on at that period we are all familiar with; Luise Rainer, who had just broken up with Clifford Odets, who was certainly no stranger to social concerns; I painted the wife of Claude Rains, who was just a mildly socially interested man, but he was a friend of my family's. I wasn't just painting glamour pussies, so to speak. This area at that time had the happy combination of very talented and very interesting people who were also deeply concerned with what was happening in the world. There was no compromise necessary for me. I could still indulge my interest in portrait painting and not have the feeling that I was simply becoming a movie-society portrait painter. There were indeed several artists in this area who were simply looking for the lucrative portrait fees, but most of the portraits that I painted at that time were not painted on commission. They were painted because I was interested in the sitters and wanted to paint them, which made a difference.

COREY

What about the Spanish Civil War? As an artist in Hollywood--and Hollywood certainly had a reaction to Spain-- what happened among the artists living in Hollywood at that time?

BIBERMAN

There was a great deal of interest in the political scene. There was an organization called the American Artists Congress against War and Fascism in that period. I was associated [with that,] in terms of helping to sponsor art

exhibitions, art auctions, benefits, and so forth. This organization attracted many of the younger artists and a few of the older artists of a liberal political persuasion, so that there was a great deal of activity.

COREY

Was this national or just in California?

BIBERMAN

It was national. This was the California branch of a national organization. There were also a number of organizations that sprang up about that time which had a very liberal, progressive political orientation, like the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League. A number of organizations grew up during the period of the Civil War in Spain. In all of these, the fund-raising activities and the social activities in many cases oriented themselves around certain art activities in which I participated. There was ample opportunity to pursue both a point of view based on a sympathy with what were then considered to be the more forward-looking aspects of the political scene and one's own art activities as well. I did a drawing which was later turned into a poster, which was printed in Mexico and helped raise funds for medical aid to the Spanish Loyalist cause. So this kind of relationship was possible, and I participated as fully as I could during this period. And this, incidentally, lasted right up to and into the outbreak of the Second World War.

COREY

I would like to go back to murals for a moment. The first mural that you painted was for the Federal Building in downtown L.A. In your book, you said that you had to do a lot of alterations on your original sketches. What kinds of alterations were these? And did the government look at mural painting in a similar way that you did?

BIBERMAN

Well, to take the questions one at a time: the commission came about, first of all, because I had been runner-up in several very important competitions. The government's practice at that time It was rather expensive to conduct a competition-- jurors had to be hired, and there was a great deal of administrative work--so that it became the established custom to run several

rather large competitions and, in addition to the award of the commission for that particular project, to make smaller awards to people who placed high in the competition. On the basis of the very good showing that I'd had in several competitions, I was awarded the mural for the then-new Federal Building, in Los Angeles. The building was constructed so that there were two opposite walls on either side of a rather large lobby. I received the commission to paint one wall, and a San Francisco painter named Lucien Labaudt (who is no longer living) received the commission to do the opposite wall. The government suggested, and quite correctly from their point of view, that since the two murals were to be visible--not simultaneously, because you couldn't look both ways at once, but certainly visible at the same time and place--that they have a certain coherence. And they requested--this was not a demand, it was a request — that Mr. Labaudt and I try to coordinate our material. They indicated that they would like me to incorporate into my mural some reference to the founding of the city of Los Angeles, some reference to the fact that this was a very rich, Paleolithic fossil area, and the inclusion of the first map that was made of the city by an army engineer in 1849. The question of how to incorporate these three completely disparate requested subjects in one mural really stumped me. In researching the problem and thinking about it and trying to develop some sense of how they might be related, I felt that the only way in which I could use these three elements was to include them with some other elements. So what I did, in a sense, was to sketch a panoramic survey of Los Angeles from Paleolithic times up to contemporary times. I therefore interjected two other elements. One was the position California took in the Civil War, which was a very interesting period, [and the other was] the emergence of Southern California as a new industrial area. My sketches went to Washington, and Labaudt also sent his sketches — he had been asked to do something based upon the mission-building story of California. When the two sets of sketches arrived in Washington, they apparently were, for whatever the reasons, uncomfortable with my sketches and very comfortable with Labaudt's. They suggested that perhaps we could meet and discuss the problem. I went to San Francisco and met with Labaudt, who turned out to be a very nice man. He was of French birth, although he was an American citizen and had lived in San Francisco many years. I soon realized, on the basis of my talks with him and also the correspondence with Washington, that all the compromises would have to be made by me . So I was

faced with a decision. Did I wish to make all of these compromises or didn't I? Well, all through this period, you must remember, I had been haunted by the fact that as someone who had been touted as a "budding mural talent," I had never actually painted a mural! And I thought, well, this is really kind of ridiculous. This will be at least a technical exercise for me, and I will have, at long last, completed a mural. So I decided that discretion was the better part of principle in this particular case, and I agreed and painted the mural. Technically, I was pleased with the completed work, although I always felt that what I had originally planned to do would have made for a much more interesting mural. However, I think that my decision proved to have been correct, because after having proved my competence, the two subsequent jobs that I received were given to me carte blanche. I did, in them, precisely what I wanted to do, and I think the people in Washington had confidence in the fact that I could carry out my intentions, and since there was no problem in my two subsequent murals of dovetailing two differing points of view, the problem never came up again. In the long run, I suppose my decision was a wise one, although at that time it was a very unhappy choice.

COREY

Who was it in Washington that was making the decision? Were they artists or government people?

BIBERMAN

The Section of Fine Arts had a very interesting staff. The head was an amateur Sunday painter named Ned Bruce, a man of wealthy background, of independent means, and a pretty talented nonprofessional painter. I say non-professional because he never attempted to gain his livelihood from his work. He had a good background in art. His second-in-command was a man named Ed Rowan, who I think-- although I'm not certain--probably had an art-history background. He was certainly conversant with the art field in general, and he and Bruce were the two major administrators. Whether anyone else was consulted when they had to make decisions such as the one that I fell heir to or not, I don't know. I do know, as I found out later, that they had as consultants a group of very learned and capable people. Whether they were brought in on decisions of this sort, I frankly do not know.

COREY

Capable in that they were artists?

BIBERMAN

Well, one was the director of the Newark Museum, named Holger Cahill, a very erudite man. Another was a ranking art critic named Forbes Watson. And [another was] George Biddle, of the well-known Biddle family, who was himself a very talented painter and also a fine muralist. He painted an important mural in Mexico, incidentally, and was a very close friend of Roosevelt's and of Rowan's. I think that Biddle probably came into some of these judgmental areas, unofficially. He was never officially a part of the administrative staff, but I'm sure that his opinions were sought and probably valued. This was the very interesting group of people whom I met a year or so later when I went to Washington as a juror on one of the very large competitions. I was very impressed with the caliber of this group.

COREY

What do you think the government's intent was with the murals themselves? Was it merely to create jobs?

BIBERMAN

I think its intention was dual. First of all, the relief part of the program was definitely a job-creating program. However, the nonrelief part of the program, in the areas in which I participated, was based on a genuine desire on the part of the government to reassess its basic approach to the whole cultural scene. For the first time this concern had to do not only with the visual arts but with the theater, with music, and with writers. Basically, a totally new point of view motivated governmental thinking in that Roosevelt era. It was much more European in that like Europe, which always subsidized the arts--even the poorest countries of Europe, as a matter of course, subsidized opera and music and so forth This had never been done in this country. Art activities in this country up until then had generally been pork-barrel projects. If you knew a senator and if you were a painter, the probability was that when the ceiling of some state capitol had to be painted, you had the inside track. These were pure pork- barrel jobs. However, now a totally new point of view originated with the highest levels of government thinking. In answer to your question then, part of the Rooseveltian thinking stemmed from the need to do

something about the thousands of impoverished artists in all areas of culture, and part had to do with a new outlook on the relation between government and culture.

COREY

Why then murals? Is it [that] the government in the thirties wanted to present to the American public a people's art and art which was available to everyone? They could have, in a sense, just as easily subsidized you to continue your own painting, for yourself.

BIBERMAN

Again, one would have to assume that the influence of Mexico was very, very important in this decision, although easel painting was carried on in the relief projects .

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COREY

You were talking about the influence of Mexico on the government's presentation of murals.

BIBERMAN

Well, let's see; I think that I was talking about the difference between the decision of the Mexican government to have murals painted on its walls and the way in which that decision occurred in this country. In Mexico, the problem of illiteracy, as I think I started to say, made it almost incumbent on the government, if it wished to talk about the history of the country to the illiterate population, to do so in visual terms. This is very much the same thing that happened in Europe, as you know, in the Renaissance. In the United States, however, the problem was not the problem of prevalent illiteracy. The effect of the Mexican mural movement was so strong that our government probably thought, "Well, we have all sorts of governmental buildings which have wall space and which, therefore, are available for mural presentation; and the question of literacy aside, wouldn't it be a fine idea to try to do the kind of thing that was done in Mexico and has been done historically in the entire history of art--that is, to use existing walls for visual art purposes?" So

that although I do not think the question of literacy was a factor, I do think the example of Mexico was very strong. However, do keep in mind that I've said that the relief projects also continued to sponsor work in easel painting and in printmaking, in addition to mural painting. However, since the existing walls on government property were already there, there was no particular reason why the government should have emphasized the subsidizing of easel paintings when they could use artists' talents to embellish the walls of post offices, official buildings, administrative buildings, etc., which is precisely what they did. As a matter of fact, the mood for carrying out this type of mural activity was so strong that legislation was introduced that every time a new building was erected, 2 percent of the cost of the building had to be earmarked for painting and sculpture. Even buildings that were not yet in existence were so programmed.

COREY

You did two murals for the Federal Building downtown?

BIBERMAN

That's correct. And one for the post office in Venice .

COREY

With the second and the third murals, you had a completely free hand?

BIBERMAN

A completely free hand, in this sense: I was given a ceiling I think I made a slight misstatement a while back when I said that the problem of adjusting my point of view to someone else's point of view never did arise. The interesting thing is that it did arise when, in the very same building which housed my first mural, Labaudt and I were each given a ceiling to paint. In this case, again, you could not look at the two ceilings at the same time. Nonetheless, the government again suggested that we dovetail our thinking. This time, I apparently found myself in the driver's seat because my sketches were accepted with no revisions whatsoever; and Labaudt, not thematically but structurally, tailored his presentation to the compositional format that I decided to use. The third mural, the one in Venice, I was again given a wall to paint. I decided on a project; I sent the sketches to Washington. I had in a very

minor area of the work part of what was a recognizable Coca-Cola ad, and I was asked to eliminate it because one couldn't advertise in a public building! The characteristic C-o-c-a, which was about all you would have seen in my mural, was eliminated, and as I say, this was a very minor change. It had nothing to do with the total idea that I wanted to follow.

COREY

Everything in those murals, from what I have been able to see in them, is directly related to California.

BIBERMAN

Yes. On the ceiling mural, one of the interesting things is that, compositionally, certain factors entered which were architecturally predetermined. You have a wall which is of a certain size, and you cannot make it any wider or higher or eliminate any architectural incidents that occur in the space. When I did the ceiling, the architectural considerations almost demanded thinking in terms of four. It had to do with the fact that there was a circle inscribed within a square. This leaves four sections in the corners, and you then have four elements that you must work with. Since there was also a pendant chandelier coming from the center of the inscribed circle, I felt that what I had to do compositionally would be something that involved four factors. I began to think of concepts which might have to do with four--earth, air, fire, water, or anything else in terms of fours. Then, I began to think of the fact that although the rest of the United States had the indigenous Indian and later the black man and the white man, California, unlike the other parts of the country, had a very unique factor in the inclusion of Orientals, mostly the Chinese at first and later the Japanese. Immediately, I felt that a very interesting concept lay in the fact that in California four racial groups were important in the development of the state. From that point on, it became a question of trying to visualize the special contributions of each one of these racial groups; so, basically, this was the motif that went into the final version of the mural. There, there were no changes asked of me at all. Washington accepted my proposed solution with great pleasure. Also, architecturally, there was a band which bordered the circle, so actually the ceiling had three levels. The four corners were one level, the inner circle was the second, and the third was the circular band. The thin circular band, from my point of view, could contain

only one thing, and that was some kind of an inscription. So as usual, when I'm looking for something very special, I brought out my very well worn copy of Leaves of Grass and went through it. I found what I thought was the absolutely perfect quotation to go with the entire concept of the mural. So as I said, Washington was very pleased with the solution that I offered, and the mural remained in place until the building was remodeled twenty- five years later, when it had to be taken down, as was the original sidewall mural that I did. Both of them are, at present, rolled up, although in varying states of damage, due to the problems of removal. Nonetheless, they are presumably waiting for installation in some other location. Interestingly enough, the current exhibition of New Deal art at the University of Santa Clara has full-size details of two or three of the figures that I used in the ceiling mural and also the full-size cartoon of the Venice mural.

COREY

Is the Venice mural based on what you felt about Venice, or what you saw around Venice?

BIBERMAN

Well, for me this was a very interesting sociological study. I knew very little about Venice, other than the fact that it was a town on the beach. When I began to research the project, I found that the story of Venice was just fascinating. The town of Venice was founded by the scion of a very wealthy tobacco family, a man named Abbott Kinney, who had great cultural aspirations. As a young man, he had studied in Europe and had fallen passionately in love with Venice, Italy. When he came back to the United States, he decided that what he most wanted to do was to build a cultural metropolis on the West Coast. Through very devious circumstances--which would take much too long to go into at this point--he acquired a stretch of land on what is now Venice, California, where he proceeded to build his dream. He invited Italian architects to come here and make a replica--at least in one portion of the area--of the architecture of Venice, Italy. He laid out canals, and for the opening of the city, he imported gondolas and gondoliers from Venice, Italy. He opened his theater with Sarah Bernhardt and with the finest symphony orchestra of his day. The dream proved to be short-lived. In a couple of years, the cultural aspects of the project did not materialize, and

shortly after that, they discovered oil in the area. A very quick transformation occurred from what had been the dream of Abbott Kinney. The cultural metropolis of the West Coast turned into (a) an oil town, and (b) a kind of a honky-tonk amusement center, which it was for a number of years. The canals fell into disuse. They became filled with refuse, the water became stagnant, and the bridges, I think, collapsed. I don't know what happened to the original convention hall, but the story of a man's dream and what the dream turned into was so fascinating that I decided that this would be a very interesting sociological study. I made the sketches not knowing whether they would be acceptable or not; but I sent [them in] , and to my great delight, the proposal was accepted completely. And the mural is there to this day [and] has received a great deal of notice over the years. As a matter of fact, I once told this story to Lion Feuchtwanger when he was still living, and he became so excited about it that he wanted to do an American operetta based on the story of Venice, California. So I offer the idea to you, and you can take it on from there. If you feel like writing a musical operetta based on the story of Venice, California, it's all yours .

COREY

What was your association with Feuchtwanger?

BIBERMAN

No real association. Again this goes back to the character of California in the late thirties. As you know, with the advent of Hitler, a great many German — particularly German Jews, but not exclusively German Jews-- refugees came to California. This seemed to be a mecca. There was a large colony of Germans, particularly out toward the Santa Monica area. And non-Jews, like Thomas Mann and Karl With, the art historian, came to California, [and] a great many Jewish writers, playwrights, musicians, and so forth came here. During that whole period, there was a great deal of social interchange with these people. I met Feuchtwanger--I don't remember where I met him first, but this particular evening's discussion took place at my brother's home one night when there was a rather large party or social gathering. I don't know quite what the occasion was. But this was the only association. I still see Madame Feuchtwanger and some of the others now, but Lion Feuchtwanger died many years ago. So, as I say, there were a great many very interesting German

refugees [in California] in that whole period between the rise of Hitler and the outbreak of the Second World War.

COREY

In 1938 you started to teach in California. Had you taught before?

BIBERMAN

I hadn't actually taught before, but, as I think I indicated, I had been invited to be a guest critic at the Beaux-Arts Institute in New York. I had also done some radio broadcasting in New York for the College Art Association. This was not teaching; this was lecturing. I started to teach in '38. The incident started in the fact that a friend of mine, one of the younger California painters, named Fletcher Martin, had been teaching at a school called the Art Center School. He got a commission, or a series of commissions--I forget just what it was--and he found that he was running too many classes, and he just couldn't get enough work done with the amount of teaching that he was doing. He asked me if I would take over one of his Saturday classes in life drawing, which I did, and I found it very interesting. Apparently I did a good job because they immediately asked me to take on more classes, and that started an association with that school which lasted twelve years. I taught there until 1950.

COREY

Also in that year you married Sonja Dahl.

BIBERMAN

That's correct, in December of '38.

COREY

Had you known her long before you were married?

BIBERMAN

We had met in the early summer of '37, so that I had known her for a year and almost six months before we were married. She, as you know, had very interesting background, both in terms of her ethnic or racial background and in terms of her geographic background. Her father was Swedish, and her mother was Russian Jewish. She was born and grew up and went to school in Shanghai but went to British schools, so that her speech today is quite British.

It's not an affectation; it's just the way that she learned to speak. She learned to speak the King's English, unlike the Americans. She lived in Shanghai until she was a young woman. She made a few trips back and forth and, interestingly enough, had gone back to China on one of her trips with an American documentary film company. When she first came here she did a little bit of acting--she was a bit player in motion pictures--and she did a little bit of drawing and painting, and she did some composing. I always say about her that she is the true amateur. The "amateur" means someone who loves what he or she does. In that sense, she has been the true amateur, although it is interesting that now she is again doing public relations work in the film area, and she has gone back to ceramics, which she loves, where she has, I think, a very interesting talent. But all in all, [she is] a very lovely and a very lovely, loving woman. I'm a very fortunate man.

COREY

All of this time--late thirties, prewar--you were obviously aware of what was going on in Europe, and by 1941, you and your brother Herbert had enlisted in the California State Guard in, almost, preparation of what was to come. How did that affect what you were doing with your art?

BIBERMAN

Well, as I think I indicated, the whole period in the later thirties, leading up to the period of the Second World War, [was] when a great deal of my work assumed a topical character. I painted a scene of a concentration camp, for example. I painted a canvas that had to do with a burgeoning hope for world peace at that time; I also did a lithograph on the same subject. A great many of the topical paintings that I did in that period leading up to the Second World War had to do with some of the socioeconomic problems in the period. I think that all one has to do is to examine the work that I was doing at that time to see that these external forces in the world were very much a part of my consciousness and, therefore, a part of my painting at that time--not exclusively, but certainly they began to play a more important role and were present as they had not been during the period of the early thirties. This was a totally new time. Since I have a feeling, always, that my work is largely autobiographical, I would have found it very surprising had I been able to,

somehow or other, go through that period in kind of schizophrenic fashion with my painting being totally unrelated to my other social concerns.

