

A TEI Project

Interview of Lee Mullican

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (January 8, 1976)

PHILLIPS

I'm going to start by asking you where and when you were born.

MULLICAN

I was born in Chickasha, Oklahoma, in 1919. Early in December, which makes me Sagittarius, [laughter] on, as my mother tells me, a very cold, wintry night. I was born at home, and my father--it was a blizzard, actually, and the doctor could hardly get there--had to cut down some dead trees around the house to keep the house warm so my mother could go through with the birth.

PHILLIPS

He had to make fires out of the . . .

MULLICAN

That's right. So it was a small town in Oklahoma, just south of Oklahoma City.

PHILLIPS

Tell me a bit about the structure of your family. Were there other siblings?

MULLICAN

Yes, at that time I had an older sister [Mahota] . There had also been another sister [Lavilla] who had died when she was about two years old. A brother [Howard] was born three years later. So I was the third child, the first male child. My mother's name was Zula Jolley, and my father's given name was Harris Nichols.

PHILLIPS

And when you were growing up, what sort of things got you interested in making art and drawing and that kind of thing?

MULLICAN

Well, it took quite a while. My mother had taken art lessons at the local college--this was before I was born--and was interested in painting and drawing. But she was very busy being a wife and mother, so she didn't have all that much time to paint. She loved to travel; we did a lot of traveling. And she always took sketch books. So actually my first interest in art came through what she was doing. And the time finally came when she went on a trip, I think to Florida, and I was left alone in the house with my sister. And I went into a closet and discovered her kit of oil paints; and I decided while she was gone I'd see what I could do. So I took some card-board, set it up on her easel, and took out the paints and began to play around.

PHILLIPS

How old were you then?

MULLICAN

Well, I guess by this time I was about fifteen or sixteen. It being a small town, there was no art instruction in the public schools. Particularly in grade school, I remember, there was just nothing, except perhaps some kind of cut-out papers and paste, paste things together. Kindergarten stuff.

PHILLIPS

What was your father like?

MULLICAN

My father was strictly a businessman. He devoted all of his time to his office--and to his church, and of course to the family. But he--well, it's interesting--had ridden up from Texas on a horse as a young man.

PHILLIPS

He was from Texas?

MULLICAN

He was born in Texas. He later came to Indian territory with his parents and began to teach school. And he met my mother; my mother was his pupil. She had come from North Carolina a few years before. And while he was teaching, he was also working in a bank, and also worked in a dry goods store, clerking. He was a successful businessman all his life. And I'm sure when I finally declared, after I graduated from high school, that I was going to take art courses, he must have been very alarmed. He was certainly hoping that I'd become some kind of businessman, like himself, I'm sure.

PHILLIPS

Now, Chickasha--is that how you pronounce it?

MULLICAN

Yes, Chickasha. An Indian word.

PHILLIPS

Was it principally an oil town?

MULLICAN

Well, no. In recent years they have discovered a lot of oil there, but at that time it was just a small town in Indian territory, with many Indian tribes centered in that area after their removal from the South. It was mostly an agricultural town. And I lived in town. I had uncles and aunts who lived on farms, and I spent a lot of time with them. But I really grew up, you know, a small-town boy, with all of the problems and all of the fun that go with that. But to think of art at that time--I mean, it just didn't exist.

PHILLIPS

What about your relationship with the Indians and Indian art. Were you conscious of any of that at that time?

MULLICAN

Not at that time. No, not at that time. I really wasn't conscious of anything as far as art goes, except what little was offered--well, in junior high school I remember painting a plaster plaque of a parrot. But that's as far as it ever went. And even in high school, there were no art classes. I did take a drafting class, which involved some drawing, and I enjoyed that. And let's see. . . . When I was in junior high school, I went on a trip to the East Coast with my parents, to visit North Carolina, where my mother was born, and up the coast and . . .

PHILLIPS

That was your first trip out of Oklahoma?

MULLICAN

Yes, outside of a trip to New Mexico, much earlier. But that was the first trip to the East Coast. And we visited Shelby, North Carolina, and the old homestead. We went on to Washington, D.C. And one vivid memory of Washington, beside the Smithsonian, was at the Corcoran Gallery. (And I was thinking about this not too long ago.) There was a head, a carved head, in the Corcoran, a head of a woman that is veiled. A cloth had been sculpted over her face so you could see only the features, very soft, underneath this sculptured cloth. Well, I guess I was very impressed with that. Many years later, when the war came, I went back to the Corcoran, and it was still there. [laughter] And then I guess at that time, I must have bought a postcard of it. I found it among my things not long ago. I was impressed with that one piece of sculpture. I don't remember the year of the Chicago World's Fair, but my parents went. And they brought back a catalog, the first art publication I guess I ever saw. Looking through it, I found what I thought were some very strange things. [laughter] Here was modern sculpture and modern paintings. But as for art, as far as I can remember, there was little else--other than what my mother did.

PHILLIPS

She was supportive of what you were . . .

MULLICAN

Oh, always.

PHILLIPS

But you were never . . .

MULLICAN

This was until high school. Now, after high school, it changed a little bit. I then began to go out into the world and see what was happening in the way of art. But up until that time, it was just what my mother did. Her paintings were hanging in the house, and I enjoyed them. But I never thought of making a career out of it.

PHILLIPS

What kind of education did your parents have?

MULLICAN

My father had attended a college in Texas, maybe for one year, half a year--I don't know. Not very long. And my mother, probably not more than through the seventh or eighth grade, if even that, because they were married very young, and she didn't have any opportunity to go away to school.