COREY

It seems as if the war years and directly postwar years must have affected you a great deal because, although there's a very strong social comment in such paintings as *Give Me This Day*, by the time we get to *8 A.M.*, there's a real, almost, anger that is much more directed.

BIBERMAN

Well, yes, and again this had to do with the times. You see, the period of the war, in terms of my painting, was a completely unproductive period. I've never made a count, but I don't think that in that entire span of four and a half years I painted a dozen paintings. The few that I did were related, somehow or other, to the war. I did a great deal of work directly connected with the whole war phenomenon. I was in the state guard, which wasn't very time-consuming, but I was teaching in a government art program — not an art program as such, but a war-training program, which was funneled through one of the art schools because it had to do with graphic work. And I was working with an outfit which I helped found called Art in National Defense. I was working with the USO, and I taught art in hospitals for the Red Cross. And the fact of the matter is that during this whole period, I not only literally did not have time to paint, but painting, as I had known it in the past, simply was not on my personal agenda during those years. However, you spoke of the character of the work which showed up immediately after the war years. The Cold War, as it's come to be known, started almost immediately after the hot war, and this was a tremendous blow to all of the people who had felt that the war was going to usher in a period of cooperation, peace, understanding, and forward progress. Quite the opposite took place. As you probably know from your reading--you're too young to remember the period--there was a great deal of feeling in the world, the military in particular and large sections of the political spectrum, that now that the war was over, the thing that we had better do while we still had a viable war machine was to immediately fight the Russians. [They thought] we would have to do this sooner or later, and since we had a good ongoing war machine, we should use it while we were strong. Well, as I say, this was a terribly disheartening factor for all those people who

had hoped that the agonizing period of war and misunderstanding was over. This whole phenomenon of the Cold War brought about widespread intellectual repression and the destruction of a great deal of the cultural life of the country and, for many of the people who had feelings similar to my own, a sense of complete revulsion. Since, as I indicated a moment ago, I have the sense that my painting is largely autobiographical, my feeling about this whole period was so strong that it colored, probably to a greater degree than it ever had done before (and certainly than it's done since), the quality of my overall art production. This is not to say that I still did not paint portraits during that period or an occasional landscape. But if one were to draw up a kind of a ledger of what channels my work went into at various times in that whole Cold War period, the major thematic channel, certainly, had to do with my feeling of complete dismay with what was happening in the country .

COREY

This didn't happen very quickly because there's the painting — I believe which was done right after the war- *Sepulveda Dam*. You seem very intrigued with man and his technological powers and almost look at it as something very creative and very positive. I mean, it's a very beautiful, calm painting of a dam, and then you go right into the horrors of

BIBERMAN

Well, you've raised a very interesting point, which I'm very eager to discuss. I think that those of us who are concerned with what we hope is a forward direction of mankind in general (humankind if you're a feminist) have to feel that our concern is for all aspects of humanity because we feel that there is a great potential for good in the human being. I have never felt a traumatic dislocation in being able to say, "This is what man has done and can do, and this, by contrast, is the horrible thing that man can do, is doing, and has done." These are the two faces of a single coin. We are in the dual position of being able to witness the most stupendous achievements of mankind done during precisely the same period when 6 million Jews were consumed in the gas ovens , when an atom bomb wiped out Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Precisely during this period, there were enormous strides made in the discovery of the peaceful possibilities for the very atomic energy that was used for destruction. Atomic energy, theoretically, can be used to create a totally liberated

humankind. The fact that it isn't is a weakness of man. I know that this problem of dualism disconcerts one — people say, "How can you paint a gorgeous landscape and turn right around and paint a horror." I say these things unfortunately coexist. So I can paint a *Sepulveda Dam*, which I still think is very beautiful. (Incidentally, I first saw the Sepulveda Dam when I was going to the Birmingham Hospital for the Red Cross to conduct a class in drawing for wounded soldiers.) Well, I can only repeat, for me, these are the two faces of a single coin. And while I glory, really, in man's potential, I'm aghast at what man can do with this potential. The fact that I paint the two sides is, I think, indicative of both my hopes and my fears.

COREY

It did interest me that you did *Sepulveda Dam*, *Cypress*, and then *The Headless Horseman* in the same period.

BIBERMAN

They were done in exactly the same period. As I say, this period of the Cold War was a period in which I painted, I think, some of my most lyric landscapes. At the same time, I was painting some of the horrific things that deeply disturbed me. *The Headless Horseman* was, of course, my horror at the fact that two or three or four years after the end of the Second World War, with 40 million people destroyed all over the world, idiots were again talking about war as a solution to problems that we faced. This is horrendous. This is really the military man without a head, which is what I tried to paint.

COREY

What about *8 A.M.*?

BIBERMAN

Well, *8 A.M.* and that whole series of paintings that have to do with the position of the blacks in this country relate to the fact that all of us have been brought up living with a great contradiction in this country. I know that as a child growing up in Philadelphia, on my way to school every morning, I used to see black women waiting on the corners for streetcars to take them to do a day's work. They also worked in my parents' house. I knew that before they came to our house to do the menial work, they had already cleaned their own

houses, and that they were going back to their own houses after they left ours to feed their own families. I grew up with this, as you did, as most of us did who came from a middle-class background. We accepted black servants, just as we accepted the fact that the blacks, even after the Civil War, had been subjected to economic servitude and second-class citizenship and all the other terms we can use to describe the condition. Anyway, I was very much aware of this all through my life and deeply troubled by it, and because of that, I have tried to paint things that have to do with this. In terms of that particular painting, *8 A.M.*, I can tell you a story that I think is pertinent. There was no model for this painting. For me, the woman whom I painted was a composite of every poor, elderly black woman who had spent most of her life doing daywork for white folks. I invented this particular person. When the painting was first exhibited, the gallery owner called me one day and said that there were some people who were interested in purchasing the painting and wished to meet me, and could I come to the gallery? I did, and to my astonishment and pleasure found myself being introduced to a black judge named David Williams, the first black judge in Southern California, who with his wife had fallen in love with this painting and bought it. He wanted to meet me because he was very interested in understanding how a white artist could have painted this particular canvas. He said, "Mr. Biberman, there's no way in which you could be aware of this, but you've painted a portrait of my mother." He said, "My mother did daywork. She was a fine, hard-working, wonderful woman and mother, and all that I can tell you is that this is a painting of my mother." Judge Williams lives in a very beautiful house on Sunset Boulevard near UCLA, and this painting, for all of the years that he and his wife have owned it, occupies the most prominent place in their living room. A number of years ago, *Look* magazine was conducting a survey of well-known blacks in the United States; blacks who had "made it." One of the people whom they interviewed was Judge Williams, and the magazine wanted to come and photograph him and his family. He said, "Fine, I would like to be photographed in front of Mr. Biberman's painting." Obviously, I tell this story because it moves me very deeply. And I've had other experiences which I cherish which have to do with the reactions that I've had to some of the paintings that I've done of blacks. I don't presume to have any special understanding or expertise in this area. Very frankly, I enter it with trepidation, but I also enter it with a feeling of obligation. I do the things that I want to do in this area, as well as I

can, hopefully, and on occasion I find very interesting and moving reactions, such as the one I just described. You want to hear another one?

COREY

Yes.

BIBERMAN

On the ceiling mural which I referred to some time back (showing the four races) I used a quotation from Walt Whitman. I think I can remember it exactly. If it's not exact, it's very close. It goes like this: "Each of us inevitable,/ Each of us limitless,/ Each of us with his or her right upon the earth,/ Each of us allowed the eternal purports of the earth." This, for me, expressed everything I wanted to show in having these four races contributing their special talents to the state and to the nation. The story that I want to tell has to do with the night that we mounted the mural. The mural had been done on canvas. The walls were too green to paint directly on, in fresco. Since the building was already in use, we were asked to put up the painting at night, so that we wouldn't interfere with the normal business conduct of the post office, which was on the ground floor of the Federal Building. We started work early evening, and we worked all the way through to about 6 A.M. By that time, the mural was in place. But along about eleven o'clock or midnight, the lobby was pretty deserted. The only people who wandered in were people who were coming in to put a letter in a drop or something, and the guards who were on duty were very bored because there was nothing to do. They walked back and forth for whatever their allotted period was, and you know it was pretty boring for them. Well, the guards on duty that night were delighted because something was going on. Here was a crew of people putting up a mural, with workmen all over the place, and I was supervising. They were delighted with this unexpected show and stood around watching. At about two o'clock in the morning, the guard changed, and two new men came on. One of them was a black cop and one was white. Just at that point, we were putting up this legend, "Each of us inevitably,/ Each of us limitless," etc. And the black cop stood and watched this whole lettered circle thing go up. When it was finally up, he turned to me and he said, "Mr. Biberman, that's a very beautiful quotation." I said, "Yes, I think it is, too." And he looked at me, and he said, "It's just too bad it isn't true." Well, I wanted to pull down the mural. I

wanted to go home. I wanted to forget the whole incident! These are terrible stories, but these are the contradictions that are a part of our culture, too.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO (FEBRUARY 19, 1976)

COREY

I would like briefly to go back, chronologically at least, to the portrait of Dashiell Hammett. Was that a commissioned portrait?

BIBERMAN

Well, I'm trying to think back. The portrait was painted in 1937. He was in Hollywood at that time, working, I believe, on a script. I had met him--under what circumstances I don't recall, since it was almost forty years ago--but I was familiar with his work, which I found very innovative. When I met him, I was fascinated with his quality, visually. As you know, he was an ex- tubercular patient, and like many people who have that type of arrested tuberculosis history, he had a very pallid, rather pink, almost translucent skin. He had close-cropped, iron-gray hair, a sandy mustache, and he was tall and thin. What with his visual quality and the fact that I admired his work so much, I wanted to paint him. Most of those early portraits which I've mentioned were not done as commissions. They were done because I was intrigued by the personalities and interested in the physical qualities of the sitters. This portrait came into being in that fashion. I think he probably posed a half a dozen or eight times, and the experience was, for me, very pleasant. We chatted, as I usually do, during the periods that he posed, and I found him a very sweet and interesting person.

COREY

Jumping ahead to 1947, that was the time you did a portrait of Paul Robeson.

BIBERMAN

It was either '46 or '47. You know, there have just been two memorials here in Hollywood, and I think that my chronology may be inexact. You know, now I never date my paintings. I haven't dated them since 1931.

COREY

Why is that?

BIBERMAN

This is an amusing story in itself. I was still in New York in the early thirties, and I was beginning to exhibit my work quite a bit. A friend of mine who had some connection with the Knoedler Galleries, which were then and still are a very prestigious firm, arranged for one of their vice-presidents, I believe, to come to see me. He was interested in my work, but since they dealt primarily with blue-chip paintings and old masters, he was not proposing to handle my work commercially. But he was very interested in what I was doing. At one point, after I had shown him a great many of the things that I had done, he asked me why I put dates on my paintings. I said, "Well, it's just a habit. Doesn't everybody date paintings?" He said, "Well, I know that it's the custom to do that, but I think you're making a great mistake." He said, "You know, for a young painter to date a work will very often, in terms of an audience, either make the people say, 'Well, maybe we should wait to see what he does next year,' or they might say, 'Well, I wonder if what he did this year is really showing the promise as against what he did last year. '" He went on, "This is so extraneous to what you are doing and what you want to do that I think that you ought to disarm people simply by not putting dates on your paintings. Then they'll either have to accept them or not." It sounded like very good advice at that time, so the last painting of mine that carries a date is 1931. Now, to come back to your question about the date of the Robeson portrait. For years I thought that I had painted it in 1947, but now I am told that it was 1946 that he was here with *Othello*. Since I painted him when he was here with *Othello*, it must have been 1946. I presume you want to know the circumstances?

COREY

Yes.

BIBERMAN

I had met Robeson first when I was still an art student in Philadelphia. I used to do some occasional bit acting with a little-theater group outside of the city, and Robeson came there to play *The Emperor Jones*. My job was to help carry him in after he was shot with a silver bullet--you remember the play? He's shot offstage in the [Eugene] O'Neill play, and two men carry him in and dump him stage front. My job was to carry one end of him. I was a pretty husky

young man, but he was an awfully big man. Someone had the other end--I don't remember who it was— but we staggered in with this man and barely managed to dump him. That was my first meeting with Robeson. Then a couple of years later when I was in Paris, he was there concertizing, and I heard him sing, and as I recall, I went backstage to say hello. Then over the years, we would meet occasionally, so that when he came to Los Angeles to play *Othello*, I decided to ask him to pose, not as a commission portrait but out of my very great desire to paint him. That's how it happened.

COREY

What were the sittings like?

BIBERMAN

Hectic. He was very busy. As a matter of fact, he was really very kind to have taken the time to pose. When I say the sittings were hectic, we were never alone. He would always make several appointments here for the time that he was posing. Earl Robinson would be sitting at this piano banging away a new tune that he wanted Paul to hear, and somebody would be reading a script, and somebody else would be interviewing him. All that I can tell you is that the sessions reminded me of the old drawings that you see of the Renaissance court painter who's off in a corner painting a member of the nobility while musicians play; somebody else is reading poetry and so forth. That was the character of the sittings. We really had very little conversation because there were too many people around. Instead of my having to do what I usually do when I paint a portrait--that is, to keep up a running conversation to keep the sitter animated--I had no problems. I just tended to my own job, and everybody else kept Robeson interested and amused, so that we had no great personal contact during that period of sittings. There were just too many other people around. I think he was very happy with the portrait when it was completed. After we finished, on the basis of my memories of him, I painted a small head, which very shortly after that was bought by Herman Shumlin, the theatrical producer. I haven't seen it since then, but I had an offset lithographic reproduction made of it, which has been exhibited a great deal. You may have seen it. But, for me, it was a very fascinating experience because Robeson was, as we all know, a most extraordinary person. It was a piece of good fortune that he consented to pose for me.

COREY

It was also around that time that you did a portrait of Lena Horne.

BIBERMAN

Again, this was something that I wanted to do. I had never met Lena Horne, but I had friends in the black community--writers and performers--and I think it was through Carlton Moss, who was a black film producer, [that I met her] . I had told Carlton that I was very fascinated by Lena and wondered if he could interest her in posing for me. He spoke to her, and she came to the studio, and I showed her some of the other portraits that I had done, and she agreed to pose. She always came with her personal hairdresser because she was very concerned about her appearance, particularly the grooming of her hair. But we were, unlike my sessions with Robeson, able to converse. I found her to be a very, very lovely person. She had none of the qualities that one might have expected from having seen her as a nightclub performer belting out popular tunes. She was a very intelligent woman, very concerned with social issues, and a very soft-spoken, lovely person. It was a fine experience for me to have had the opportunity to meet and to paint her.

COREY

Would you find it difficult to do portraits of people whom you did not have some kind of feel for, or who you felt were not in some way decent or good people?

BIBERMAN

Well, you see, I have never been a portrait painter in the commonly accepted sense in which that term is frequently used. People don't call me and say, "I would like my portrait painted. And what is your fee? And how many sittings will be involved?" In most cases, or almost all cases, the portraits that I've painted are portraits of people whom I've wanted to paint. I've very carefully indicated ahead of time that I'm not a "fashionable" portrait painter, that I want them to see my work, that I want them to understand that I have a personal point of view about the way I paint portraits. If they are interested, fine; otherwise, it would not be interesting either for them or for me. I've never been put in a position, let me say, of feeling antipathetic towards someone whose portrait I was painting.

COREY

About what year was the painting *The Informer* painted?

BIBERMAN

That was painted during the height of the [Joseph] McCarthy period. As you probably know, the inquisition hit Hollywood with a great deal of fanfare, which is probably why it got its greatest publicity here. This was one of the reasons, I'm sure, that the [House] Un-American Activities Committee chose Hollywood--because of its news value. In that period, a great many terrible things happened, terrible not only in the sense of people whose careers were ruined, but terrible also because a great many people capitulated and became informers. This had its own kind of special horror. The portrait that I call *The Informer* is a portrait for which no one posed. It's almost a composite, although I had someone very definite in mind whose name I am not really interested, at this point, in divulging. But this was a woman who had a great many close friends in the motion picture community who herself became an informer for the committee and ruined the careers and indeed the lives of many of her former friends. She was a very attractive woman physically, but I painted [the picture] without a sitter but with this definite person in mind. I changed the features enough so that I don't think it is a photographic likeness, but this [picture] was based on the horrible incident of a woman who, out of self-interest, informed on her former friends and was instrumental in ruining their lives. The time was approximately somewhere between 1948 and 1950, the period of the height of the Un-American Activities Committee's incursions into Hollywood.

COREY

How did the incursions of the committee affect the art world in Los Angeles, California, and the nation?

BIBERMAN

Well, it didn't have quite as dramatic an effect on the artists as it had in the entertainment industry because the artists whom it hurt were not public in the sense that actors or writers or personalities in the entertainment industry are public. Nonetheless, it did hit a great many artists. The art community here was not attacked as directly as was the motion picture field, but in the

animation studios, there were a number of people who were called in because they were sort of tangential to the motion picture industry. However, a number of painter friends of mine~colleagues , and in a couple of cases, ex-students--were called before the committee. Some took on the role of what came to be known as "friendly witnesses" and became informers. In several instances, my name came up in the hearings, but I was never called before the committee. However, there was a very direct personal effect that this period had on my career. I have to digress slightly and indicate the fact that in the art school in which I was teaching at that time, there were two men in the administration who were not only themselves very reactionary persons but whose relation to what was going on during that period was very direct. One of them--and there is no reason why his name should not be mentioned—later became a member of the Los Angeles Board of Education; his name is [J.C.] Chambers. He was one of the directors of the Art Center School where I taught. During that period, there was an organization called the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences, and Professions. I was a member, and on numerous occasions, I lectured for them on current events which affected the cultural situation in the country. There was a large convocation called to protest the beginnings of thought control in the United States. A three-day conference was held at the Beverly Hills Hotel with a number of very important, distinguished participants. My relation to that conference, in particular, brought me into public prominence, since my role was that of a spokesman in the field of art specifically concerned with social issues. I found on several similar occasions that the man whose name I've just mentioned would be in the audience taking copious notes whenever I spoke. It was perfectly obvious that he himself, either personally or with surrogates, was keeping a very close watch on my activities. I know that I had the really disgusting--I can only use that word—experience of seeing students of mine, whom I knew were assigned to cover my exhibitions, and who would spend an inordinate amount of time hanging around the gallery, presumably to see who came to see my exhibitions.