PHILLIPS

Let's talk about what happened when you went to high school. Was that when things began to open up for you, or was it after high school?

MULLICAN

Well, it was really after high school. I mean, the time was coming when I was ready to graduate, and in September I was to go off to school. My father had selected a church college in Abilene, Texas.

PHILLIPS

Abilene Christian College.

MULLICAN

Abilene Christian College. So I knew I was going there. But just what I wanted to take, I had no idea.

PHILLIPS

So you went away from home to college, and that was in a way your first step out.

MULLICAN

That's right. I got out of Chickasha, and that was a great. ...

PHILLIPS

Had your older sister gone away to school?

MULLICAN

Yes, she had. She had also gone to school in Abilene, and then later to Ward Belmont College in Nashville, Tennessee, where she majored in home economics, and dress design, and that sort of thing. And I also remember, come to think of it, as a young boy seeing her drawings; they were really kind of sketches of clothes, etc.

PHILLIPS

Sketches and designs.

MULLICAN

They were something drawn on paper. It was an image on paper. And so that may have had--I mean, I'm trying to really think back.

PHILLIPS

And there wasn't anybody in Chickasha who had paintings hanging in their house that you remember?

MULLICAN

Well, no. The ones that my mother did were the only original things. The others were copies of calendars and so forth, although my mother and my mother's closest friend also did painting. She was a very artistic person. But it was mostly china painting that was very popular then.

PHILLIPS

What happened when you went away to college?

MULLICAN

Well, I guess I knew that when I got to college I was going to take at least one art course, no matter what. I was not very good in any other subjects. It was a torture to go through high school. I had no interest, absolutely no interest, in my classes, as history. I did have an interest in English, and I enjoyed reading and attempted to write. I can even remember in high school attempting to write a novel, and some short stories. So I was interested in writing. Of course, in college, I was recruited to take courses in math and government, and even courses in the Bible. The only thing I was really interested in was my one art class.

PHILLIPS

What kind of teacher did you have?

MULLICAN

She was a marvelous woman. Her name was Mary Locke. She was tall, thin, very noble, white-headed, and very kind. And to this day I can see her, as she walked across the campus toward the building that the art studio was in, and I can see her facing that west Texas wind. We got along very well together. I don't remember taking any drawing classes. It was mostly working in oil paints from still lifes that she would set up. There would usually be a vase of flowers or a plate of apples--some- thing like that. One thing I do remember about her is shortly after I was in the class--and I may have been the only student, as far as I can remember; certainly I was the only male student. [laughter] Anyway, she took my hand and read my palm, and she said, "You're going to be a very distinguished artist." [laughter]

PHILLIPS

Oh, how marvelous.

MULLICAN

So I thought, well, maybe there is a chance. Certainly that was the only thing I was interested in.

PHILLIPS

Did you manage to get through your other courses?

MULLICAN

I guess so. I guess I did. I didn't feel any pressure, you know, to make good grades. I felt very free. There were restrictions in the school, and . . .

PHILLIPS

Was it hard for you, being away from home?

MULLICAN

I guess it was at first: thrown into a dormitory, where there was all kinds of hazing going on, and all kinds of devilment, which I was completely unused to. But at the same time, I felt that I was off on my own and doing what I wanted to do. And I did my little still-life paintings--for that year, anyway.

PHILLIPS

Did Abilene have anything interesting to offer?

MULLICAN

No, not really. At least I didn't come in contact with anything that year. Now, the second year, when I returned, Mary Locke was still there, but I worked mostly with a woman whose name was Juanita Tittle. She was a much younger woman, who had completely different attitudes about painting. I wouldn't say she was more contemporary, but she had--I can see looking back--the right attitude as far as brush handling and working emotionally with paint. Doing it directly on the spot. So the second year, we would take our paint boxes to different parts of town, to the Mexican section and the Negro section, to paint shanty town shacks and barns. The whole regionalism period was coining into focus. So we did that, and we did it freely. And that I very much enjoyed. It was away from the still lifes and into a new way of handling paint. Also at that time, I suddenly had my first awareness of cubism . . . [laughter]

PHILLIPS

How did that happen?

MULLICAN

. . . and surrealism. Well, through things that she presented; and also, about that time. *Life* magazine began to reproduce modern paintings. I was immediately taken with this. Thinking back, also, some of the first modern thoughts I had, or the first modern things I had seen were at the Texas Centennial and had been designed in what we would now think of as art deco style--decorated with modern-ized murals and statuary, and so forth. I was very impressed with that. This was actually before I left high school. I also

remember seeing my father on television--very experimental. I was also impressed with the theater I saw there. They produced a great pageant called the Caval- cade of Texas. I'd never seen anything like that . And we went to the great Billy Rose's Casa Manana which featured Sally Rand. [laughter] I thought this was a very daring thing for my father to do. And I remember almost apologizing to him saying, "Now, Dad, I want you to be aware of what we're going into, that there are going to be dancing girls, and so forth." Anyway, to go back to Abilene: in that second year, I tried a kind of art deco mural on the wall of the art studio; it was terrible, absolutely terrible. But I did do a competent cubist drawing from a group of plants sitting on a windowsill. And I still have that drawing. So from there, things happened rather rapidly, because I began to look into art magazines; I began to look into books; I began to search out what was happening in this new world of art that had opened.

PHILLIPS

You were at Abilene for two years . . . ?