COREY

Assigned by whom?

BIBERMAN

Assigned by this very man, I'm sure, or by E.A. Adams, the head of the school. This kind of surveillance, and I think that's a very exact term, was something that I was very much aware of. In 1950, when my brother was sent to a federal correctional institution for having refused to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee, I realized that because of that situation and my own participation in activities--which I was by then certain were frowned upon by the administration of the school--it was only a question of time before I would be asked to resign. I decided to beat that particular punch and asked for a leave of absence, which was very gleefully granted me; and I simply never returned to that school. [My] teaching position, which had lasted for twelve years, came to an end very dramatically and very directly because of this particular climate. There were other problems that I had. Exhibition facilities, in several cases, were closed to me, and other minor harassments in the professional field took place. But I must say that I had none of the very crippling and acute problems that so many people in other fields had-- people like my brother or those others who were openly blacklisted and whose professional careers ended. My professional career, it is true, was warped for several years, but after all, no one could interfere with my painting. Some exhibition channels were open to me. Although I didn't teach, I had the opportunity to undertake speaking engagements. So that although these were difficult, unpleasant years, my productivity within the walls of my own studio was probably as great or greater than when I was painting full time, with no days lost in teaching. The product that came out of my studio during those years certainly reflected the general temper of the period and my own relation to it. What I am implying, obviously, is that during that period, since the climate of the time was so much a part of my psyche, there were more paintings with a topical basis than at any other time.

COREY

That's a period when you seemed to bring children into your paintings. Is there any specific reason for that?

BIBERMAN

Well, children under specific circumstances. They weren't portraits, but paintings of children in relation to war situations. This was the period of the Korean War, and some pretty terrible photographs appeared in the

newspapers. The plight of children—the innocents, so to speak--moved me deeply. This was also a period in which, although there was no specific intensification of socioeconomic problems of the blacks in this country, there was, nonetheless, that factor present too. During this period, it's true, I painted some black children, though not in problem circumstances. In the year of '51, we took a summer trip to Mexico for two and a half months, and during that period, simply by happenstance, I painted a Mexican child. She was the very beautiful little daughter of a woman who came to do our cooking and housework. So it's probably true that in those years I did several paintings of children, but I think that they were done in each case out of specific circumstances. They didn't just happen.

COREY

Going back briefly, again, to the period of McCarthy and to your brother Herbert. Aside from your position in the community as an artist, that was a very direct connection with the beginnings of the horror of McCarthyism. How was that dealt with?

BIBERMAN

Well, you mean I suppose specifically by me, personally? All that I can tell you is that during the five months that my brother was in the federal correctional institution, I did practically no painting. I spent almost all of my time working with a committee which was seeking to either reduce the sentences, or secure parole, and to do whatever educational work could be undertaken to try to expose the horrible effect that the committee and similar committees all over the country were having on our nation's cultural life. During the specific period of five months that my brother was imprisoned and denied the opportunity to do his work, I, in good conscience, could not just go normally into my studio and carry on my profession. I did very little painting in that five-month period and spent most of my time, as I've said, working with the committee, which was [also] trying to care for the dependents of some of the people who had been sent to prison. In many cases, families were left destitute, so that there was a big campaign to raise money to help support the families of the men who were imprisoned. These activities, then, consumed practically all of my time. So far as how the period was dealt with generally, I must say that there was a great deal of resentment on the part of a large segment of the cultural

community. On the other hand, there was a tremendous amount of fear, and many people simply did not want to find themselves in the position of being blacklisted, banned from their profession, and therefore ran for cover. They either remained silent or, in some cases, became willing tools of the committee. But I must say there were a great many very stalwart people who did what they could, at great risk to themselves and to their careers, to help ameliorate the situation. It was a horrible period, aptly dubbed by Dalton Trumbo as "The Time of the Toad."

COREY

Prior to Herbert's imprisonment, did you ever think it would come to that? Was it something that was anticipated?

BIBERMAN

Well, the whole question of the legalism of the Cold War period is very complicated. The fact of the matter is that I don't think that anyone ever had the feeling that this political atmosphere would actually deteriorate to the point of physical imprisonment. The legality of this period is, in itself, an engrossing story. There was a significant change in the composition of the Supreme Court, and as a result of the change, the test case--which is what the Hollywood Ten had tried to bring to the Supreme Court-- was never heard by the Supreme Court. Had the court which [had been] sitting at the time when these cases first took place been in composition the same as in this [later] period, the likelihood is that the former Supreme Court would have heard the cases and thrown them out. The committee's power to declare people in contempt would never have been successful.

COREY

Even with the atmosphere of the country?

BIBERMAN

Even with the atmosphere of the country. The element that really brought about the jailings was, as I think I've indicated, the change in the composition of the Supreme Court. Test cases were carried up the whole legal ladder in the firm belief that when the Supreme Court heard these cases, they would, as I have said, be thrown out.

COREY

And that would stop the committee?

BIBERMAN

That would have stopped the committee's power to hold the threat of jail over people who did not cooperate. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Careers were ruined, and many people suffered physical imprisonment.

COREY

Given the social and cultural atmosphere in America at that time, did the activities of the committee, or your own surveillances, come as a surprise?

BIBERMAN

A great surprise. You know, it's hard for us to believe, even in retrospect--and especially hard for young people today, to believe — that these things happened. Young people today, when they see plays like *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been*, which is based on the hearings and is currently playing, sit in utter disbelief. They just can't believe what they see. Well, many of us at that period didn't believe that these things could happen. But they did. This was the Cold War period, and the activities of committees like the House Committee on Un-American Activities and local committees of a similar nature, were part of the political scene. It was hard for us to believe it then; it's difficult for us to believe it now. But one has to understand the total quality of that period.

COREY

Once you began painting, after that five-month period, what types of pictures were you able to produce?

BIBERMAN

You see, the worst elements of that era didn't really begin to disappear until the final put-down of McCarthy himself. Here again, one would have to go into a full discussion of the politics of that whole period, but there was the famous confrontation of McCarthy with Robert Welch, the lawyer. And finally the stench--and I use that word advisedly--the stench of that whole situation reached the point where eminent public figures, senators, and people of

impeccable integrity, began to be pilloried, until finally not even the fabricated Cold War situation could persuade the country to stomach the kinds of things that were happening. At this given point, McCarthy himself was put down, and this began the end of the nightmare. There started a process of unwinding that took several years, and slowly the horror of that whole period was dissipated. To come back finally to your direct question, I continued to concern myself with issues that were still largely topical through a good part of the fifties. It was only by about the end of that period that I began to feel that I wanted to or could turn to elements in my work which had a more lyric affirmative quality rather than the bitter statements I was trying to make about situations which were themselves very, very negative .

COREY

On your trip to Mexico City in '51, that was a time when many people were leaving the country because of McCarthyism. Did it ever occur to you to leave?

BIBERMAN

No. No, it didn't, because my own feeling was that I wanted to stay and sort of ride out the situation, for whatever it might bring. As I said, I was never called before the committee. I did not have that experience of a direct confrontation, although the possibility was always there, since my name did come up several times during the committee hearings. But at no time did I seriously think of leaving the country to avoid this kind of possible confrontation. I thought about this a great deal, and I just decided that leaving the country was not for me. Our trip to Mexico was a holiday trip. We went there after our daughter got out of school in the spring, and we came back in time for her to reenter school in the autumn, so it was a summer holiday. It was never meant to be anything else. Out of that summer, which was fascinating for me, came a whole series of paintings based upon the Mexican experiences.

COREY

There is a painting which I imagine came out of this period, *Tear Gas and Fire Hose*. Is that about a specific event?

BIBERMAN

Yes. This had to do with an earlier episode, however, still in the whole Cold War period. I am very hazy now about the exact date of that painting, but there had been a strike at the Warner Brothers studios with some pretty rough tactics on the part of the studio police. The organization that I referred to, the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee, had asked for volunteer observers to go out there to see whether the violence was called for or not. I became a volunteer observer and was witness to the kind of incident I showed in that particular painting. The painting, however, is a composite. I did not myself see that exact sight, but situations of that sort were photographed and did occur. I saw some of these things, and the painting which I call *Tear Gas and Fire Hose* came as a result. There was the use of tear gas, there was the use of fire hoses, and there was, very definitely, uncalled-for violence used against the people who were exercising their legal right to picket in front of the studio.

COREY

Later on--I assume it was around the time your brother Herbert was directing *Salt of the Earth* --you did the portrait of Rosaura Revueeltas.

BIBERMAN

Yes. Now that was really not a true portrait of her in the sense of a painting based upon sittings. My wife was part of the production crew on location in New Mexico during the making of the film, and I went there to see her for a short visit. As I recall it, it was rather a long weekend, or about half a week. During that period, I met Rosaura, who was the star of the picture. I was fascinated by her looks, and I did a painting which is not called a portrait of Rosaura. I call it *Woman of Mexico*, and it is based on her physical appearance, plus my feeling about many of the women whom I had seen when we were in Mexico in '51. So, although I think of it as a painting which would never have been done had I not met Rosaura, it is not really a portrait of her. Had I wished, I probably could have made a truer likeness than it is. It was not designed, in other words, as a portrait.

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE (FEBRUARY 19, 1976)

COREY

Now, beyond that entire period, you began a series of paintings concerned with buildings. There's *The Carpenter*, *The Plasterers* -- city scapes, I guess you call them. Why that change? Actually it wasn't so much of a change, but a recurrence?

BIBERMAN

No, it wasn't a real change. If one were to go back to the work that I did while I was living in New York, for example, it would be apparent that I was always fascinated by the look of cities and particularly by the structural qualities of buildings with both an architectural and an engineering personality. When I lived in New York, I painted the George Washington Bridge. I considered it to be an absolutely beautiful structure. I was talking to someone about this just a couple of nights ago, as a matter of fact, and I said there was a painter who deserves to be much better known, the American painter Charles Demuth. [He] painted a canvas that I saw when I was quite young. It was a painting of two great wheat silos, probably someplace in Kansas, and he titled that painting *My Egypt*. Now, I knew exactly what he meant by that. When I say I've always been fascinated by cities, engineering, [and] structural forms, I speak of something that has, emotionally, touched me very deeply. This interest has always been present in my work when I am not impelled, let us say, to paint things with an overtly social quality. You see, I think of myself as a very lyric painter. I love the look of nature, and I also love the look of many of the things that men build. I find both of these very wonderful, stirring, lyrical experiences. When I turned again to painting structural forms and the workmen constructing these forms, as in the plasterer series and the carpenter series, two things were combined. First of all, I've always liked to work with my hands. In addition to being a painter, I've always liked to work with tools, and for an amateur I'm a pretty fair carpenter. When I studied fresco painting, I had to learn how to plaster, so I became a fair plasterer. These things touch me, move me, deeply. I've always had the feeling that had I been functioning as a painter in a period of political calm or social well-being, I probably would have found almost my entire output very lyric in quality. I would have painted people; I would have painted landscapes; I would have painted the structures that men build — all of which, as I say, have a strong emotional impact on me. So turning to the matter of the cityscapes, I was not suddenly "discovering" a new art territory for myself. Los Angeles has its full

share, both of stirring structural forms and engineering forms. It also has, for me, some very fascinating, tacky forms, to use that term. The old, beat-up parts of Hollywood, with the tall, spindly palm trees and the old stucco houses, and the look of other decaying parts of the city fascinated me as a kind of a social document. As someone who's interested in urban life, this has been a very fertile field for me. I find the city replete with material that I'm anxious to record. It's not something that I suddenly came to as a release or an escape or a substitute for something that I was really more interested in.

COREY

Do you feel at all that the cityscapes were possibly the easiest transition from the more horrible social themes that you had been painting--that a cityscape was safe?

BIBERMAN

Well, I don't know that I'd use the term "easier." You see, on many occasions I've found myself trying to explain the diverse channels into which my work has fallen over the years. I've already indicated the fact that the lyricism of nature and structural forms has always interested me, so that I don't think that the term "easier" is exact. It's a matter of turning to another facet of my interests. A show of mine was once hung in four completely compartmentalized sections — one section only portraits, one section only landscapes, one section only social paintings, one section only structural forms. If all of Gaul was divided into three parts, maybe all of Edward Biberman is divided into four parts. I've constantly plumbed these four areas. The greater emphasis, at certain times, has gone into one area as against another. I didn't find it easier to paint the cityscape than to paint a social painting or a landscape. Circumstances probably dictated where the flow was directed. If, for whatever the reasons, a channel was either blocked or purposely shut off in one area, the flow then very naturally went into another area without my undergoing any great traumatic experience. Even in the period when the bulk of my work was topical in quality, I would turn very frequently to a landscape or to a portrait. My own feeling, in terms of my own work, is that this represents my totality, and I would find it very difficult to isolate any one or any two elements and say, "Well, that is really what I've always wanted to do."

COREY

Do you feel that many artists get caught up in that?

BIBERMAN

That kind of a division?

COREY

No, not the division so much, but falling into being one-sided. "This is what I've really always wanted to do; therefore I'm going to do it."

BIBERMAN

Well, I don't know. You know, there are painters who have been known as landscape painters, and there are painters who have been known as portrait painters, and there are painters who have been known as still-life painters. Maybe they're very lucky. Maybe they don't have their interests or their energies diluted. Maybe it would be nice to feel that there is only one thing that one wants to do and to plumb that continuously. I've never felt that. A friend of mine, the very fine black painter Charles White, in an interview that I once had with him on television, made a statement that I've always thought of with great envy. He said — I think I'm quoting him exactly—"All of my life, I've only been painting one picture." Well, I know what he means. He was only painting one picture because all of his life, really, he painted nothing except his relation to the black experience which he is a part of. Maybe Charles White is lucky. Maybe he's very fortunate. I've never found myself satisfied with any one single area. As I've already said, there are many areas that I've wished to examine, and the emphasis has varied, depending on the circumstances.

COREY

Do you think being an artist, living in California, you've been able to do that more easily than if you had stayed in New York--or in Europe, for that matter?

BIBERMAN

That's always speculative, but let me say this: I think that at one point in our discussion, I said that one of the things that I liked when I first came to California was the fact that few people here were really interested in art. You could sort of settle down and paint and solve your own problems without the

frenzy of a very frenetic art scene. I don't know what would have happened, obviously, had I stayed in New York. I don't know, obviously, what would have happened had I stayed in Europe. I can only speculate. Since I am very unhappy about much that has happened in American art--let's say, from the period of the Second World War on— I think that it would have probably been more difficult for me to have pursued my own interests in the face of the more bitter art scene which existed in New York. However, this is speculative. One can never know. So far as Europe is concerned, I obviously could not have stayed there, because by the end of the thirties, the Second World War broke out. I would either have been thrown into a concentration camp, as a Jew, or I would have hightailed it back to the States, so that I think one would have to eliminate your question in terms of Europe. In terms of California, the art scene here has, in a sense, always reflected the eastern scene. A great many of the fashions, trends, and a great many of the schools follow the fashions and trends of schools of art in the East. They have never been quite as sharp here as they were in New York. I think it probably would have been more difficult for me to have stayed with my point of view in New York than it was here. However, this too is kind of an iffy answer to an iffy question. These things have to be guessed at. I can only hazard an opinion.

COREY

What is it about American art that you're unhappy with?

BIBERMAN

That's a long story, isn't it? The emergence of the so-called abstract expressionist school of art and the nonobjective attitudes in American painting really had their greatest moments starting with the end of the Second World War. I always find it not without a kind of coincidental interest that the height of the abstract expressionist movement was also the height of the McCarthy period. This may be, again, speculative, but I have always found the point of view of nonobjective art to be a very limited one. Action painting, abstract expressionism, and the avoidance of associative values in painting have, for me, not been constructive, despite the fact that historically this has been considered to be the emancipation of American art. Most of the people who write about the art of the middle of the twentieth century speak about the fact that the center of art and the center of the experimental movement

moved from Europe to the United States, and that the so-called New York School (which means the abstract expressionist and the action school) signaled the emancipation of American art, and that for the first time American art moved to the center of the world scene. From my point of view, if this is the center of the world scene of art, it's not a very good center. I don't enjoy it, I don't feel comfortable with it, and I don't feel it's a very contributive point of view. My speculation as to why this particular point of view, which avoids subject matter, coincided almost exactly with the Cold War is something which one cannot prove. The painters of the abstract expressionist and action schools did not have to wrestle directly with contemporary social issues. A great many artists and critics maintain that this is a very positive outgoing manifestation of the individualist, democratic, forward-looking point of view in art. I do not subscribe to this thesis.

COREY

Then you don't think that the purported radicalism of the New York School, if you can call it that, is in any way grappling with or making a statement about social issues or society. You don't believe it's a reflection of a fragmented society?

BIBERMAN

Well, there is a partial truth here. I think it was Ben Shahn who at one point said, in effect, that there is no such thing as a totally abstract painting. Even an abstract painting makes the statement that the subject is of no importance, which in itself is to me a very significant statement. You know, this question has to be wrestled with, and I think there is a certain validity to my argument. I assume you mean the formal qualities when you speak of the radicalism of the abstract expressionist, action schools-- whether this was a positive, liberating force, or whether it was not, one of the things that has to be understood is the fact that this movement lasted precisely ten years. If it was as radical and as liberating and as constructive a statement in art as was claimed, I think one would have to wonder why, after ten years, it disappeared. There's nothing in the world today more tired than an abstract expressionist painting. Nobody's painting abstract expressionist paintings any more. They are dated. They're already like last year's styles — out of fashion. So that I have to wonder why so many schools, like the ones that we've

already mentioned-- and like op art, for example, which lasted maybe two years — disappeared after such great fanfare. You see, if such an enormous contribution was being made, one would have to say, "What kind of a statement exhausts itself in a period of two years, five years, or ten years? I have the uneasy feeling that the short life of some of these movements may have some relation to their intrinsic worth. I'm being very subjective, obviously.