MULLICAN

I think that's right, yes.

PHILLIPS

And then you went to the University of Oklahoma in 1937?

MULLICAN

I was there for two years .

PHILLIPS

From '39 to '41?

MULLICAN

I was there for two and a half years.

PHILLIPS

And you got your BA there?

MULLICAN

No, I didn't get a BA. No, I knew I couldn't stay in Abilene, and the University of Oklahoma was just forty miles from my hometown; so I told my parents that I would much prefer to go to the university there, and they agreed. During that summer, before my enrolling at the University of Oklahoma, we took a trip to Santa Fe . This was my second trip--the first one I was too young to remember very much. But this time, of course, I was in my late teens, and Santa Fe was a wonderful place. My mother and I painted

together. It was about the only time that I can ever remember that we did that--that summer, down on the Pecos River.

PHILLIPS

This was the summer that you were between Abilene and the University of Oklahoma.

MULLICAN

That's right. We set up our easels together, along the river. And that was very nice. And then I did fishing with my father, and we of course explored the pueblo: and the whole art feeling of Santa Fe .

PHILLIPS

You were aware of it then.

MULLICAN

Oh, yes. Very much so. And in Taos, we went into some artists' studios; and I remember in Santa Fe my mother and I going to a studio of a man named Fremont Ellis, who I believe is still alive and painting there. In any case, this was my first introduction into the studio life of an artist, what it might be like. So I was intrigued with that. Then in the fall I enrolled at the University of Oklahoma.

PHILLIPS

Were you aware then of the Southwest environment having an influence on your art-making?

MULLICAN

Yes, because by then, the whole regionalism school in American painting was in full force.

PHILLIPS

You mean [Thomas Hart] Benton and . . .

MULLICAN

. . . Benton and [Grant] Wood and John Steuart Curry and all of those people. So it was "back to the land."

PHILLIPS

And those things were being reproduced a lot then for you to see.

MULLICAN

I saw them; I saw them. And the University of Oklahoma had examples in their museum. I saw them there, and I was aware that this was going on. And so I even did a few, what you'd call, pasture sketches, rural sketches of old barns and silos and things like that. But I think what impressed me most was the landscape. Nature. I began to look at it differently and suddenly discovered that all those red hills that I'd grown up with were really red , [laughter] I mean, you know, brilliantly so. Certainly in Santa Fe, one looked at the skies, and also in Oklahoma. Sunsets. I was into landscape, but not for very long, be- cause once I got into the art classes at the university, I found them to be very stuffy. During all the time that I was there, if I did anything of any consequence, it was done outside of classes. But I did learn techniques. I had a class in photography which I enjoyed. I remember doing a serigraph. And I was involved in courses that dealt in some aspects of commercial art.

PHILLIPS

Do any of the teachers stand out for you? Were there any special relationships that you developed then?

MULLICAN

No, I don't think so. The only person I was really interested in was a man named John O'Neil, who eventually left the university, and he's now at Rice [University] in Texas. He was a very sophisticated man, and I appreciated what he was doing. In his classes, I felt I was held back, because really by that time I felt I knew a great deal about modern French painting, cubism and surrealism particularly. And that's what I wanted to do, but they wouldn't allow me to do it in class. So I was forced into working this way in my studio. By that time I had set up in a very pueblo-style apartment house where I simulated a Santa Fe-style studio, with bones hanging around, you know, horse skulls, and rocks. And you know, I was also working on these things out of my head- not knowing what I was doing, really, except I was putting things together as I had seen in reproductions of Braque and Picasso.

PHILLIPS

Did you have a desire to go to the East Coast to the museums to see these things?

MULLICAN

I didn't think about that, I guess because it seemed too impossible. It would have been an idea that was too far away. I wouldn't have thought of that. After a couple of years at the university, I knew that wasn't enough. I wasn't interested in a degree. I could have stayed on another year and received a BA, but I declared to my parents that I didn't want to do this. Well, I'm sure, looking back, that they must have been quite shocked and amazed. But, of

course, you have to consider that at this time, the war had begun in Europe. And during my last year at the University of Oklahoma, I registered for the draft. I must have said to my parents, "Time is getting short; I'm going to be in the army before I know; it. A degree isn't going to do me any good in the army. I want to have this last year or two before- I'm inducted, doing what I want to do." So I looked around and decided that what I wanted to do--and I guess I must have gotten the idea out of an advertisement in an art magazine--was to go to the Kansas City Art Institute.

PHILLIPS

And that you did in 1941. Let's go back just a minute to something that you mentioned. You said that you had set up a studio for yourself with bones and rocks. Was there anyone else around who was doing that kind of thing?

MULLICAN

There was one man.

PHILLIPS

Was there anyone who understood what you were doing?

MULLICAN

There was one person who understood. And if I remember, his name was Elmer Capshaw. He was an art student, and he came to my studio quite often. I really felt that he understood what I was doing, that he knew the French painters that I was interested in--he was perhaps a year or two older. And even though his own work, as I remember, was not all that abstract, he had some sense of what modern art was all about. And we became friends. He was in the ROTC--he was an officer--he didn't get through the war. I never saw him again. After the war, I heard he was killed. But he was the only person. And then I had friends that I'd grown up with in Chickasha. They encouraged me. Their names are Edward Ersland and J.B. Ellis. I don't think he even understood what I was doing, but he encouraged me. And that was good. And I can remember when John O'Neil came to my studio, looked around and saw all these strange things, and didn't discourage me. But I had the sense it was something I shouldn't be doing at school, or in his class, anyway. [laughs]

PHILLIPS

Well, it's interesting, because out in a more sophisticated world with lots of people making art, you run into the sort of direction that you describe that has to do with ethnic material and nature. It's the kind of direction in art-making that you see a lot of, but to do it all by yourself is amazing.

MULLICAN

Well, looking back, it's amazing to me, because I'm sure that I was the only one at that age in that part of the country doing such a thing.

PHILLIPS

I mean, now people can refer to photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe's studio, but you couldn't do that.

MULLICAN

No, no. I had no idea. I had no idea. That last year at the University of Oklahoma was exciting, because during that time, I was doing what I was doing, and I was suddenly interested in music. I discovered music and film, foreign films. I'd always been a movie fan, but then I discovered foreign films. I read a lot from the library and I discovered composers like Ravel and Stravinsky. One cherished and celebrated every discovery. It was just all awakening.

PHILLIPS

If you'd been going to college in New York City, for instance, you would have been surrounded by intellectuals and aesthetes.

MULLICAN

Oh, if I'd been born there, I would have been a different person, of course.

PHILLIPS

It's hard to know.

MULLICAN

I think, of course, I've been very conditioned by the fact that I grew up in the Southwest, in that country.

PHILLIPS

Were you, at that time, aware of what you wanted to do and where you wanted to go with your art-making?

MULLICAN

Yes, by then I had decided full force that I wanted to be an artist, that I wanted to paint, I wanted to draw, I wanted to live that way. I wanted to make something of it, for myself. And I think the drive really began right then. And it's continued, certainly. There was an excitement in being different, in presenting things that had never been seen before, or I'd never seen before, in the way of what one could do with paint--image-making. And I was a part of it.

PHILLIPS

What do you remember about your experiences in school, and in art classes? Even though I gather they weren't the kind of classes that really turned you on or instructed you.

MULLICAN

Well, I think they finally did instruct me. I really can't say I would have been just as good an artist without those classes.

PHILLIPS

That's what I'm getting at. I wonder how you feel about art education for artists.

MULLICAN

I think it's very necessary. Because looking back at that time, at the University of Oklahoma, I can remember doing a still life--John O'Neil had us do still lifes in different styles of painting--and I remember one that I did in an impressionist way, which of course was laying in dots of color. Through that, I learned that I could lay out dots of color and that they didn't need to add up to look like a vase or a flower. They could just be areas of dots of color. So at that same time I did drawings--one painting in particular where the dots very loosely made up an abstract human figure. I mean, O'Neil introduced one thing. Well, I took that; otherwise I would not have even. . . . Well, I may have found it later, but there, I had it right at that moment. I think it's important who the teacher is. There were other teachers from whom I got nothing, thinking back.

PHILLIPS

Has that knowledge influenced you as a teacher?

MULLICAN

Yes. Yes. Well, I think it has. I think it has, although, I must say, I went through a period when I really didn't believe in art schools, didn't think they were necessary. But now, as a teacher, I find that there are things that one can give, clues that one can give a student, that will be helpful and perhaps help the student find himself much sooner than he would otherwise.

PHILLIPS

And it's very supportive, isn't it, for students?

MULLICAN

Absolutely. After I arrived in Kansas City, I came into a whole new thing with support from Fletcher Martin.

PHILLIPS

Oh, he was there.

MULLICAN

He happened to be; I didn't really choose to go to Kansas City because he was going to be there. I guess I chose Kansas City because it was closer to home, and it was a full-scale art school. And I felt that it would offer me more. And there again, there was this opportunity to get out into the world. It wasn't all that much further, perhaps, but there it was. And Fletcher Martin was the first famous painter that I ever met.

PHILLIPS

Whose things you'd seen reproduced in *Life* magazine?

MULLICAN

That's right. His sailors, looking through portholes, in *Life* magazine, and so forth. Well, there he was, his moustache as big as life. [laughs] And very kind. We got along very well. But, of course, we painted his way, which was from the model.

PHILLIPS

Was he from Kansas City, or the Midwest?

MULLICAN

I think he had come from Los Angeles. His reputation had been founded here on the West Coast. But anyway, he was also one of the regional painters. His subject matter was sailors and boxers and prostitutes, and that sort of things. So that's how we painted. I mean, I don't remember painting any prostitutes, [laughter] but he did bring in a Negro boxer, and draped models. And then he let us do anything that we wanted to do. But no abstraction. I didn't do anything abstract. This was forgotten that year I was there. I remember doing one or two abstract lithographs, very weird, surrealist things. It was the craft of painting-- that's really what I was involved in.

PHILLIPS

There you must have run into some other congenial students.

MULLICAN

There I did meet other students.

PHILLIPS

You had things in common.

MULLICAN

That's right. And it was interesting being in art school, where everything was geared that way, and every person that you met was an artist, a student of the arts in some respect. And it was a big city; that was exciting. The William Rockhill Nelson Gallery [Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum] was across the street.

PHILLIPS

Oh, marvelous.

MULLICAN

You know, filled with the wonders of Oriental art. And I remember a very impressive exhibition of Picasso, things which I will never forget, giant-sized paintings.

PHILLIPS

This was at the Nelson Gallery?

MULLICAN

During that year.

PHILLIPS

It's not just Oriental art at that gallery?

MULLICAN

Oh, no. No, no.

PHILLIPS

It's a general museum?