COREY

What do you feel is the contribution of the artist?

BIBERMAN

Potential contribution? You know, we now have the perspective of about 4,000 years of the recorded history of art, and from our vantage point, I think that it's possible to make certain observations if not conclusions. I think that being able to look at better than 4,000 — 5,000 — years — from 3,000 B.C., there is, as we examine the history of art, a very fascinating relation between the art of any culture and the total quality of that culture. Although I don't think that in any one of those years, the artist sat down and said, "How can I best relate to the culture of my time?" I think there is, on evidence, a significant relationship between the totality of a culture and the art that the culture produced. If we look at the scene today and say, "What is the obligation of the artist?" the artist, whether he consciously wills it or not, is more than likely reflecting some aspect of the culture in which he lives. He may be reflecting some of the good elements of that culture or some of the negative elements. My feeling is that the artist of today who is literate must be aware of the art of the immediate past and the remote past. I mean, we're not isolated in time. We have the means, through books and travel and cultural experience, to know the art of the past. We are in a particularly fortunate position, and I think that somewhere along the line, we ought to question our relation to our own time. The only thing that I can suggest, although I would hesitate to be dogmatic about a matter which has long engrossed aestheticians, philosophers, and scholars--I can only respond very personally to this question and say that some sense of one's own time (and some decision as to whether or not one has an obligation to one's own time) has to enter into this question. I know that I have been conscious of these

factors. I think that the creative artist today should be aware of these matters, and how he reacts is then going to be evident in what he does. The matter of the artists' responsibility becomes a social question and will be answered one way by those people who have a strong feeling about their relation to the social ambience and will be answered differently by others who, presumably, couldn't care less. However, I feel that those who "couldn't care less" are also expressing a very interesting social attitude. I think back to the wonderful formulation made by the American philosopher Barrows Dunham, who said, in an article called "Art and Politics" (I'll have to paraphrase it) that the avoidance by an artist of a sense of social responsibility is in itself a very significant social attitude. These are the only general terms, I'm afraid, in which I can respond to your question. What you're asking has to do with ethics, with morality, with philosophy, and with aesthetics; and I don't know of any short answer that I can possibly give. I think that I have indicated the areas of my own concerns, and I have the feeling you know by now that I am unhappy with the reactions of others of my colleagues. Maybe this is why I feel as I do about certain aspects of contemporary life. I once had a very interesting conversation with Aldous Huxley, who for many years was a neighbor of ours. We were talking one day about the general question of abstract art versus art that employs a series of associations, and he said something which I found fascinating. I have quoted it on many occasions when I have been speaking publicly on this question. He said, "You know, I am a great lover of Chinese porcelains, and I know a great deal about Chinese porcelains. I am also a great lover of the paintings of Titian. If someone were to ask me to examine the most beautiful Chinese porcelain that I've ever seen, and asked me to look at the most beautiful Titian that I've ever seen, and then asked me to make a choice, I would have to choose the Titian. I would choose the Titian because it touched on the greatest number of levels of human experience." That, I think, is a pretty good answer to your question. For me, the number of levels of human experience that are touched on in abstract and nonobjective art are very limited. I enjoy the work of Josef Albers, for example. In his series, *Homage to the Square*, I am very aware of the great sensitivity with which a rectangle encompasses another rectangle, but after having satisfied myself that he has created the best possible relationship between two rectangles, I have the annoying question of how many levels of human experience this touches. This is my subjective response to the

problem. This is basically why I feel that the entire period of abstract expressionism, action painting, nonobjective painting has been a minor period in the history of art. I can't prove this because the history of art is going to have to deal with this question many hundreds of years from now. It's my own feeling that this can be, when practiced well, a very beautiful visual experience but a limited one. Hence my own choice.

COREY

The kind of art which you are talking about, which you seem to wish for--is it something which is taught? Why has it not come about?

BIBERMAN

Well, I have to disagree with your formulation. I think that it is coming about, but it's coming about in areas that are not the accepted and fashionable areas of contemporary art. For example, the art that is now being produced in this country by the blacks, by and large, is not a nonobjective art. However, there are many blacks, it is true, who are nonobjective painters and sculptors. The art that is emerging, in California particularly, out of the Chicano community is not, by and large, a nonobjective art, although some of the kids who go to the universities here feel that this is the thing that they should do. But if you saw an exhibition a couple of years ago at the County Museum by a group called "Los Four," or if you saw, about a year before that, an exhibition by a group of black artists also at the County Museum, you would have seen two strains of contemporary art in this country which are not the fashionable, accepted strains. There is also a kind of an underground of painters who have never — and I use the word "bought" in quotes--who have never "bought" the abstract thesis. I call them an underground because they're not fashionable. I have the sense that we will probably witness- not a return, because that implies a kind of regression, but a reconsideration on another level of the associative elements in art. I feel [these] have the richest possible potential, have in the past, have in the present, and I think will have in the future. When you ask why they are not in evidence or why they are not being taught, the only thing that I can suggest is that for many reasons which are highly complex, this is not the fashion in the art establishment of our time. Who controls the art establishment of our time is another big can of beans which, if we were to open it, would involve a long period of discussion. It's a very fascinating

subject, and the question as to how an art style or how an art form comes into being in a period when art is not openly subsidized—which it is not in this country at the present time—opens up a vast area.

COREY

A vast area, but a very interesting one and difficult to let pass. Who does control the art world— what is produced or the manner in which things are produced?

BIBERMAN

Well, I recently approached UCLA Extension — for whom I have over many years lectured — with a proposal that we do a series of sessions to be called "The Art Scene," subheading "The Tastemakers , " in which we would try to examine this precise question. And for that examination, I suggested we call into the discussions the following groups of people: number one, the producing artists; number two, the art teachers; number three, the art historians; number four, the art dealers; number five, the museums; and number six, the critics. These six elements, in combination, produce the thing that we call "the art scene." Who contributes how much of it and in what context was the question I wanted to examine. I can't possibly, on a tape, indicate all the feelings that I have about these six areas. This would require, as I saw it, a series of at least six full evenings of discussion. All that I can suggest is that at the present time, unlike periods in the past, we have at least these six major groups, all of whom, in concert, are together producing the thing that we call the contemporary art scene. This is a relatively new phenomenon. You see, up until about 200 years ago, there was no such thing as today's art museum. Up until 400 years ago, there was no such thing as a vested, published art critic. The matter of sponsorship, of subsidy and how it has changed over the 5,000 years that we've already mentioned and for what reasons has to enter the picture. The old question of "who pays the piper plays the tune" also has to do with the art scene. The pattern of who paid the piper over 5,000 years has undergone a great deal of change. It's a vast subject, and as I say, honestly, on this series of tapes, we just can't do it.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO (FEBRUARY 25, 1976)

COREY

I'm still curious about one of the things that you mentioned last week. You said during the McCarthy period, although there were surveillances and you were aware of people watching your activities and your paintings, that there was always gallery space available to you.

BIBERMAN

No. If I said that, I either made an incorrect statement or you misunderstood what I did say. In fact, gallery space was not always available to me, and this presented obvious difficulties. Some of the galleries where I had previously shown never came out point blank and said, you know, "We can't show you," or "There's a problem." But by implication, I was aware of the fact that there was a kind of — well, the parallel is the "gray list" in other professions. I soon realized that it would be embarrassing, both for the galleries and for me, to have the request for exhibitions refused. There were, however, during that period, a few galleries, the owners of which were themselves very irate about what was happening, and they made their facilities available. So that access to exhibitions was not impossible for me in that period, but my choices were not always the ones that I would normally have made.

COREY

Was there any movement among artists in California — or Los Angeles—to open up a cooperative or private gallery area during that period?

BIBERMAN

No, not during that period. There had been efforts of that sort at an earlier time, but not for the same reason. There had been efforts made at an earlier time to have a cooperative gallery. One actually existed which was run by an organization called Artists Equity Association, but it was started for purely economic, not political, reasons. The gallery actually operated for about two years on a cooperative basis. There was a very nice exhibition space. I don't remember the exact location-- somewhere in the MacArthur Park area--but the project folded simply because the gallery-going public was not accustomed to go into an offbeat area. We [also] had problems staffing the gallery. Theoretically, everybody manned it for a certain number of hours per week, but this proved impractical. People didn't show up, and the gallery was not opened when it was supposed to have been, and the project finally folded.

But the fact is that during the period that I speak of, the McCarthy period, since there were relatively few exhibiting artists who had problems in exhibiting, therefore there was no need for this kind of a cooperative effort.

COREY

The cooperative effort that you just spoke of, was that merely for exhibition space, or was it . . . ?

BIBERMAN

No, it was for general art activity. We had lectures and symposia and art film showings and things of that sort. It functioned both as an exhibition area and also an educational area during the brief period it was in existence.

COREY

You had a book published in 1954, *The Best Untold*. How did the publication of that book come about?

BIBERMAN

In a way, that involved a very close painter friend of mine, a very talented artist named Ted Gilien whom I had known for many, many years. [He] had been in the army and was with a unit — I don't know whether it was a combat unit or kind of a clean-up unit — but in any case, his army unit came into Hiroshima a short time after the atom bomb had dropped. He was completely shocked by everything that he had seen in the war in general, but his mind was blown by what he saw in Hiroshima. When he came back [to the United States] he painted like a demon to kind of exorcise all of the horror that he had seen during this period of military service. After several years—I don't remember what the timing was exactly, but I would guess in the early 1950s—he had published by, I think, one of the humanist groups a book which he called *The Price*, which reproduced a series of his paintings that had to do with his own war experience. I was so impressed with the book and so intrigued with the idea of an artist collating a group of his own paintings for a given objective that I began to wonder whether, in terms of my own work, something might be done in terms of presenting one of the threads that had been running through my own work. One evening, I took a sheaf of photographs that I had taken of my own work over the years and laid them

out on this living room floor--in the very room that we're sitting in now—and began to examine them to see if there was a thread of continuity and, if so, what that thread was. I soon found that indeed there was, for me, a definite sense of cohesiveness in one group of paintings. They were originally painted not to illustrate or follow any particular theme, but once having been done, they bore out my concern with topical elements in my work and certain sociological directions. I therefore assembled a group of the paintings which established an interesting sequence--not necessarily a chronological sequence, but a thematic one. I found that I then needed to write a short text to lead from one painting to the next. I didn't think of this, in any sense, as the final text, but rather, in submitting the project to anyone who might be interested, I felt that some written continuity would be helpful, so I wrote what I felt would establish a needed short narration for the paintings. [I] didn't know quite what to do with the completed material once I had finished it because this was still the period of the very peculiar political situation in which I found myself. I had heard that a publisher in New York might possibly be available. On the suggestion of a friend of mine, I sent the material to Howard Fast, whom I did not know and whom I have never met to this day, with the request that he might, on behalf of our mutual friend, if he felt so inclined, take the dummy of the material to a publisher. Posthaste I received a reply from Howard Fast saying that he was enormously impressed with the material, that he himself had been having difficulty with his former publishers, but that there was a small publishing house called the Blue Heron Press which was very eager to publish my material. I wrote back and said, "Well, that sounds very good, but who will write the text?" He in turn replied, "Are you out of your mind? The text is perfect the way it is. We wouldn't change a word of it, and we would like your permission to publish both the paintings and the text as is." I was doubly pleased, number one, to find that I had a publisher, and number two, to find that the material that I sent [as a guideline] apparently had a very profound effect on someone who was himself, of course, a well-known literary figure. So in short order, the book appeared.

COREY

Fast wrote the introduction?

BIBERMAN

He wrote the introduction, and I wrote a kind of postscript, which we called an "afterword."

COREY

What type of audience were you trying to reach or hoping to reach with the book?

BIBERMAN

I really didn't know. Never having been a published author, I didn't think in those terms. I had no idea of how a book was publicized, and I more or less assumed that whoever published the book would go through the normal channels of seeking an audience. I knew that in Los Angeles I could certainly make the book available to both individuals and groups through personal solicitation, which I did, but I made no attempt at the national distribution of the book. It was not a large edition. I think that the total printing was probably not more than 2,500 or at the most 3,000 copies. It apparently did not flow into the normal distribution channels in the East. I don't know whether it was because Howard Fast at that time also had his normal publishing channels closed, or whether the publication house, which was a neophyte in the field, just didn't have the necessary connections. So far as I could tell, there were no important national reviews of the book. The book was given a kind of brush-off locally and, as a matter of fact, was attacked by the then art critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, who felt that the book was highly political and was therefore very suspect — doubly suspect since it carried an introduction by Howard Fast. However, over the years, the entire edition of the book sold out, and it is, at present, a much-sought-after work and a high-priced collector's item. There simply are no more copies available. I myself have about six copies which I hoard and part with only under very special circumstances because it's impossible to procure a copy of the book.

COREY

Along the idea of the artist communicating with the public, looking over [your] papers it seems that you've devoted a great deal of time to lecturing or teaching, not only in a technical sense, but in a more theoretical sense. Why is that?

BIBERMAN

The first reason is purely economic. The fact of the matter is, as you know, that there are probably only a handful of practicing artists who can live entirely on the sale of their work. Most artists find that they have to supplement their income by things other than the sale of their work. For example, although I have a pretty extensive exhibition record and am fairly well known in the art world, I, to this day, do not subsist entirely on the sale of my own work. I lecture [and] do all sorts of related activities in the art field. All of my early teaching and lecturing started out as a purely economic gesture, but the direction of these extracurricular activities has changed over the years. I indicated, I think, at our last conversation, that the teaching I had done for a period of twelve years at one of the art schools here came to an abrupt halt because of the political situation I stopped the "how you do it" kind of teaching at that point, and as I look back on it, I am very pleased that that was so — although I'm not happy with the circumstances that caused it. As I began to lay greater emphasis on lecturing on art history and on the philosophic and theoretical attitudes of the artists' position in the contemporary world, I found that this was much more exciting and interesting than teaching how you put two eyes and one nose and one mouth and two ears together. So because of circumstances, there came about a shift in the areas in which I was functioning, and the fact of the matter is that from 1950 until the present time--a period of twenty-six years--I have not, since that 1950 rupture, done any of the "how you do it" kind of teaching.

COREY

Beyond the economic reasons, are there any reasons, as an artist, why you feel it is either necessary or important to communicate with the public?

BIBERMAN

Yes, I do--and I'm sorry that I have to say yes to that question. I think it would be wonderful if a painter or the practitioners in any one of the arts could simply function with no need to either explain, apologize, or account for the direction of their work. However, I don't think that we find ourselves, at the present time, in that particular kind of euphoric situation. [phone rings; tape recorder turned off] I'm sorry that I have to find that occasionally verbal communication is also necessary for someone who is dealing with visual communication. At the present time, I think that there are probably two

groups of artists who find this necessary on occasion. First [is] that group of artists--of whom I don't consider myself one--who work in visual idioms which are very difficult for the lay person to understand and who therefore feel that they have to explain them verbally. Since I am a figurative painter, I don't feel that this is precisely my problem, although I am not a painter whose work is traditional or photographic in the normal use of those terms. However, very often I find that my choice of material rather than my idiom is offbeat. I also find that I have to explain why I choose to be a figurative painter in a period when most of my colleagues are working in a non-figurative idiom. In my lecturing, if I have a critical audience, I'm often called on to account for the seeming aberration. Some people seem to feel my work is going against the current fashionable stream, and I therefore try to account for my choice of both material and technique. I don't mind doing this--as a matter of fact, I rather enjoy it — but as I said a moment ago, I think it's too bad that a painter finds himself in a position where he has to make such explanations. Theoretically, the old Chinese proverb, "A picture is worth a thousand words," should apply. Factually, it just doesn't under all circumstances. Perhaps we're in a period where saying that the picture is "worth a thousand words" does not apply, and you have to have the picture and--if not a thousand, perhaps a hundred words to go along with it.

COREY

Why do you think that is?

BIBERMAN

Well, we've discussed the whole question of the direction of a great deal of contemporary thinking in the arts today, and I don't know how far we want to reenter that particular discussion. For reasons which are, I suppose, both historic and philosophic, many painters feel impelled to work today in an abstract, nonobjective idiom. For the painters who do not find themselves swayed by this particular approach, there is very often, as I've indicated, the need to account for the choice of thematic material. We are historically in a period where both the matter of form and of content are undergoing a great change. I think that both of these tendencies can be accounted for historically. We are, after all, in a technological culture, and it would be rather strange if all of the tools of contemporary technology did not have some effect on how we

see and how we reproduce our feelings. The other question--and that is the question as to whether a change in subject matter can be best portrayed nonobjectively or figuratively — I think has to do with our feelings about contemporary life, about how we communicate, and on what level of human consciousness we choose to function.

COREY

Do you feel that technology has just affected the way in which we see in terms of art, or is there more?