MULLICAN

And at that time, they were collecting American painters. Again, it was that school of Benton, and the New York artists, Reginald Marsh and Edward Hopper, etc., and those artists that one found in the book *Art in America*. There were very few; art books that one had access to. And that was the only book that I could find on contemporary American painting. If you go back and look at them today, it's very . . .

PHILLIPS

It's all regional.

MULLICAN

Yes.

PHILLIPS

Peter Hurd.

MULLICAN

That's right.

PHILLIPS

And you were at art school in Kansas City for two years?

MULLICAN

No, actually it was just one year. I went there in September, and then there was that fateful day in December when Pearl Harbor was bombed. And we all filed down into the school auditorium the following Monday morning and listened to Roosevelt declare war. By that time I thought my number was really up. I wrote to the draft board in Chickasha and pleaded that this was my last year in school, I would get a diploma in June, and I felt I had to stay on. And they granted it. So I was able to stick out the year. Except right in the middle of it, my father got very desperate at the thought of me going into the army. If I thought I was desperate, [laughter] my parents could not imagine me in the army. Well, I couldn't imagine myself in the army; I mean, it was absurd. And so my father had the idea that I should take some clerical classes--I should brush up on my typing, maybe learn shorthand--do something so that when I was drafted, I could go into an office instead of into the infantry. [laughter] So I broke up the school year--I don't remember at which point--and I went to Oklahoma City and enrolled in a business school. And I don't remember even how many weeks I was there, but eventually I went back to Kansas City and finished out the year.

PHILLIPS

How much younger was your younger brother? Was he being drafted, too?

MULLICAN

No, he was three years younger. So I wasn't inducted at that time. Then I graduated. I got my diploma in June.

PHILLIPS

Did you get the BFA?

MULLICAN

No, it was just an art school diploma. It wasn't any kind of a degree. I don't have any kind of formal degree. But I did graduate with honors. My parents were excited about that. I guess they felt that it was worth it all.

PHILLIPS

And they were quite reconciled to your being an artist at this point, were they?

MULLICAN

Well, my mother was, of course, very sympathetic. And my father did not know what was going on with me, [laughter] what I was trying to do, where I was going. He could not imagine it. However, until the day he died, just a few years ago, he gave me full support, even though he never understood. And I'll always bless him for that, because so many parents just say no to their children, and that's it. It was very hard for him to ever say no. I just pursued my own course, and he agreed with it. He always reveled in any kind of success: if I won a prize somewhere, when I sold a painting, or had an exhibition, or something was written in a newspaper that he could read, he was always appreciative. But that time, with the war coming, he couldn't imagine what was going to happen. And I must say, I felt the same way. And then, of course, it happened.

PHILLIPS

You were drafted.

MULLICAN

I was drafted in June, just a very few weeks after I left Kansas City. And I felt like I was entering the Dark Ages. Well, there was an excitement about being able to move around, as I thought I would, and go places. I liked to travel. But there was this fear that I was getting into something that was way over my head. I didn't know whether I could cope with it or not.

PHILLIPS

Why don't we stop here.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (January 8, 1976)

PHILLIPS

Now why don't we start with your life in the army and what went on there. Let's see, you were in the army for three years?

MULLICAN

Yes, almost three and a half years. Well, my father didn't give up. [laughter] He was determined that I wouldn't end up with a gun in my hand. And being a graduate art student had something going for me. He knew someone who knew someone, a general in the army, who wrote a letter saying that I would be very good in topography, making maps. So I think when I was drafted that this had already been set up for me. I then went through all the tortures of the induction center and was sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, just as a kind of

processing place. And there I was assigned to the Corps of Engineers. And within a very few days, I was on the train, going somewhere into the wilds of Missouri, and ended up at Fort Leonard Wood, where I went through my basic training in the engineer corps. I was immediately playing at being a soldier, at being at war, and the rifle range, and all of the basic knowledge at being engineers; we had to lay pontoon bridges, etc. We did all of that. I took it in my stride, I think. The only thing I couldn't do was fire the rifle. I was terrible and afraid on the rifle range; and that may have been a help, too. Anyway, I was on my way to becoming a topographic draftsman. While at Fort Leonard Wood, I remember, I had one pass. I went back to Kansas City and spent some time with Fletcher [Martin]. He was still teaching there. We planned to meet in Mexico after the war. Shortly after that, I was again on the train, having been assigned to a topographic school at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, which is just outside of Washington, D.C. So for the first time, I was on the East Coast, and doing something, learning something that came very easy--drawing and map making. And of course the very valuable thing, as far as my life was concerned, was the accessibility of Washington and Baltimore, and eventually, New York City--places I had never seen before. Even though I was in the army and a soldier, I thought of myself as an artist. I was seeing museums as an artist. So I remember the excitement of going into the Phillips Gallery and seeing my first full-scale exhibition of Paul Klee.

PHILLIPS

Oh, how marvelous.

MULLICAN

Plus, the impressionist canvases and all the modernist painting that was there. There also was the Corcoran, and the National Gallery [of Art]. I wasn't at that point very interested in European painting, only the twentieth century from the impressionists on, from Cezanne on. This is what really interested me. And not only museums, there was the theater and concerts--a new part of my life.

PHILLIPS

Were you interested in Oriental art at this point?

MULLICAN

The only art history course that I remember taking in Kansas City was a course in Oriental art, given by Mr. [Lawrence] Sickman at the Nelson Gallery. The class was held in the museum, in a private room, where he would bring out the bronzes, you know, and hand them to you.

PHILLIPS

This is when you were at the art school?

MULLICAN

In Kansas City. I mean, he would present these bronzes and set them on the table in front of you. You could pick them up, and we talked about them. That was really the first interest I had in anything other than painting.

PHILLIPS

Did you go to the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C.?

MULLICAN

Yes. Yes, I did. But I was still a part of the modern French school, and that was the thing that interested me the most. And certainly, I had no longer any interest in regionalism. That had dropped when I was still at the University of Oklahoma. I pushed that aside--except for the Associated American Artists, where you could buy a lithograph, an original work of art, for five dollars. I saved up my money, and while at the University of Oklahoma, I would send off for these lithographs. I had a very fine but small collection of what was available: a Benton, and a Curry, and a Kuniyoshi , and a couple of prints by New Mexican artists. Even though I was purchasing and collecting these artists, I didn't have any interest in actually drawing or painting that way. It was just a way of reaching out and being a tangible part of the art world. With the war, that stopped, and curiously enough, until two years ago, these prints had remained all this time in a closet in my mother's home. I then gave them to the University of Oklahoma.

PHILLIPS

How long were you in this camp in Virginia?

MULLICAN

I remember being there in the fall. And we would do our map making exercises in the woods, along the Potomac and so forth. It was very beautiful. I was there, I guess, four or five months, I can't remember. Anyway, the following year, I gave up the East Coast and was sent to Camp Maxey, Texas, near Paris, Texas. There I became a part of a topographic battalion. And I was in the company that was drawing the maps . There was also another company that did the printing. Camp Maxey was very close to Oklahoma, so I could have passes and leave, and I went home several times. I also took trips to Dallas, and I went to the Dallas Museum.

PHILLIPS

During that period you were in the Army, did you meet any other soldiers who had like interests, or were you the only one?

MULLICAN

That was the great thing about being in a topographic battalion. One was put in with other--not so many artists but other men who were interested in drafting or drawing or art. I met quite a few, and have even kept in contact with some of them until today. So that was one of the better things about the battalion. And also, there was as much paper, as many pens, ink, as many pencils as one wanted. So I was always drawing. It was very difficult to paint. But I do remember at Camp Maxey, several of us tried to establish a kind of studio in a vacant building in Hugo/ Oklahoma, which was the closest town, other than Paris. [laughter] But it was frustrating, and I could never do very much on canvas. Throughout the war, I was mostly drawing, and a lot of drawing. Portfolios were filled. I was influenced by techniques and materials which were a part of map making. A lot of the drawing was done with crowquill pens, very fine line.

PHILLIPS

And those are the things you still use.

MULLICAN

Things mostly that I did use. I haven't worked this way recently, but for years after the war, I did a lot of drawing in this style and with this kind of technique. But it was a depressing time. I knew that I did not belong in the army, and I couldn't imagine why I was there. I literally spent hours away, weeping, wondering where it would all end and where I was going. Fortunately, I had two or three friends. One of them was Jack Stauffacher, who now lives in San Francisco. He was a printer and was in the printing company of the battalion. We printed our own maps. I ran across this follow one day, sitting on the toilet, reading the *Life of Buddha*. [laughter] So I said, here is someone that I must get to know.

PHILLIPS

Is that how you first encountered him?

MULLICAN

That's how I met Jack Stauffacher. He came from San Francisco. He was into printing and aware of all kinds of contemporary thought--in literature, etc.

PHILLIPS

When you say printing, do you mean art print-making, or ... ?

MULLICAN

No, he had a small press in San Mateo before he was drafted. So being a printer, he was put in a topographic battalion. In time, he and I both began to scheme and to try to find ways of getting out of the army--as I guess everyone did at that point. He succeeded. He became so ill that he was

eventually discharged. I became very ill. And it was mostly mental, I'm convinced. I was having these terrible chest pains and strange ideas. The doctors would find nothing wrong with me. So of course I ended up with some psychiatrists. And I told them that the array was not meant for me, that I was a misfit and would be no good. I enjoyed what I was doing, but there were whole other sides of it that were just not for me. Well, this was solved. At the same time I was going through this bad period of depression, we got the word that we were leaving Camp Maxey, that the company was being shipped out; and I was glad. I didn't know where we were going, but wherever were going, I was ready. So I told this to these doctors, and they said, why don't you go along? [laughter]

PHILLIPS

And see what happens.

MULLICAN

And see what happens. Maybe things will pick up for you. Maybe you will be able to adjust to this new scene.

PHILLIPS

Did you feel that any of those psychiatrists really understood what you were telling them, or did you feel they were in a difficult position because they felt they must keep you in the army.

MULLICAN

Well, I'm sure they felt that they had to keep me in there. But it was only a brief thing. The consalutations did not go on for long it was just one or two meetings .

PHILLIPS

So they didn't say anything that was very insightful, that was helpful to you, particularly, or helped you understand yourself better.

MULLICAN

Only that they did say, well, you're leaving here. Your period of training is finished here. You're now going on to a new place; new things will happen. And so I said, "That's fine; I'm ready for that. Let's see where we go." But I had been alarmed, I guess, by the fact that one really didn't know when it was all going to end. And I felt that my life had been interfered with , that I was not doing what I should be doing, and so forth. I guess every soldier must have felt the same things. But anyway, we came to California. We got on the train; we didn't know where we were going. Then one morning we pulled onto a side track, and the next morning--because, of course, it was wartime, no one knew anything; we were just shipped out--we looked out

the window and I saw palm trees. We were in the railroad yard at Indio . [laughter] And there was the desert, and there were the mountains and the sky. And I said, well, now, this looks better. [laughter] At least we're not getting on a boat going into the heat of the war. Well, where we did go was a place called Desert Center, a camp that was outside of Indio. Here we lived in pyramidal tents, on the edge of the desert. There were no gates, no passes. One had freedom to walk out into the desert. And this was really great.