BIBERMAN

Well, it certainly has had a profound effect on the way we see, but it's also had an effect on some of the other art forms. For example, the impact of the motion picture, of television, of advertising, [and] the impact of reproduction techniques of all sorts have had a very profound effect on how we see and what manner we choose to restate our vision. For example, until the invention of the camera, the ability to duplicate completely that which the eye sees, the whole school of painting called "trompe-l'oeil," the "deceiving the eye" technique, was considered a tremendously valuable accomplishment. Once the camera, and particularly the color camera, was able to reproduce pretty accurately that which was set before it, one whole type of painting obviously became--if not invalidated, certainly less important than it had been. That certainly has to be considered to be one direct effect of the camera. The development of both the motion picture and television have affected profoundly, I think, the way we react to visual stimuli. The fact, for example, that in the motion picture we accept the flashback, the cutaway, the close-up, [and] group shots, has affected many painters. I know that it has affected me in many of the things that I do. Very recently, I showed a painting of some flowers in a landscape to a writer friend of mine. From my point of view, [it is] a very lyric painting of a poppy field. There is a large single poppy in the foreground, and then I rather arbitrarily designed a group of flowers in a poppy bed behind it. I showed it to this screenwriter friend, and he looked at it and said, "Oh, isn't that interesting? It's a close-up and a two-shot." Of course, from his craft point of view, he was absolutely right. It was "a close-up and a two-shot." Now, had I been painting in a period where I was unfamiliar with the device of a close-up and a two-shot, or fade-in and fade-out, I don't

know whether I would have thought of presenting my own experience in precisely those terms. So technology has had a profound effect. Now, the painting materials that we use also have undergone a certain amount of change. Up until very recently we were using the very same materials that had been used for about 2,000 years. With the development of acrylics and polymer resins and other synthetics, a type of very quick drying pigment is available which we did not have before. This hasn't had a tremendous effect, but it has had an effect on some techniques. There are certain types of underpaintings and glazings which in the past were rather laborious techniques. For example, we're told that Titian would underpaint his canvases in umber and white, and allow them to dry for a year, and then superimpose on that underpainting a series of up to forty transparent color glazes. Now if we want to use a similar technique, we don't have to wait a year for the underpainting to dry because we have quick-drying binders for our pigments. So that there are certain technical problems — not problems; I should say "possibilities"—open to us today which we didn't have before. In addition, there is the whole new scientific concept of our universe that we have today. For example, we are aware of the fact that we no longer live in a three-dimensional world. The whole Einsteinian theory of the fourth dimension and space-time physics has had a profound effect on how we think of our world. As a matter of fact, just a week or so ago I was asked to speak at an evening devoted to the memory of three Pauls--Pablo Picasso, Pablo Casals, and Pablo Neruda. I was asked to speak about Picasso, and I indicated that whether you liked Picasso's approach or not, you had to understand that what he was trying to do in a certain period of analytical cubism was to try to parallel, from his painter's point of view, the theory of space-time physics. If you looked at a head, and did not confine yourself to a front view, three-quarter, or profile, you could scramble all of those views simultaneously and make a composite. This is what we see in the typically scrambled Picasso head. Now, whether you want to do it that way or not presents you with essentially a philosophic choice. But I don't think that anybody, until the emergence of space-time physics, would have embarked on Picasso's particular approach to that visual problem. Obviously technology has had some effect on all of us.

COREY

What you were saying about the poppies with the close-up and the two-shot-- is it really, in a case like that, so very different from plain old perspective?

BIBERMAN

Completely different. You see, the plain old traditional perspective, as you have spoken of it, is really Renaissance perspective. It's what we call, technically, three-point perspective, with two vanishing points right and left and a vanishing point above, so that all forms, theoretically, taper and converge to these given points. In what we call linear perspective, objects farther away from the spectator get smaller. Also, in what we call aerial perspective, colors, as they get farther away from the spectator, diminish in their chromatic intensity. Now, these two concepts are at the heart of Renaissance perspective, which marked a departure from the two-dimensional art idiom which preceded it. The contribution of Leonardo da Vinci and others, who did painstaking research into the laws of three-dimensional art, resulted in the whole theory of what we call Renaissance perspective. Most art students are taught Renaissance perspective. There's no great mystery to it anymore, even though a couple of hundred years ago it was considered almost magic. Strangely enough, for many painters today, there is a kind of dissatisfaction with this traditional perspective. The awareness of space technology and the impact of some of the other factors that I've talked about has made a great many painters seek to create certain new psychological illusions on a two-dimensional surface by other means. I know that I find that I often rely on certain devices other than three-dimensional perspective, but I still use traditional perspective on occasion to achieve certain specific optical qualities. If you were to ask the next logical question, "Why do I do this?" I would simply have to say that there are times when a more contemporary idiom creates greater visual impact. I can't prove it. I can't pinpoint it any more precisely than that. For many painters today, the traditional techniques are no longer the complete answer for what they're trying to do.

COREY

Is the perspective that you're talking about a variation of, let's say, a close-up or a two-shot, or is it something more beyond that?

BIBERMAN

No, it's quite different. Think of the simultaneous depiction of a close-up and a two-shot, and if we wanted to go even farther, a distance shot, each superimposed on the other. This is quite different than in a Renaissance painting, which has a foreground, a middle distance, and a distance, each existing in its own section of a painting. We often try to present the emotional sense of this kind of traditional perspective by different means. It's like the thing that happened in the theater, where the classic theater simply assumed that the fourth wall was nonexistent. You saw the back of the stage and the two wings; and you, the audience, were behind the fourth wall. Now we find that some theatrical devices are expanding into the theater-in-the-round to try to establish another sense of how we create illusions. In all of the arts, there seems to be a desire to expand certain hitherto accepted modes of expression and direct them to more contemporary feeling. Sometimes this may be necessary, sometimes not, but the fact is that historically, there has been and there always is change, as we examine the movement evidenced in the whole history of art.

COREY

For yourself then, what do you find that those means are?

BIBERMAN

Well, let me try to put it this way. The surrealists (basing much of their theory on Freud) wished to establish the validity of a world of the unconscious or the subconscious on the theory that perhaps those worlds were more "real" than the world of waking consciousness. There are certain visual and emotional devices in the surrealist idiom that have always interested me, although not necessarily the Freudian content. However, the juxtaposing of two seemingly unrelated concepts — be they concepts of optical fact or of content--has appealed to me strongly, I would say, throughout a significant portion of my painting career. I have never hesitated to juxtapose seemingly unrelated color sequences and unrelated thematic relationships if I feel that those juxtapositions can bring about a greater emotional impact than simple visual, optical reality.

COREY

What about your choice of color in paintings? Why a particular color?

BIBERMAN

Well, color, as you know, in itself has a very strong emotional appeal. We can make cliches about it, you know — we can say that we "see red," or hell is a place that is red-hot. This changes sociologically, however. We normally, in the Western world, associate the color black with mourning, but in the Far East, the color of mourning is not black, but white. Sociologically, people establish different relations between color and their emotions, so that we find that certain colors at certain times and in different places have carried varying associations. "Royal purple" was royal in the past only because this pigment was very costly. [tape recorder turned off]

COREY

Beyond the emotion in color, then, are there particular reasons for your choices of color?

BIBERMAN

Well, you know, one chooses color for two reasons: either for duplication of a local color that one sees, or for purely psychological and emotional reasons. For example, German expressionist painters never relied on the optical truth of the color they saw. If they felt impelled to paint a sky a bloody red or black for emotional reasons, they didn't hesitate to do so. There are two problems that enter into choice of color. Trees in the spring have green leaves which they gradually turn golden — and if you're in the Vermont hills, they later turn red and other beautiful fall colors. These are local colors, so if the aim is to paint the perfect truth of an Eastern fall landscape, you paint it in autumn colors. It wouldn't under those circumstances occur to you to paint it, let's say, in black, or in some color totally unrelated to the optical facts. However, if you aim to say that something is really terrible, and you want to establish a different mood and psychological atmosphere, then you use color for its impact value, bearing in mind that it's fallacious to think that a given color will have the same emotional effect all over the world at a given time. However, if we're talking about the audience with which we normally communicate, then we can certainly say that a cool lavender has a totally different emotional reaction on the average Western psyche than a bloody red does. All of these factors come into play. I know that in my own work I am constantly having to weigh the question of how faithfully I wish to reproduce the optical effect of

that which I am painting, against the possibility of saying the emotional impact that I want to create with unreal color is more important. Under certain circumstances I will deliberately change that which the retina of the eye registers as a color. These two factors constantly have to be weighed, and I think that the outcome is determined largely by what it is that one is painting.

COREY

By the subject.

BIBERMAN

By the subject, and also by the total content.

COREY

What about color in terms of structure?

BIBERMAN

The structural use of color is a factor that we recognize as we examine the history of Western painting-- although in the Eastern tradition, color structure probably plays a quite different role. For example, we don't have, in the Western tradition, anything like the Eastern tradition of sumi painting, in which an entire range of grays establishes the feeling of color where there's no chromatic color at all. Certainly an Eastern sumi artist thinks differently about the structure and use of color. This different concept results in a different idiom. For us, the fact that colors have certain wavelengths--causing certain colors to seem to advance while other colors tend to recede— this fact becomes part of the structure.

COREY

Do you ever deal with color in terms of projecting where a particular painting may hang?

BIBERMAN

Well, you see, one of the problems of the easel painter is the fact that he never knows where his painting is going to hang. In a sense, this question also applies to the whole choice of content. The only factor, therefore, that can possibly be foreseen is whether a painting is going to be seen under natural light or under artificial light. But to try to tell in advance where a given

painting is going to end up is obviously quite impossible. I know in my own case, for example, [there are] many early paintings which I have lost track of completely. The original owner may have died, I don't know who the heirs were, and I therefore haven't the foggiest notion as to where a painting is at the present time. Even if I were to try and outguess the time the original owner of the painting would keep it, I could never know for certain how long the painting was going to stay there. So that this is a question that, frankly, I don't even try to cope with.

COREY

Getting back to what you were saying about the technical changes in material, how has that affected you directly?

BIBERMAN

It's had no effect on me directly for one purely personal reason, and that is that technically I paint slowly because I like the quality that I can achieve by a very slow build-up of oil pigments. Therefore, all of the fast-drying acrylic and polymer-resin-based pigments (which are marvelous for very quick work because they can also be overpainted very quickly) have never been the qualities that I felt that I wanted. I do have those colors in my studio, and once in a while, if I want to make a very quick color notation, I will use it. But ordinarily, I have not worked with watercolor to any great degree, nor have I worked with the contemporary polymer- and acrylic-based paints. They don't suit my technique, but a great many of my colleagues, of course, use them extensively.

1.9. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE (FEBRUARY 25, 1976)

COREY

In terms of the techniques—changes and developments- would you say that you have stayed fairly consistent with both oils and silk screen?

BIBERMAN

No, silk screen presents a different problem. As you probably know, the material used is rather different in that the vehicle, the binder, is a different binder. Also, the technique, which is a technique of squeegeeing color through

silk and producing a series of two-dimensional images which, if superimposed one over the other or juxtaposed, can create something only fairly close to the three-dimensional that one achieves in oil. The two techniques are quite different, and there are many things which I would not even attempt to do in silk screen. It is next to impossible to get certain subtle gradations which are very easily achieved in oil and are one of the oil medium's great virtues. So there are many things in silk screen which I do not attempt, and there are many changes which I have to make if I'm endeavoring to translate something which I have painted in oil and am attempting to reinterpret as a print using the silk-screen process. The qualities of each medium are quite different, and therefore the use of the silk-screen medium has to be completely on its own terms

COREY

Do you ever take the same subject and silk-screen it as well as oil?

BIBERMAN

I've done that with a number of my paintings, but looking at a painting done originally as an oil and looking at a serigraph or a silk-screen version of the same work will immediately make the differences apparent. I have done a number of interpretations in serigraphy of paintings that I've originally done in oil; there is no possibility of confusing them if they were examined side by side.

COREY

What is it that will make you choose to do something in oil or serigraph?

BIBERMAN

Well, let's go back to the question of how I started to do serigraphs. The question as to what things I choose to paint in oil, I think we've probably covered by now. My interest in serigraphs, which I've done for the past fifteen years, came about in an almost accidental fashion. A long time ago, when I was living in Paris, I became interested in graphic techniques. At that time a very good friend of mine, an English artist named Stanley William Hayter — who has since become extremely well known because of his teaching in a school which he called Atelier 17 — was teaching etching techniques. He was

doing it for the young artist's usual reasons — to make a little extra money. I studied the technique of hard-ground etching with Hayter, and also the soft-ground etching technique. Later on, with someone else, not with Hayter, I did some experimental work in lithography, which as you know involves drawing on stone. In all of these areas, although I found the technique interesting, I never felt any great desire to do extensive work in them, and I have only one or two examples of things that I've done in these techniques. I think that the reason is that at that time, one was usually limited to working in black and white. Since I love the use of color, I felt that working in black and white was not what I wanted. I dropped further study and simply looked on those experiments as interesting pieces of technical information. However, about fifteen years ago a painter friend of mine named Joseph Chabot, at whose gallery I'd had an exhibition some five years before, said to me, "Why don't you do some silk screens? You know, there are a lot of people who would like to have your work, and they can't afford to buy your paintings. I think that you would find this a very interesting technique." I recounted my experience with the other graphic techniques. He then said, "This is entirely different. It's a different medium, and the most important thing from your point of view is the fact that you can go as completely into color as you wish." And he continued, "I have a workshop upstairs. Why don't you make a drawing, something that you can interpret very simply in two colors on a toned background, so that you will end up with three major color values, and see how it works?" So I prepared a simple drawing, a version of a painting of mine, and I went at it. Almost immediately I became absolutely fascinated by the medium, so much so that shortly after that, for a period of a little over a year, I did only prints and no painting at all. Then I felt that enough was enough and that I'd better space my efforts out a little bit more. So for the past dozen or so years, I do about two serigraphs each year, and the rest of the time I devote to painting. But I did find that what Chabot said at our initial conversation was true, and possibilities were open to me which were totally unlike the ones that I had experimented with before. Now, it's true that in color lithography today—and in certain types of color etchings-- one has an even greater technical latitude because some of the limitations that I've talked about in serigraphy do not apply. [However,] they involve the use of a great deal of special equipment, such as printing presses, and also the service of professional printers. Serigraphy, [however,] is comparatively simple; one can do it with a minimum

amount of equipment. Since I, for various reasons, didn't want to go through the routine of working with heavy presses and professional art printers, I have stayed with serigraphy [for] my printmaking, although I realize the greater technical latitude of color lithography or color intaglio.

COREY

Technical latitude in what sense?

BIBERMAN

Serigraphy, as I've already indicated, is a series of superimposed, two-dimensional idioms, whereas color lithography permits some of the visual devices and modulations that one employs in painting when using an oil medium.

COREY

So that it would alter your representation of a subject?

BIBERMAN

It would. It would give a greater technical latitude, but the virtues inherent in the simplicity of serigraphy, for me, outweigh the values of the other medium. Since I don't wish to spend too much of my time in any of the graphic techniques, I've not experimented with the other graphic devices which are now available.

COREY

Through the years you've had a number of exhibitions. How are those arranged?

BIBERMAN

The usual procedure for a young painter is to enter work in competitive group exhibitions, hoping that the work will come to the attention of dealers who will then be interested in arranging a one-man exhibition and a continuing relationship. In my own case, the procedure was pretty much as I indicated. My first exhibitions were in group shows in Paris, and then came the two one-man exhibitions, which we talked about before, in Paris and Berlin. When I came back to the States and started my seven-year residence in New York, my work came to the attention of several important people in the art field. As a

result of their interest, they convinced my first New York dealer, a man named N.E. Montross, to invite me to have a one-man exhibition. I had two such exhibitions with him in the early thirties. On his death I shifted to another dealer in New York, the Reinhardt Gallery, with whom I also had two one-man exhibitions. By that time, I'd also been in a number of important group shows, so that I'd begun to enjoy a certain amount of recognition, and I no longer had the problem of trying to convince people that my work merited showing. It was then a question of trying to find a dealer who was compatible with my thinking and what I was painting and then establishing a working relationship. This is the basis on which I've carried on in this community also.

COREY

Comparing California, New York, or Chicago in terms of the art world and art dealers, what, for you, has been the function of California art dealers?

BIBERMAN

They're not appreciably different than the dealers anyplace else. If I were to compare, for example, my relations with the two dealers that I had in New York with several dealers with whom over the years I've had contact here, I would say that the general situation was basically no different. First of all, the dealer has to have an interest in your work. Although dealers operate commercially, they're in a special kind of commercial undertaking, and usually they don't like to try to sell something which they themselves don't like. It's not as though they were selling shoes or groceries. There's a special kind of relationship that has to be established with a dealer if the relationship is to be effective for both. The artist has to feel that the dealer is genuinely interested in his work. The dealer, on the other hand, if he is to do a good job for the artist, should operate with the belief that he is trying to sell work in which he himself has confidence. That situation is pretty much the same, I would imagine, all over the world. I've never known it to be any different, unless you speak of vanity galleries, where you simply buy a period of time in a gallery. There, the dealer is usually interested only in the amount of money that he receives and not in the work of the artist. He is guaranteed a certain return for the time that his premises are occupied. These vanity dealers are paralleled by, let's say, the private book publishers. If a novelist can't get a recognized publishing house to accept his work, he will very often go to a vanity

publishing house and pay for the publication of a book. This type of activity, although it's prevalent, is usually frowned on professionally because neither of the two parties concerned is very happy about that kind of relationship.

COREY

For you, then, the terms "gallery" and "dealer" have been fairly synonymous?

BIBERMAN

Yes, although at the present time, due to the fact that we are in a depressed economic period, there is a change in the norm. There is, increasingly, the phenomenon of dealers who do not have public galleries. They are the private representative of the artist but do not have commercial galleries in the sense of a shop which opens at nine and closes at five. The people who operate on this basis do so for economic reasons — that is, they have a very limited overhead. But this type of relationship has certain limitations, too, because the very fact that it does not have the normal commercial aspects limits the critics' willingness to review and limits the potential audience. You can't go to a private dealer and knock on his door and say, "May I come in and look at your paintings?" It's a totally different "by-appointment-only" relationship. There are a number of private operators of that sort in Los Angeles at the present time. There are a great many in New York, and I would assume in other parts of the world as well.

COREY

In trying to explore the avenues for exhibition, there are, obviously, the small art galleries. What do you feel the function of the larger museums is for the United States?

BIBERMAN

Of the museum as against a gallery?

COREY

Yes.

BIBERMAN

Well, a museum has a totally different objective and, therefore, organization. First of all, a museum is not geared to sell work. It may sell out of any of its

exhibitions, but this is not its prime purpose. Its primary purpose usually is educational--to combine a historic perspective of the field of art with contemporary presentations. Most museums over the world combine these two educational functions. If they have an exhibition and there are works which are available for purchase, they will not be averse to selling. But very often, because of their setup, they will not effect the sale themselves but will refer the purchaser directly to the artist. So, to repeat, the museum is generally oriented in the direction of education, whereas the gallery is oriented toward exploiting commercial possibilities.

COREY

Do you feel that there's a role that is not being fulfilled by museums in terms of supporting contemporary artists?

BIBERMAN

Well, there are two possibilities. You see, theoretically, as I would look at a museum, unless it is completely historic in its collection and a kind of a library of art, it would seem to me that the function of a museum should be to relate the present to the past. That's its theoretical function, as I would see it. Now, there's a great deal of unhappiness on the part of many living artists who feel that too often there is an imbalance in this relationship, that there is too great an emphasis on documenting the past as against exhibiting the present. However, this situation varies enormously depending on what museum you're talking about and where. A museum, for example, like the Museum of Modern Art in New York does not attempt to be historic. Its very name, the Museum of Modern Art, indicates what it sees as its function. But even in those terms, there are many artists who feel that there is bias on the part of the museum, that although it may, programmatically, desire [to]--and in effect does — exhibit contemporary work, its choices do not reflect the kind of catholicity that many artists would like to see. So there's a certain degree of unhappiness. Theoretically — and ideally, I suppose--the situation would be one of a fair relation between the present and the past, and the present [would] evidence the kind of catholicity of taste in which there would be a representative showing of divergent contemporary points of view. This is the ideal situation. If you ask me if it exists, I would, unhappily, have to say that I know of no place where it exists in those terms. It's better in some places, worse in other

places. In Los Angeles, for example, there's a great deal of unhappiness with the L.A. County Museum, a feeling on the part of the artists that the County Museum is not fulfilling its function in terms of showing enough work by the contemporary artists in Los Angeles. On the other hand, when there was, in Pasadena, the Pasadena Art Institute—which did indeed show contemporary work almost exclusively—there was a great deal of discontent on the part of people, artists and public alike, who felt that the bias of that institution was so completely directed toward the avant-garde that there was no opportunity to assess other contemporary points of view in the area. Unfortunately, most artists are not too happy with the museum situation for the many reasons which I've just outlined.

COREY

Even with the emphasis of the Pasadena Museum on the avant-garde, it seems to me that there was still a great tendency to ignore what was happening in California and in Los Angeles--not only currently, but in the past twenty years--and that the only place that was open to artists were the smaller galleries.

BIBERMAN

Well, maybe that's the reason that the Pasadena Museum passed into limbo. [It] has now been taken over by Norton Simon, and the policy now is totally different than it was before. At the present time, at least a half of the museum is devoted to the historic past in painting, and the contemporary material which is being shown is mostly the display of German expressionist works and of the contemporary holdings of Norton Simon.

COREY

As an artist who happens to be living in California, how great is the frustration? There doesn't seem to be a very cohesive art direction in this town. It is going into many fragmented directions and nobody is stopping and saying, "Okay, this is going to the place where we really can show." As I said before, there are the small art galleries, but there doesn't seem to be a very cohesive trend or movement.

BIBERMAN

Well, that's true. There is, as you probably know, as of about a year ago--and due largely to the demise of the old Pasadena Museum— an institution called the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, which is housed in Century City. As its name indicates, it is designed to try to fill the avant-garde gap and is concerned largely with contemporary works by the younger painters, sculptors, and concept artists in this area. Early in its exhibition schedule, however, it tried to pay tribute to a group of older painters, and it put on a four-man show of works by four painters who were important in this area in the past. But here again, it chose four painters whose work it felt preceded the experimental preoccupations of the younger group. Had they wished to document the contribution of some of the older painters in this area, they certainly did not cover the entire art spectrum in their selection. By and large, they are fulfilling what is probably a very important function—that is, the display of one segment of the art that is currently being done in this area. The other, less experimental artists who are working in this community are more or less forced to seek the commercial outlets that we spoke of.

COREY

Has there been any attempt by that group of artists to form a cohesive center or group, not only for displaying but for support within the community, within the art world?

BIBERMAN

Well, this brings up something that we touched on in our last conversation, and that is the whole question of taste and who makes it. This really involves such a lengthy discussion that I don't think that, in these interviews, we can go into it more deeply than to say, as I tried to indicate the last time we talked, that the problem of making an impact on the art community involves many diverse groups. It involves the producing artist, the dealer, the museum, the critic, the educator; any single art group trying to make a dent or an impact would have a tremendous organizational job in trying to influence all these disparate elements. This would probably involve a number of artists stopping work and going into organizational activities which nobody is particularly interested in doing. I think most artists would rather suffer an unhappy situation than to stop work entirely in order to organize that theoretical

vehicle which might allow them to make a greater impact on the public consciousness.

COREY

Is this a problem which is unique to California?

BIBERMAN

No, I would imagine this would probably be true in any area in which there is a large, functioning group of painters and sculptors and people in the visual arts. If there is a large functioning group, it would probably be just as fragmented as in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, or Chicago. This is rather a symptom of the time in which we're working and living.

COREY

In terms of the smaller gallery shows which you have had, the ones in Los Angeles, do you usually hang your own shows?

BIBERMAN

I like to when possible because I have certain feelings about how I like my works to be juxtaposed, one against another. Sometimes, however, the gallery owners themselves like to take on this particular pleasurable activity. Hanging an exhibition is very much, I think, like playing a musical score. If you have a piece of music by composer "X," you can't change the notes. The notes are already indicated, but the challenge becomes that of how you interpret the music. When you hang an exhibition, you are given a body of visual material. You can't change the material, and you're faced with the fact that x-number of paintings are to be hung. The way you arrange the paintings can enormously influence the effect. You can work either for opposition and shock value, or you can work for harmony, or for any variation or combination of these elements. I always feel that hanging an exhibition is a minor art in itself. I enjoy hanging shows; and, given the opportunity, I always like to hang my own shows, though I don't always succeed in being able to.

COREY

Going back again to communication with the public, there was a TV show, "Dialogues in Art," which you worked on. How did that come about?

BIBERMAN

About ten years ago, I approached UCLA Extension with a proposal to conduct a series of art interviews with contemporary artists. This came out of similar series of this sort that I'd had in other institutions, but I approached UCLA with this idea for two reasons. First of all, I felt that artists in this area were not [being] given all the exposure that they deserved. I felt it was very important to increase their opportunity to show their work and talk about it to the public. The idea was looked on with favor at UCLA Extension, and in two successive years, I conducted a series of art interviews called "Dialogues in Art." I insisted, incidentally, [that] if I were to do it, [that I] go, figuratively, from left field to right field in the spectrum of art. We were in a period of great differences in the points of view of very sincere people in the art field, and I wanted to have each artist given the opportunity to show his or her work and to talk about it—technically, thematically, emotionally, aesthetically, philosophically, whatever. Painters, sculptors, and printmakers, men and women, revealed the most diverse attitudes. These were not debates. I didn't heckle, I didn't cross examine. These sessions were designed, from my point of view, to provide a platform, and I think that they did that. The two series were well received. Then I had the feeling that the audience ought to be expanded because, although we had good attendance at the sessions at UCLA, nonetheless, the attendance was limited by the size of a lecture hall. I approached the Extension people at UCLA with the proposal that we try to get television coverage, utilizing the same general interview idea. We had conferences with the L.A. County Museum which also, to my great pleasure, agreed to participate. I really think that they cooperated because of a sense of guilt, since this is precisely the kind of thing they should have been doing and had not. The people from UCLA who were instrumental in the organization of the project then spoke to NBC. NBC, which, like all the networks, has to put on a certain number of so-called "public-service" programs per year in order to keep its FCC license, then agreed to implement this proposal. We did a series of twenty half-hour programs under the triple sponsorship of the L.A. County Museum, UCLA Extension, and NBC. The programs were aired locally and nationally in New York, Cleveland, Chicago, Washington, where NBC has affiliate stations. There was a great viewer response to the series, and the artists who appeared as guests on the program — I took on the same role as I had at UCLA, of commentator and host--were delighted because what it

actually meant was that each of the artists had a one-man show in New York, Cleveland, Chicago, Washington, and Los Angeles. Since the programs were done in color and since we had a very good technical crew, many of the artists said that they felt quite honestly that their work looked as good or better on TV than it did in a gallery or in private showing. So everybody was very happy with the series. However, the unfortunate thing is that these programs, which were put on as public-service programs by NBC, were not money-making programs from NBC's point of view. They didn't bring in the advertising revenue because they weren't interrupted every few minutes by a commercial. We ran each program straight through from beginning to end, and studios don't make money that way. Since television is unfortunately designed to sell products in the commercials, what happens between commercials, from their point of view, is incidental. Once having done their good deed, they said in effect, "Well, that's fine. We're off the hook for a while, and we don't have to do it again." I had wanted to have repeats of this kind of television program, but so far have been unsuccessful. I just this past year approached KCET with a similar project, but unfortunately KCET also is in a money bind. They would be very happy to do the same kind of thing, they said, if I could get the programs underwritten. However, I'm not anxious to leave my painting and my studio to look for sponsors for KCET. So until and unless one of the studios, whether it's PBS or a commercial studio, can subsidize the project, I will have to wait and hope that one day it can be reinstituted. But this is precisely the kind of art activity which I think could be of enormous value because it did two things: it gave the artist the wide exposure of simultaneous one-man shows in the major cities throughout the country with their work looking great, and [it] gave them an opportunity to talk about their work at the very same time. It also — and this was proved by the enormous amount of fan mail which came in--gave an art-hungry audience all over the country an opportunity to not have to worry about where to park the car but to just sit in their own homes, turn the dial, and look at an art program. This is the kind of exposure to art which, theoretically, should be happening more and more. I do all I can to try to plug it, but I can only devote a certain amount of time to this kind of spadework.

COREY

For the artists who were on the show, I assume that you also decided to choose a broad spectrum from left to right .

BIBERMAN

Oh, yes. This again I insisted on. We had a kind of a horse-trading session, in which I presented my point of view and the museum presented its point of view. NBC was perfectly willing to accept whatever we came up with. We had a master list from which we chose the final group. There was a certain amount of give and take involved when we came to controversial areas, so we had to very frankly say, "Well, if you put so-and-so on, then will you allow me to put so-and-so on?" We didn't always see eye to eye on the choices, but I think that we arrived at what was a very fair investigation of a very complex aesthetic field.

COREY

Were the artists primarily from California?

BIBERMAN

Not from all of California but only from Southern California. The reason was that although every artist who appeared was paid, they were paid minimum scale. We couldn't use out-of-town artists because we just didn't have a large enough budget to pay for transportation and expenses, so we were limited to those people who resided locally and were willing to appear for minimum scale.

COREY

Did you find people who were unwilling to appear?

BIBERMAN

Yes, there were people who were unwilling, for two reasons, interestingly enough. There was one — and I don't want to mention his name; I don't think it would be fair--but there was one artist who said that he was being exploited at minimum wage and therefore would not appear. There were other artists who were very worried, frankly, by the fact that I was the moderator, and although I tried to assure them on the record that I was not there to badger them or to proselytize or to debate, they were very worried, apparently, that they would not be treated fairly and for that reason refused to appear.

However, these were not the usual responses. The usual responses were those of great willingness and gratitude.

COREY

Do you have a history of badgering artists?

BIBERMAN

No, I don't, but the point is that I've been around the art community for a long period of time. People know both my work and my point of view. If they are worried and insecure, they don't want to take a chance because, for better or for worse, they don't wish to find themselves in the position of having to debate or to argue, and they could not be convinced, in two cases, that I was not arguing or debating but simply offering a platform. However, a few were unconvinced and therefore refused.

1.10. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO (MARCH 4, 1976)

COREY

I would like to go into the period of the sixties. There was a lot happening and I'm curious as to how the early sixties, the whole social and political energies in the South, Selma and marches, and how that affected you in terms of your painting?

BIBERMAN

Well, let me start by saying this: beginning with the tapering down of the whole Cold War period, a great many of the issues that had been springboards to many of my paintings were less in evidence. Anyone who has followed my work from the period of, let's say, the late fifties to the present will be aware of the fact that there was a numerical shift in the overall content of my work. Although there continued to be paintings based upon the political, social, and economic problems of that period, they took less of my total painting time than the landscapes, the portraits, and subjects from the urban life that I've always so enjoyed painting. However, in that period, there was a very definite concern with the whole civil rights movement. A number of paintings that I did in the period of the early sixties stemmed from some of the horrific things that were happening, particularly in the early civil rights movement. I was not in

the situations that stemmed from Montgomery or from Selma; nonetheless, I was keenly aware of them. And a number of my paintings from that period reflect that interest. These events were very definitely a part of my consciousness and, again, a part of the work that I did.

COREY

What about the later developments of the sixties?

BIBERMAN

Well, before we really get into the later sixties, I did two portraits that I felt, and still feel, were very important in light of my preoccupation with interesting personalities. One started from the fact that Aldous Huxley had been a neighbor of ours for a long period of time and a good friend. I prevailed upon him to let me do his portrait. He'd been painted and sculpted many times, but I was very anxious to do something of him. I didn't want him to sit formally, but we spent a lot of time together, and I made notes and drawings and sketches from which I made the painting. It was shown in a New York exhibition that I had in the year of '64, I believe it was--either '64 or '65. The painting was done in 1963, and it was the last portrait ever done of Huxley because his death occurred, as I recall it, almost the very same day that John F. Kennedy was assassinated. A great many people never knew that Huxley had died because Kennedy's death had the headlines, whereas ordinarily the death of an Aldous Huxley would have been banner-headline material for many days. Thus this news made only the back pages, or the inside pages. Also, during the same year, I did a portrait of Dr. Linus Pauling. We were guests at a dinner party one night, and I was struck, as I had always been, by his fantastic head. I kept staring at him all through dinner, and all I could think of was the famous Houdon head of Voltaire, which I'm sure all of us are familiar with. For me, there was a certain resemblance and a sense of familiarity with Pauling's head because of my feeling about the Houdon portrait of Voltaire. Pauling's wife happened to be seated next to me, and I asked her when he had last been painted. And she said, "Well, he's never been painted." I then said, "Well, I'd love to do something about that." I arranged later in the evening to speak to him. I told him I didn't want any formal settings--he was at that time at Caltech--and I said that I wanted to go to Caltech and spend as much time there with him as possible, making notes,

drawings, and sketches from which I [could] paint the final portrait. I consider the two portraits of Huxley and Pauling two of my important later portraits, and I think that this also has to be remembered in terms of my work in the sixties. Then, as we move into the later sixties

COREY

I have one more question about the Pauling portrait. In that portrait, as you mentioned in *Time and Circumstance*, there are certain symbols as background. As I was looking through and noticing the other portraits, very few of them seem to have that. Why does that particular portrait have symbolic background symbols?

BIBERMAN

Although many of the portraits reproduced in the book may not have backgrounds which relate to the activities of the sitter, I have done this type of thing before and since. This is, in portraiture, what is known as a "heraldic" portrait, one in which some of the attributes or preoccupations of the sitter are used as background material. Since Dr. Pauling had received two Nobel prizes — I think that that is unique in the history of the Nobel awards; I don't know if anyone has ever received two—I decided that I wanted to put two of those symbols behind him. Then I became very intrigued, particularly after having been at Caltech, with some of his other scientific research artifacts, and I included two more. Actually, in the portrait, there is the dove, symbolizing the Nobel Peace Prize, and also a section showing the sickle-cell anemia forms. There is also an alpha helix and, in the foreground, the symbol for the carbon molecule. I used all of these because the shapes were visually very exciting for me, and I also felt that Dr. Pauling, since he had never had his portrait painted, should be shown surrounded by some of the things that had made him world-famous. That portrait, incidentally, no longer belongs to me. It doesn't belong to him either. It was purchased by the Westside Jewish Community Center eleven years ago. This coming Saturday night, the portrait will be shown at a dinner honoring his seventy-fifth birthday at the Ambassador Hotel.

COREY

Moving on to the period of the mid-sixties

BIBERMAN

Well, the entire period of the sixties was a very exciting time for me, for a number of reasons. First of all, I had, for a long period of years, been totally absent from the New York exhibition scene. The obvious interruption of the war years and the resultant fact that I had severed my connection with the art establishment in the East almost made me feel as though I'd never had any relation to that community--that is, the art community. I felt that this was a great lack, and I made a trip east with the idea of arranging for an exhibition. [I arranged for an exhibition] at the ACA Gallery [in New York] in 1965. That was the first one-man show that I'd had in New York for a period of almost twenty-five years. I think the last one before that was in 1940 or 41. I found that the New York art scene and my reactions to it created a final impression of disenchantment, so definite that I wanted to have no lasting part of it. I stayed in New York for five weeks--both before and through the course of the exhibition. [I] found that I disliked the city cordially; I wanted to return to California as quickly as possible, and I did as soon as the exhibition ended. I have since then made no serious efforts to keep up a continuing relationship with the New York art scene. However, it was in the period of the late sixties that I began a very stimulating association, namely with the extension department of the University of California, Los Angeles. I began my series of lectures [for them], and this has been an ongoing relationship which has continued up to the present time. It was one of that particular series of "Dialogues in Art," which was also done in San Diego and at Irvine, that finally evolved into the television series which we have already discussed. Also in 1967, I was approached by the directors of the Ward Ritchie Press, who asked whether they could bring out a book on my work. That was a very exciting project also. These, then, were very interesting times for me. However, this was also the period of the start of our deepening involvement in Vietnam, and this, too, became reflected in my work. Several paintings which I consider very important in what I can only refer to as my "topical" vein came out of that period. Also, the great confrontation in Chicago at the Democratic National Convention, in '68, with all of the drama that stemmed from it, resulted in a series of paintings based upon those incidents. As we continued into the later period of the sixties, I felt a very rich period of my life unfolding, both in terms of the variety of things that I was doing--the lecturing, the television program, and the publication of the book of my paintings — and also in the fact that the great excitement of the time was, again, reflected in my painting. When I

thought of the title for the book, *Time and Circumstance*, the title really came from what I'd already begun to feel and still feel about my work — that it develops out of particular times and particular circumstances. In that sense, my work, like most people's works, whether they're dealing in the visual arts or any other area of the arts, are probably largely autobiographical. And so, as I began to assemble the work for a very important exhibition which came a little later, in '71, I became once more aware of the fact that the paintings that I assembled really constituted an autobiography. I wanted the book also to have that quality, which is why I added the running text, which, with the paintings, tries to tell the story of the forty years of my life which the book covers.

COREY

You were talking about the one show in New York. I sense more than disdain for the city. What exactly was it about the whole atmosphere of New York?

BIBERMAN

First of all, I found the city itself distinctly unpleasant. At the time I first left New York for California, I carried very fond memories of the city, both visually and emotionally. When I lived in New York, for example, we used to walk over all parts of the city. I used to love it. When I came back, I found that New York had become a city with a very high crime incidence. When, one evening, I had gone to dinner at the apartment of some friends who lived on the West Side, and I told them I had walked alone across Central Park, they were absolutely horrified and said, "My God, you should have never done that. People are getting mugged right and left in the park." This came as a great shock to me, because in the period that I lived in New York, we used to walk all over and think nothing of it. So that — added to the reasons that I've gone into before in our talks together — made me unhappy with the city and disappointed with the art scene. I really felt there was very little point in my staying there after my exhibition and making any concerted efforts to continue a relationship which might require my periodic return.