PHILLIPS

What time of year was it? It must have been a good season.

MULLICAN

Yes, it was. I remember when we arrived it was very hot. I remember passing out, standing at attention, in a retreat. We were there during the winter and spring. It was hot during the day, and we froze to death at night. But we had passes--by this time I had developed some very sophisticated friends. [laughter] And we'd go to Palm Springs for the weekend, or come into Los Angeles, have dinner on the [Sunset] Strip, and feel like we were a part of the Hollywood scene. It was an adventure. By this time, I had perhaps adjusted to the army routine, and it was not as difficult. We were into heavy training. We hadn't been given any real wartime assignments; it was all training assignments. And I was, by this time, working with contour mapping.

PHILLIPS

It was your first encounter with Los Angeles and Southern California.

MULLICAN

That was my first encounter. And there wasn't very much. I remember coming into Los Angeles in the back end of a truck, absolutely frozen to death. [laughter] I had a friend I had known at the Art Institute who lived in Long Beach, and I went down and spent a holiday with him. But I didn't really see much of Los Angeles, as I say, outside of going to Hollywood, and the Stagedoor canteen. But life in the desert was adventurous, and I've enjoyed that landscape ever since. One could wander off, hike, and find an oasis in the mountains.

PHILLIPS

After your winter season in Desert Center what did you do?

MULLICAN

We were to move again. That phase had ended, and we knew this time we were really shipping out--into a theater of operations somewhere. And we

assumed it would be the desert. We had been trained in the desert!
[laughter] And, well, as it turned out, it wasn't the desert. We boarded the train and went to Seattle. From there we were sure we were going into the Pacific. We boarded the boat there; then one day, we pulled into Honolulu Harbor, [laughter] were put on a pineapple train, and were ensconced at Schofield Barracks. And I think I had a year in Hawaii. We worked behind locked gates and sealed doors, making maps for operations in the Pacific, the different islands for the invasion of the Marianas, etc.

PHILLIPS

Did any of the Oriental background and influence in Hawaii get to you, or were you pretty isolated from that as a soldier?

MULLICAN

Yes, I sought after it. But it turned out that the Bishop Museum was closed; during the war, it was not open.

PHILLIPS

But was the Honolulu Academy of [Fine] Arts there?

MULLICAN

The Academy of Fine Arts was there, and it was open.

PHILLIPS

And did you go?

MULLICAN

And I went.

PHILLIPS

And it's marvelous.

MULLICAN

And it was marvelous. And I spent a great deal of time there--the library particularly, the art magazines that were available. And they had some fine paintings on the walls. It was a very influential time, as far as my work and the war was concerned.

PHILLIPS

And how had you been working then? Were you mostly drawing?

MULLICAN

Still mostly drawing. Practically all drawing. Although while we were at Schofield Barracks, a friend of mine and I began to do some experiments in egg tempera painting. We would go off and paint the landscape, the pineapple fields and things like that. The drawings were cubist and surrealist in concept. But I felt I was discovering something. Then at the academy, I came across the first copies of *Dyn* magazine, which was being printed at that time in Mexico City and was probably the only art magazine that was flourishing during the war. And that, of course, was a great influence.

PHILLIPS

And who was publishing that?

MULLICAN

Wolfgang Paalen, the surrealist painter, was publishing this in Mexico City, and what he presented in that magazine was something completely new to me. I recognized where these concepts came from, which was, I thought, surrealism. But there was something else, and this was primitive art. One issue of *Dyn* was devoted to the American Indian. And I began to realize that this was something that interested me. Here was a primitive art that brought into focus a lot of the things that I had really begun to think about. Also, at the same time in one of the bookstores, I came across a book, which I bought, on the Diego Rivera collection of pre-Columbian pottery, and I was immediately taken with that--which I guess also goes back to Picasso, and the African influence on his work and the distortion of the human figure, and the emotion that those pre-Columbian pots and figures had for me .

PHILLIPS

Are you sometimes aware of attempting to depict certain emotions or emotional states in your art?

MULLICAN

Yes, from landscape. Well, I guess at that time, or maybe earlier--it's hard to know. Maybe even going back as far as Abilene, where I spent a great deal of time walking in the landscape. I remember a springtime in Texas that was just incredible as far as wildflowers and patterns of color were concerned. Landscape has always been a great influence on what I wanted to paint, that which comes from nature. And I guess what you speak of, this kind of emotional impact, is my really trying to grasp the essence of it and the sense of it. I've always felt nature, and travel has always meant a great deal to me because of that. So whether it was crossing the Pacific, walking off into the desert, or whatever, I felt a sense of pattern and light and sky and cloud formations--all of that. I looked for it in an abstract way. And maybe I recognized some of that in those reproductions in the *Dyn* magazines.

PHILLIPS

Somebody else was doing that.

MULLICAN

Yes, somebody else was doing that same thing. And here they were completely abstract in what was presented; the figure elements were gone. As Paalen has pointed out, there was a pleasure in doing that thing which did not look like anything else. It was completely the invention of a new world. And, of course, later this had a great impact on my work and on my life. But at that time, here were magazines and reproductions, and I looked at them with interest, and then I had to go back to the barracks. There wasn't anything I could really do about it. [laughter] So the total influence really hit me only later. But it was strange that they happened to be there, in Honolulu.