COREY

Do you think that L.A. is more receptive to your work because of what your work represents, or because L.A. is more receptive in general?

BIBERMAN

Well, as I think I've intimated, though this is now the second largest art arena in this country, the characteristics of the art world do not have the sharpness or the intensity that they have in New York. Although many of the things that I felt unhappy about in the art scene [in New York] are also present in Los Angeles — in a lesser quantitative sense, if not in a qualitative sense--they are less obvious, less troubling. I felt that I could function here with much less of a sense of dislocation than I could were I to return to New York or to continue ongoing relations there.

COREY

In terms of some of the types of art which developed out of the sixties--you 've talked about the op art and how quickly it came and went— there's also an art which came out of a social energy in the sixties, like the happenings, Sister Mary Corita [Kent], or people writing on themselves, painting on themselves, painting on anything. What are your feelings about that kind of art? Do you think it is art?

BIBERMAN

Well, one of the hardest things in the world to do, of course, is to give a short, snappy definition of art. It is a question which always arises at a symposium. Somebody will always say, "Well, now, what is art, and what do you mean by art?" It's a very difficult matter to try to pin down with any degree of definiteness . I have no quarrel with the fact that the format of the hitherto accepted art forms has undergone, and is undergoing, a change. I see no reason, for example, why one has to sculpt in marble or wood or stone, or why one has to paint in oil or watercolor or tempera, or why one has to print in one of the accepted graphic media. It is perfectly understandable that there may be a time in which these rather rigid art categories may break down. We are probably in such a period now. I don't have any objection to people working in what is, from my point of view, a cross between the visual arts and the theater. If something cogent can be better expressed in those terms, I have no desire to insist on the hard-and-fast rules of the past, so that things like happenings and concept art and some of the other manifestations of the present art scene don't bother me because of the provocative quality of their format. The only thing that I do find a bit troublesome and difficult to accept is

the end objective. If someone, for example, wishes--as has been done--to wrap a cliff in plastic or to stretch a curtain between two mountain ranges, I don't object to the fact that it isn't painting or sculpture; I just feel that the objective that is being pursued is not very profound. If the cliff is successfully wrapped in plastic, it might be an innovative endeavor--and certainly is attendant with many physical difficulties. Ditto stretching a curtain between two mountain ranges or plowing up fields and creating earthworks. It's simply that I find the goal, in most cases, is not worth the effort entailed. But the fact that a breakdown in the form of the arts may be occurring doesn't trouble me in the slightest. And one or two people, I think, have been very successful. For example, in some of the works of a man like Ed Kienholz--who is a Los Angeles artist--it's very hard to say whether one is looking at a still life or a charade or a stage setting. I, in many of Kienholz's works, find that I am very moved, and the fact that I can't say that it's not painting or it's not sculpture or printmaking doesn't bother me at all. But I find that works of that sort are few and far between. It's the efforts which I think are simply a tour de force or a pointless objective that I take exception to.

COREY

So essentially you're saying that the goal or objective is extremely important for an artist.

BIBERMAN

Well, I think that unless the objective is of primary importance, it just isn't worth doing. Then it becomes simply decoration, or a pastime, or a kind of self-indulgence .

COREY

In terms of exhibitions, during the period of the sixties, were there any particular shows or exhibitions which really did what you would expect an exhibition to do?

BIBERMAN

Not in the sixties. During the period of the sixties, I was exhibiting rather extensively. I had the New York show and three or four other one-man exhibitions. I enjoyed them because they were the means for me to show the

paintings that I had done out of a particular period of time. However, the exhibition that really excited me and, for me, was the high point of my exhibition career did not occur in the sixties but occurred in the early seventies, when the director of the Palm Springs Museum invited me to have a retrospective exhibition of my work. He spoke to the director of the Municipal Arts Commission here in Los Angeles, who agreed to cosponsor the show. That show opened in the Palm Springs Museum, and subsequently came here to Los Angeles and was shown in the newly constructed Municipal Art Gallery in Barnsdall Park. The show covered the period from 1926 into 1971, forty-five years of work. This was very exciting because paintings for that show were brought in from private collectors and from museums all over the country, and I saw works in that show that I myself had not laid eyes on for forty years. There were many early paintings in that show that my wife had never seen. The fact that I was able to see assembled representative examples of work covering the span of forty-five years — a span of my entire professional painting career— was a very, very moving experience for me. The two exhibitions were beautifully assembled, they were very well hung, a very good catalog was prepared for them, and all of this was done by the two museums for me. I had no financial obligations in the entire undertaking. It was one of those marvelous events that I hope every artist at some point in his career can enjoy because it was very fulfilling for me and very satisfying.

COREY

How do you deal with that? What do you feel about that sense of loss that you must end up having with so many of your paintings? I mean, a writer can always go back and reread his or her work.

BIBERMAN

Well, you know when you paint professionally, you simply take for granted the fact that very important works will be acquired, that they will leave your hands. However, I do keep a very complete photographic record, and since color photography became perfected, I have a good file of color slides of my work. It's not, of course, like having the works themselves, but I don't feel possessive about my own paintings at all. There are a few things that I've never wanted to sell. Out of every year's work, for example, there are usually one or two paintings that I like to hold on to so that I can look at them as often

as I want to. But even in that case, I realize that ultimately they may be sold later, [and that] they will go someplace. As I say, I don't have a possessive feeling about my own works, so that I don't shed tears when a painting is bought or when it leaves my studio. As a matter of fact, I'm very pleased to feel that someone wants it badly enough to purchase it and hang it. It's comforting for me to know that in so many places in this country and a few places outside of this country, works of mine are hung. It's a source of great self-satisfaction which far outweighs any feeling of proprietorship that I might have were all of the things to remain in my own possession.

COREY

To get to the manner in which all those paintings are dispensed, or sold, the Heritage Gallery was your representative--or still is?

BIBERMAN

No, it was . We had a relationship that lasted about ten years. They're no longer my agents because, finally, of a mutual dissatisfaction. There were certain things that the gallery did not want me to do professionally that I wanted to do, and there, in turn, were certain things that I wanted the gallery to do for me professionally which it did not do. This is a common complaint among painters and sculptors and printmakers . There is a great rate of attrition in the relationships that artists have with their galleries; a certain amount of shifting is constantly taking place. This is not an unusual situation, and the director of the gallery and I are still very good friends, and we came to a parting of the ways with no hard feelings on either side. That situation terminated just about the period of the large 1971 shows that I mentioned. I've had no big exhibition, no large public show, since then, a period of almost five years. I've had, however, a couple of private exhibitions. One of the reasons, very frankly, is that after that really very, very exciting retrospective experience, the idea of having just another exhibition in another gallery, to which x-number of hundreds of people come, just doesn't hold out a very exciting prospect for me. From the point of view of my professional activities, I will have to resume that public exhibition pattern, and I probably will again in the very near future. But I will do it with, I must say frankly, very little of the excitement that I used to feel in the past when I had an exhibition because all the one-man shows that I've had in the past, I now weigh against that large

retrospective exhibition—and very frankly, they looked like small potatoes to me.

COREY

What are your expectations of a show? Is it mere exposure?

BIBERMAN

Well, there are two things that you always look for in an exhibition. First of all, if you are a professional, you want to make sales, and you always hope that the critical reactions will be good. This is not only ego- satisfying, but it also helps financially because there are many people who read the critical reviews of an artist's work and, on that basis, decide whether or not they wish to make a purchase. There are certain people, of course, who couldn't care less about a critic's opinion and are motivated entirely by their own reactions. But there are many people who are timid about acquiring something if they feel that, critically, the artist is not being well received. So as I say, two things are always looked for in an exhibition: the immediate financial returns and the critical returns. Also, the artist benefits by seeing his work in a new setting .

COREY

I'm assuming nothing was for sale in the retrospective.

BIBERMAN

No, that's not true. Some were. Although many of the paintings were borrowed--I think at least half of the things were out of either private or public collections-- not all of the others were for sale. Some of them were private paintings, like the paintings of my family, my mother's portrait, my wife's portrait, and the self-portrait. Despite the fact that these museums did not operate commercially, four paintings were sold out of the Palm Springs show and several were sold out of the showing here in Los Angeles. Even though neither galleries operate on the basis of pushing sales, people made inquiries; and if they found that a particular work was available, they either contacted me directly or they made the overtures through the museum. So actually, that double exhibition was also rewarding financially, although that was not the purpose of the show.

COREY

During the past ten or fifteen years, you've also continued to hold discussions and lectures. I was noticing in a brochure from the Westside Jewish Community Center that you held a discussion called "Art and the Erotic Revolution." What exactly did you mean by that?

BIBERMAN

I'm trying to recall that round-table discussion. The fact is that the social mores of our present time have changed, and what is known now as permissiveness is very much a part of our consciousness. It's no accident, therefore, that precisely during this period there was a reflection of that theme in the paintings, prints, sculptures that were being executed and shown. The title for that particular symposium is not one that I dreamed up. I participated in it, and I don't remember the others, but as I recall it, we had a discussion of eroticism and its relation to the visual arts. At that evening, as I recall it, we had a psychiatrist, two artists, and some other people who were, professionally, peripheral to both of those areas. We discussed the significance of the relationship between the permissive quality generally and the eroticism in the arts which was prevalent in the period. This was a time when there had been a great furore over two exhibitions in Los Angeles, one of which was temporarily closed by the police on the grounds that it was pornographic. That was simply a reflection of the temper of the times. That symposium was designed to discuss the phenomenon of permissiveness, the open eroticism in hard- and soft-core porno movies, the sex shops and adult bookstores, and so forth-- all a manifestation of the same attitudes. That evening then simply discussed its impact on the art community.

COREY

What do you think the impact was in terms of ... ?

BIBERMAN

The fact is that a great deal of very erotic art was being produced and shown.

COREY

Is there an influence which is beyond mere pornographic or permissiveness? Do you think that a permissive or erotic sexual environment will lead to an artist thinking in permissive terms in other areas or freedoms in other areas?

BIBERMAN

I think that there's no question but that a certain group of people in all the arts will turn to this. You know, the history of eroticism in the visual arts is very ancient and a very documented tradition, and includes not only such things as the famous frescoes in Pompeii but the quality of both sensuousness and eroticism which we find in a great deal of Oriental art and Occidental art also. I mean this libidinous quality in art, as a theme, is a fascinating study in itself. There are some very beautiful art books, for example, which are devoted entirely to the erotic in art. There have been periods in certain countries where this was a very major art force, and there are other periods where it played a very minor role. I would say that in the United States, a great preoccupation with the erotic in art was quite a new phenomenon. This was a very puritan country in its art, up until very recent times. Although a certain eroticism was present all through the great periods of art in both Asia and Europe, I think that it came very suddenly to the United States, and very recently.

COREY

Eroticism is one avenue of permissiveness, and certainly it would seem that, as an artist, it would be easier to paint what you want to paint in a society which is open, not just in a sexual way but in a political and social way as well, and that all those are reflections, assuming that one signifies another.

BIBERMAN

It's easier, yes--you see, this brings up the whole question of freedom in the arts. It's easier, both theoretically and actually, to be very free in the choice of one's subject matter today than it was in a period when the artists worked almost entirely on commission. However, like a great many freedoms, that particular freedom also carries with it certain problems. The fact is that one may be free, for example, to paint out of political motivations. However, the difficulty lies in the fact that unless you are subsidized, you will probably find that those paintings have a very small sale, so that there is implied or covert censorship in that sense. It is very easy, in theory, to do a great many things today because the cost of producing a painting is very minimal. It's a matter of a few dollars for paints and canvas. Most of the expenditure has to do with time. If one places a value on one's time and has to be reimbursed, one is free

to invest that amount of time. One is also very doubtful about whether the hours invested will ever be paid for, because, as I say, there is censorship of an implied sort in the fact that the painting or the sculpture or the print may or may not be purchased. It's perfectly true that we are free, but we are not free when there is the problem of economic necessity. I'm talking now about the art market.

COREY

In line with the art market, do you foresee, or do you wish for, a time when certain legal royalties, if they can be called that, will be given to an artist?

BIBERMAN

Yes. As a matter of fact, this is a matter on which I have been, along with many of my colleagues, engaged over a very long period of time. There was formed just after the Second World War a professional organization called Artists Equity Association, which was very much like the Musicians Union or Actors Equity or the Writers Guild. [Its] purpose was to try to arrive at some kind of a code of economics, ethics, and behavior in the field of the visual arts. Such a code had never existed, since there was never, in the field of the visual arts, anything like the kind of organization that the professional musicians, actors, and writers have had for many years. The question that you asked relates very directly to a number of the items which were set out in this original table of demands, one of which had to do with the question of royalties on continuing sales. The history of art, as you know, is replete with examples of a painter selling his work for a pittance, and then, as he became better and better known, the value of the work skyrockets to the point where it becomes almost obscene. Contemplate the figures, for example, at which a van Gogh painting was sold, when the poor man, through his entire life, sold hardly a single work. In order to cope with this problem, royalties on each successive resale were suggested. There were also provisions drawn up for payment of a rental fee to the artist whenever his painting went on public exhibition, and for a while, this actually happened. I received, for a very short period of time, small royalty checks whenever my paintings were publicly exhibited in museums.

COREY

Was this through the government?

BIBERMAN

No, the commission was paid by the exhibiting institution. For example, if a museum had a group show and your work was shown, the museum paid you a rental fee--a very modest one, but a principle was being established. However, that practice fell by the wayside because the museums pleaded poverty, and additionally, a great many of the younger artists who were terribly anxious to have their work shown would say, "Well, if you show my work, I won't charge you a fee." There was no viable organization to stop the latter practice, and unfortunately the whole program collapsed. But that, and the question of the governmental subsidy of the arts--which was a very, very big question- all such things have been on our agenda. When I say "our" agenda, I'm talking now about art organizations for as far back as I can remember. And they're still very much on the agenda today because, at the moment at least, we are in a period of economic recession; the plight of the artist is very bad. The artist is always the first one to suffer in a period of economic blight, so that problems like royalties, rentals, and subsidy are very much a matter of concern.

1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE (MARCH 4, 1976)

COREY

Would you prefer starting with the King portrait? The Martin Luther King portrait was done in the early seventies?

BIBERMAN

No, it was done later than that. Let's see, when was the assassination of King? Certainly not in the early seventies. Three years ago, four years ago? Well, in any case, let me just say this: all of us were, I'm sure, very shocked and disheartened by the assassination of Dr. King, and although I had never met him, I had always been fascinated by the man, by his voice, by his appearance. After the assassination, I felt a compelling need to do something about him. I wanted to do a painting that had to do with his look, and I discovered a very interesting thing. And that is that when I thought about him, I could visualize him, really, only down to his mouth. I could see his eyes and his nose, his mustache and his mouth, and for me this was his face. So, rather than paint the full head, I decided to paint only those features which made the strongest impact on me. The painting itself, therefore, stops just below the lips and goes

only above the eyebrows, and is very large in scale, the features being, I would say, about five times life-size. And [in] the portrait, the mood is created mostly by the eyes, which are looking directly at you. My feeling about this approach was based very much on a quality that I've always felt in Egyptian sculpture, painting, which always moves me enormously. There is a haunting quality in Egyptian art when the eyes look directly at you and seem to not only look at you but through you and keep on going. It's not a difficult problem technically. It simply means that you don't bring the eyes quite to a focus, so that the gaze does not stop at you, it goes through you to a distant point beyond. In painting the portrait of Dr. King, I treated the eyes that way, and I believe they did what I wanted my painting to do--that is, to give the sense of the eyes not finishing their emotion with the spectator but carrying their message beyond. The interesting thing to me was the fact that although the entire head is not shown, I have never shown that fragment of the head to anyone who isn't immediately aware of the fact that it is a portrait of Dr. King. The problem [of painting the portrait] was compounded for me by the fact that, of course, I had to work entirely from my memory of the man and from several photographs that I obtained. The painting was also in the retrospective show.

COREY

Where is that portrait now?

BIBERMAN

Let's see now--if the painting was in the retrospective show, it obviously

COREY

He was killed in '68.

BIBERMAN

Yes, obviously he was killed before '71. Strange how our memory of the years plays tricks on us.

COREY

Where is that portrait of Dr. King now?

BIBERMAN

I have it. As a matter of fact, there are several portraits, as I believe I've indicated, that I've always felt were public portraits, and they're not private. My feeling is that no individual should own them. I've never made an effort to sell the Martin Luther King portrait because I hope that someday it will find its home in a public place. Although I've exhibited it in public galleries, I've not offered it for sale because of this feeling.

COREY

In line with that, where is the Robeson portrait?

BIBERMAN

I still have the Robeson portrait, and we're now trying to see if we can place it in Rutgers University, which is very anxious to have it.

COREY

The other thing we had talked about was the Vietnam War.

BIBERMAN

Yes, I want again to emphasize the fact that topical considerations in my work have remained constant, but the quantities varied. In the period of the sixties and into the present seventies, there is a much greater emphasis on landscapes, cityscapes, and so forth, but it's important to restate the fact that the paintings of a topical nature were still a concern. Out of the period, for example, of the Vietnamese War, there are two paintings that I consider extremely important. One is the painting which I call *The Offering*, which is based on the absolutely horrific photograph that I saw several years ago in *Life* magazine, of the monk who immolated himself in a public square in Saigon, surrounded by a group of people, none of whom made the slightest effort to extinguish the flames. I felt that this was both a gruesome and a very significant attitude on the part of the people who, from my point of view, allowed this man, quite willingly, to sacrifice himself. I felt that they were acquiescing and therefore, in a sense, also sacrificing themselves. At least, this was my interpretation of why no one, in the hundreds of people surrounding this burning figure, made any effort to put out the flames. The other painting coming out of that period was also based on the very famous--or should I say infamous — photograph of the little girl who, after a napalm attack, ran

screaming down the street of a village somewhere in Vietnam. [She was] completely naked--had torn her clothes off--and ran screaming in terror. This for me, also, was a painting that I had to do because I had to exorcise the horror that I felt. Also in pretty much the same period there was the terrible situation in Africa, with the war in Biafra. Again [I did] a painting which I based on the photograph of a child dying of hunger, the typical manifestation of the swollen belly and the spindly arms and legs. In this photograph, too, the child [was] all alone, squatting somewhere. There must have been people around because the photograph showed the legs and the feet of many people. But the child seemed, however, to be surrounded only by emptiness. There was a terrible sense of horror which I tried to parallel in the painting. In this period, incidents such as these became the compulsion for me to make a visual statement. But in quantity, there are less of these paintings than, let us say, in the period of the late forties into the middle fifties. But this, again, perhaps is a reflection of the times in which my paintings were produced. I would be very happy, at some hypothetical point in the future, to feel that I could happily paint the lyric, beautiful, and challenging aspects of life on this very lovely planet. For example, I was very moved when one of the astronauts looking at the earth from outer space talked about this "beautiful blue ball in space." You may remember it. I was struck by the feeling that it was such a pity that from the point of view of someone in outer space you could see the splendor of this beautiful blue ball and not its troubles. Very frankly, I'd love to have been able to spend my life painting this beauty, had there not been all the problems, some of which I shared in, many of which I observed. Perhaps the period that I find myself in now is one in which I can state my feelings about some of the things that I love, rather than feeling impelled to paint the disturbing, the horrifying, and the deeply repugnant aspects of life. But I know that these things I have to do also.

COREY

In your more horrifying paintings of the Cold War period--and there is horror in those, obviously, but there's a different kind of ugliness and horror than in a painting like *The Offering*. Do you think it's because the times have really changed that much, or is it that technology has brought the horror more directly into our homes?

BIBERMAN

Well, I think it's both. I had a very strange experience recently. My first book, *The Best Untold*, I think I told you, has long been out of print and has become a collector's item. Recently, a number of people who have been rereading it commented on the fact that even though the book was published in 1954 and was based upon paintings done between the period of 1937 to 1954, that a great many of the incidents painted in that book again seemed timely and very apropos. [They] suggested that I ought to have a second edition of the book published. I sent a copy of it to a literary agent in New York, who took it around to a great many publishers, and for a time it looked as though there would be a reprint. But I reacted to that, as I told the agent, with very mixed feelings. I said, "You know, I think it would be wonderful if one could look at this book as an historic document and say, "Wasn't it terrible between 1937 and 1954?" But, very frankly, if that book should ever be reprinted, I would want to write a new introduction. I would want to say in that new introduction that I am ashamed of the fact that in 1976, we reissue a book indicating that some of the horrors that took place between 1937 and 1954 are happening again today. Have we learned nothing? I would therefore look upon a republication of that book with these mixed emotions. If and when that ever occurs, then my introduction will have to say precisely what I've just said. I wish that it could be reissued only as a social document of a period long gone. I don't like the *deja vu* aspects of the present, as I look at that book out of the past.

COREY

It being 1976 and you're saying that, what do you find you are drawn to need to paint now?

BIBERMAN

The greater number of the paintings that I've done over the past year have been based on landscapes, cityscapes, the structural forms that I love so much. There are relatively few that reflect a direct topical interest. It's not that I'm happy about all the things around me at this point — I'm very unhappy about many of them — [but] I don't quite see the way in which to visually depict them. They're a bit more intangible than some of the happenings which gave rise to very specific paintings in the past. I don't feel comfortable about our present situation, but the problem, as I say, is the way in which to

interpret my feeling of unease. I don't prefer to be symbolic in my paintings, although I have dealt with symbolism at various times and for various reasons, but I don't always like reliance on symbolism. I would usually rather be more specific. How that quality of being specific will show itself, I don't know, but I would really not feel entirely comfortable were I to find myself in the position in which George Grosz found himself when he came to America. You know that George Grosz, when he lived in Germany in the period of the First World War and after, became the acid chronicler of that particular period. He made the most brutal and revealing statements about the war and postwar German society. But when he came to America, his work changed almost overnight. In this country he had no immediate social problems, he found himself politically at ease, he had no one to hate, and he became a very beautiful painter of very lyric, East Coast landscapes. He was no longer an angry man; he was happy. Many people say, "Isn't it too bad that George Grosz became happy? Because the paintings that came out of his unhappiness were so much more interesting and exciting." There are many people, similarly, who are very impatient when I paint landscapes or structural forms. They say, "You know, there aren't very many artists who, in this present period, have turned to some of the thematic material that you have, and we think it's really a pity that you dissipate your energies in painting the other things. We wish that you would spend your time with your social preoccupations." Then there are other people, by contrast, who feel that to be a "social" painter is not properly the direction for a contemporary painter. These people say, "You know, it's fine that you have a social conscience, but why don't you keep that out of your work? Why don't you paint your beautiful landscapes and wonderful structural forms?" I can only answer both these criticisms by saying that things will occur in my work when I feel them deeply enough to have to paint them. At the moment, I find myself in a much more lyric and generally agreeable relation to the world around me, even though the disturbing factors that I've indicated are very present. How the latter will manifest themselves--if and when they will manifest themselves — I cannot, at this point, say. They will happen when they have to happen. And beyond that, I am as curious as the next person.

COREY

Do you then, in all your painting, irregardless of the period, wait for motivation?

BIBERMAN

I don't wait for motivation. Motivations are all around us, but they produce different results. I'm reminded of the wonderful story that they tell about William Faulkner, who was being interviewed by a lady from a Northern paper — and I think he was living in Jackson, Mississippi, at the time. She was asking him a number of questions about his work pattern and so forth, and she said, "Mr. Faulkner, I'd like to find out something about how and when you write. What are your work habits? When do you write?" And he thought for a moment and in his nice, Southern drawl, he said, "Well, ma'am, I work whenever the spirit moves me, and the spirit moves me every day." And I can only tell you that unless there are certain unforeseen things that happen, I work in my studio every day. It's not a question, and I know that you didn't mean to phrase it that way, of "waiting for motivation." It's rather a question of exploring the motivations that are present at a particular time. I've usually found myself in the position of being a couple of paintings behind, in terms of what I wish to do. Only rarely have I had the experience of sitting in front of a blank canvas, like a writer who finds himself sitting in front of a blank sheet of paper on the typewriter saying, "My God, what do I put down next?" This, of course, has happened to me on occasion, too. There are periods when one works better, and others when one works less well. But in general, as I've said, I usually find myself a couple of paintings behind.

COREY

You seem terribly disciplined, and I'm not even certain that discipline is the fair word. What is it that gets you into your studio every day?

BIBERMAN

I really don't know. I happen to be, by temperament, a rather methodical person, and I also am a person with a conscience. I am also very grateful for the fact that I have been able, all of my life, to do the thing that I love most to do. Very few people find themselves in that fortunate position. Most people-- who was it? was it Eliot who said, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation"? I have been able to do that which I wanted to do. I have a conscience about that, and I feel a sense of deep obligation, therefore, to those circumstances which have made this possible for me. So when I get up in the morning, I have breakfast, and I go into the studio. It's a very natural thing for me to do, and I

never feel as though I'm being chased into the studio. Quite the contrary, I thoroughly enjoy going down those stairs. As I say, some days you work better, some days you work less well, so although my work habits are disciplined, they don't come out of any discipline that's been forced on me. As a matter of fact, I think that, by and large, this is true of most people who work in creative areas. The fiction of "the starving artist in the garret" who waits around for inspiration to strike is, I'm afraid, a very nice piece of fiction which comes out of *La Vie de Boheme* but is, in my experience at least, not a true picture of the artist. There are people who goof off, of course, but most of my colleagues, most of the people whom I know, are very serious about their profession. They practice it diligently, and very few of them can afford the luxury of being bohemian. Some of the most bohemian people I know are stockbrokers, bankers, doctors, and so forth. Most of my artist friends are rather disciplined, sober, hard-working people.

COREY

What happens to you when you leave your studio?

BIBERMAN

Well, I don't really leave it. You see, my studio is exactly fifteen feet away from where you and I are talking, and I like it that way. I've only once in my life had a studio apart from where I actually lived, but now I seldom leave my studio during the working day. I don't leave it emotionally; it's always there. I don't have the nine-to-five syndrome of going to an office at nine o'clock in the morning, and closing the door at five o'clock in the afternoon, and saying, "Well, thank God I don't have to go back until nine o'clock tomorrow morning." It's a different feeling. And interestingly enough, you know, in most professions that I know about, men and women say, "Well, at a given point, I'm going to retire." I've never known of an artist who retires. What would an artist do if he retired? He would continue to do precisely what he was doing. Many people who retire take up painting or music or some other time- and energy-consuming hobby. I don't know of any painter [who,] at a given point in his life, [has] said, "Well, that's that. We close the book on that. I'm hanging up my palette, I'm putting down my brushes, and I am now retired." It's a different relationship entirely. You never leave it. You know the marvelous stories about Renoir when he was crippled with arthritis. He used to have

brushes strapped to his hand so he could continue to paint. Or Matisse, when he was bedridden and couldn't even hold a brush, got big pieces of paper and cut out shapes with a scissors. This is the norm. We don't "retire" from our professions--this is one of its great compensations.

COREY

Part of what I meant in terms of leaving the studio was not leaving it professionally or leaving the art but was in regards to discipline and thinking about your work. If you are walking down a street and an idea comes to you, do you quickly jot it down in some form, or do you just let it pass?

BIBERMAN

Both. If I happen to have an envelope in my pocket, I try to write down my Gettysburg Address. If I don't have an envelope in my pocket, I try to remember it. What usually happens is that I try to go back to the place the next day with enough equipment so that I can make sketches. You see, I very seldom paint on the spot. I haven't for many, many years. Most of my paintings are composites, really, of drawings, notes, sketches, observations, and thoughts about things. I'm not a literal painter in the optical sense, although some of the paintings may look as though they are very literal. They are based on fact, but they are very carefully edited and reordered. I usually start with notes and sketches and add to them certain memory factors. These are usually all that I need to continue with a given piece of work. I'll very often go back to the spot which has provided the original impulse to see if the impact I originally felt is being returned — not in straight visual terms, but psychologically. But the answer to your question is that I generally have a pencil or scrap of paper with me. If I don't, I try to rectify that omission as quickly as possible.

COREY

If the impulse doesn't return, do you assume that it was incorrect?

BIBERMAN

If it doesn't return, then I have the sneaking feeling that it wasn't very important to begin with. If it stays with me, then I usually do something about it. But in most cases, if something stops me, it usually has an element of

continuing preoccupation. I know that since I do a lot of paintings of the city, for example, I'll be driving along, and if I suddenly see something or am aware of something, the first impact usually has for me some valid basis. If I've not been able to stop--if I'm driving, for example-- I've found that in returning to a spot which first gave me a psychological punch, that on returning, it is no longer there. If there's a kind of first empathy with a visual situation or an idea, it usually stays.

COREY

Do you think that's perhaps why many of your paintings, as you say, may appear to be real whether they actually are or not?

BIBERMAN

Well, I think that's so. Although usually I don't set much store by critical opinion, the late Merle Armitage, who wrote the foreword to an early catalog of mine in a New York exhibition, said something which I would like to believe is true. He said that I had the ability to carry the spectator to the exact psychological spot where I myself had been--I'm paraphrasing it now. I hope that what he said is true, because if what I do seems to be "real," I think it is due not to the fact that it is optically exact but that it is psychologically and emotionally parallel to my own initial reaction. If that is true, then I think it can register on the spectator with equal validity.

COREY

Making a bit of a jump, I came across a booklet from the American Graphic Arts which contained three examples of prints of yours which could be purchased. I was curious about who did the choosing of those prints. And if it was you, why those particular prints?

BIBERMAN

I have to confess that I really don't remember how the choice was made. And I also have to confess that since I haven't seen that brochure in a long time, I don't remember which three prints they were. But I'm trying to think back.

COREY

Woman of Mexico, Hail and Farewell, Farewell, and The Yellow Door.

BIBERMAN

Well, now that you've refreshed my memory, I have the feeling that I chose them from an early period of my printmaking. That brochure, incidentally, is at least a dozen years old, and at that time I hadn't done very many prints, but I probably chose those three because of my fondness for them. *Hail and Farewell* had to do with an emotional feeling about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and *The Yellow Door* came out of the period that we spent in Mexico. *Woman of Mexico* is based on the actress who played the lead in *Salt of the Earth*. These prints probably were also chosen in consultation with the people who got out that particular brochure.

COREY

I was just curious in terms of the use of prints, the whole idea of prints, as being another means of interacting with the public.

BIBERMAN

Well, I've already indicated that that's one of the things that I like about printmaking, and I also like for that very reason, if possible, to make large editions of my prints. The per-unit cost can then be kept very modest, which is an area of disagreement that I have with some of my colleagues. We may have gone into this before; I don't remember. There are two schools of thought about the size of editions in printmaking. Assuming that the quality of the print does not suffer, I am of the persuasion that likes a large edition at a low unit cost, rather than a small edition at a higher cost. If one assumes that for the hours expended on a given graphic work that x-number of dollars have to be returned, that sum can come in one of two ways: a lot of sales for a little, or a few sales for a great deal. To repeat, I go along with the school that likes to see the edition as large as possible--without deterioration of quality--and the unit cost as low as possible. Perhaps I'm right because there are a lot of my prints all over the world, and I often wonder if there would have been that many had the availability not been so possible.

COREY

Another thing that I was wondering about in terms of different ways in which you view your own painting: there's the painting *Golden Hills*, which you mentioned was part of a series. I was wondering why you view any of your

work as being part of a series and why an artist would attempt to paint a picture as being part of a series.

BIBERMAN

Well, you know, for someone who was born and brought up in the East, where the summer landscape is mostly green, I was very moved by the Western landscape. We may have discussed this once before, but the fact that I suddenly found myself in a country which, at least in the autumn, was gold and black and blue struck me with a tremendous emotional impact and I just couldn't express it all in one painting. I found that I kept returning to that initial impulse many times before I could get it out of my system. I painted the golden hills and the visual impact of this landscape in autumn, I would say, probably in about a dozen canvases. At a given point, I will probably decide that there's nothing more I can do with it, but I don't think that I've yet reached that point. I think that I will still want to go back to that tremendous fascination for this visual challenge. I think this is the only reason one does a series. If the statement can be made once and with a sense of finality, then I think it should stop there, but if there's a feeling that it has to be chewed over again and again, then the final statement has not been made. And at a given point, maybe one can say, "Well, that's really all I can do with it." At which point, one should stop.

COREY

I have a question about a specific painting, the *Sardine Fleet- Brittany*. When was that done?

BIBERMAN

Well, that painting has a very peculiar origin. I told you that I was in Brittany for two summers in 1926 and 1927. I did a lot of painting, mostly figures, but I also did a lot of drawing. One was a drawing of a lot of little sardine boats tied up overnight in a little sheltered area, an artificial quay. The boats were rocking with the gentle movement of the swells; and being very small, and the sails down and the one mast up, they looked to me just like a series of dancing musical notes. I put the drawing away and never painted it at that time. I go over my old sketchbooks every once in a while with a kind of nostalgic interest, and I remember over the years I often wondered why I'd never made

a painting of that drawing. I didn't know why I hadn't, and finally, about forty years after I made the original drawing, I finally decided to paint that picture. I've often said to my friends that for me it's the longest period of gestation that I've ever had with a single painting. But it happened that way, many years after I left Brittany and after I had done the original drawing.

COREY

Was the final painting very different from the original drawing?

BIBERMAN

Was the final painting much different? Essentially, no. The quality of these little dancing boats, I think, still has the feeling of the musical notes. The treatment of the entire canvas, however, was probably a little bit more semi-abstract than it would have been had I painted it at the time I did the original drawing. When I re-viewed the sketch after that long period of time, I was already painting in an idiom which was not the one I used at the time of the sketch. But I think that the feeling of little boats looking like musical notes still remained the heart of the painting.

COREY

If you were to invent or describe what you would consider the ideal community for an artist to live in, what do you think it would be?

BIBERMAN

You know, offhand, my reaction would be to say, "a community at peace." And for me this would be one of the essentials. However, the unfortunate fact is that the history of art is replete with very many great paintings and sculptures based on absolute horrors. I'm now thinking of things like Goya's *Disasters of War*, and any number of paintings and sculptures which depict pretty awful things and are undisputedly great works of art. One always faces this dilemma. If, historically, we find that some of the greatest works of art are rooted in periods of bitter struggle and strife, one would be tempted to say, "Well, then the ideal climate for great works of art is a period of struggle." If on the other hand, one can say that man's greatest challenge is not with his fellow man but with his efforts to understand and use the forces of nature, then we would have to say, "Well, there are many kinds of struggle." So if I

were to answer your question, I would say that for me, the greatest struggle that man faces--and I'm using man in the generic sense, humankind--I would like to see mankind's greatest challenge to be against the unknown secrets of the world, against the mystery of the universe, against the forces of nature that surround him and of which he is still so woefully ignorant. This, for me, is a much more meaningful struggle than who crosses whose boundary and for what reasons. So that if you ask me for the ideal situation, I would like to envisage it as a period in the history of the world where man's new outlook might give rise to a new kind of art, a different kind of living, based not upon his need to fight his fellow man, but based upon his great need to understand, to encompass, to enjoy, to celebrate, and to explore the great mystery of the universe, the great wonder of life, and the greatest mystery: why we're here and what we can do with our lives. I would find this the ultimate challenge.

1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE TWO (MARCH 4, 1976)

BIBERMAN

I am enormously fascinated by the fact that we, on this tiny planet revolving around a minor sun on the edge of a minor galaxy in endless space, know so little about the vastness of the universe. And if a reincarnation were ever possible, I would dearly love to find myself in a time when one could break out of the narrow confines of this very minor solar system and find out something of the potentials of this completely unknown universe. And for that reason, I've envied the astronauts. I followed their exploits with tremendous interest. I deserted my easel and was glued to that little TV screen. And again, recalling the phrase of the astronaut who spoke about "this beautiful blue ball in space"--this, for me, had a stirring, evocative quality I was just fascinated by. So to end this rambling, discursive answer to your question, I think that though the fact of struggle is continuously present, I can envisage it being pursued on a much higher plane than it's ever been carried on in the past. I would dearly love to think that ultimately this might be possible. Obviously, in our lifetime this will not be probable--a probability. But hopefully, and since we're dealing with both a hypothetical question and an ideal situation, I would hope that at some time in the future, the race of mankind on this planet and its artists will be able to face the most challenging ideas of all--some understanding of the universe, some understanding of life, and some

understanding of our place in the cosmos. On which point, I think we should end.

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