PHILLIPS

Well, the army in some ways did some great things for you. [laughs]

MULLICAN

Well, I was determined that since these years were being taken out of lay life, there had to be a reward somewhere. I mean, I wasn't going to give in and say, "Well, I'm in chains" because it really wasn't true. And life in Hawaii for a year wasn't bad. These were very posh quarters; Schofield had the best of everything--our own theaters, the best food available, I guess, at any army post.

PHILLIPS

And after Hawaii, what happened?

MULLICAN

We secretly worked on these Pacific campaigns, making maps for the navy and the army, and then we were told we were going to be moved again. This time we knew we were really going into the Pacific. We were leaving the great Schofield Barracks. And sure enough, we traveled, ending up on Guam. As it turned out, we became a part of Admiral Nimitz's CINCPAC headquarters, where we began to make maps for the navy. We were stationed with the navy, and there again it was easy to take, and the work we were doing was interesting. We were making photomosaics and also interpolating and making maps from aerial photographs, something we had been trained to do, even in Texas. This, of course, gave me a new viewpoint for looking at the world--the aerial view. And when I looked through the Stereo-Comparagraph, a machine that aided you in picking up contours from the photographs, what I really saw were marvelous abstract patterns. It was

difficult for me to keep my mind on what I was doing, on what I was supposed to be doing. But there were, of course, times off. I began to make abstract drawings and patterns, and so forth, which were, as I say, influenced by what I'd seen in the photographs. But in Guam, we found we were a part of the war, because the bombers came in and out every day, right over our heads. They were bombing Japan at that time. And then rumors began that we were going to be pushed off somewhere else, that things were getting so tight that there was a possibility that we'd be disbanded and be made infantry-men. Well, you know, in the army rumors spread. Fortunately it didn't turn out that way, because the atomic bomb was dropped and suddenly it was all over.

PHILLIPS

Did you get to Japan?

MULLICAN

After the war ended, the company was moved to Tokyo, into a hotel in the Shinjuku section. Hotel Isetan. The bottom two floors were still operating as a department store, and our battalion moved in on the top floors, and this was, again, another new adventure.

PHILLIPS

How long were you there?

MULLICAN

Well, I was there for a month, and by that time, I'd been in the Pacific long enough that when my number came up I was ready to be shipped back and was discharged.

PHILLIPS

Was Tokyo in quite bad shape when you were there?

MULLICAN

It was so distressing. We disembarked at the Yokohama Harbor, and between Yokohama and Tokyo there was not a thing standing. If you can imagine--- just miles of rubble. That's all there was. And of course Tokyo was filled with homeless people, wandering, starving, I remember unloading supplies into the department store where we were staying, food supplies, and you'd turn around, and there would be twenty people standing. And you just felt like--God, you've just got to throw them one can of beans, or something. But you didn't dare.

PHILLIPS

I suppose with that kind of environment, that you weren't anxious to get out and explore the wonders of Japan.

MULLICAN

Well, no, I was. Everyone wanted to get out and see rural Japan. Because, of course, Tokyo had been almost destroyed, except the downtown center, around the palace and government buildings, and so forth, and the parks-- they were all still there. And we wanted to get out into the countryside, so we did arrange one trip into the shrine country of Nikko, and up to the highest waterfalls in Japan. It was amazing how suddenly the war ended and a new life began. At this waterfall, high on a mountain, there was a turnstile, and there was a man there to sell you a ticket to take the elevator, down through the mountainside to the foot of the waterfall. In Tokyo we were absolutely amazed, and I must say it was a thrilling thing to discover that the Nippon Philharmonic was giving concerts. So within the first week-- and this was only a month after the war ended--we went to a concert given by the Nippon Philharmonic. And I must say, I must have cried through the whole thing. Be- cause they were playing Ravel. Ravel! *Daphnis and Chloe* . And it was a German conductor. [laughter] Many Japanese were there.- as well as servicemen. And there, out in the streets, was all this destruction. And of course, I began to search out things in the way of art.

PHILLIPS

What did you find?

MULLICAN

Well, I found a lot of odds and ends of pottery, prints, nothing really great. Because there just wasn't anything available.

PHILLIPS

I suppose all the museums were closed; I suppose that the museums we know now didn't even exist then.

MULLICAN

If they did they were closed, and one could see nothing. No, there were no museums open. I remember seeing one gallery that had contemporary Japanese painting--which was very French, of course. Then I collected prints at random, not knowing really what they were, if they were any good or not.

PHILLIPS

Japanese, more traditional.

MULLICAN

That's right. And some that I knew and some that I didn't know. But it was really a kind of tourist grab bag, what one could take back home, you know. But the thing that I, of course, have carried with me is what I found outside of Tokyo in the countryside. Hope I'll get back there someday.

PHILLIPS

You haven't been back?

MULLICAN

No .

PHILLIPS

It's a long ways.

MULLICAN

And then it was to a ship back to Seattle, and from there to Missouri. I was discharged in January, '46, I guess.

PHILLIPS

How old were you then?

MULLICAN

Oh, I couldn't say. In my twenties, of course-- twenty-five, twenty-six.

PHILLIPS

Then how long did you stay around home after you were discharged?

MULLICAN

Well, I really didn't know what to do. So I decided it would just be easier to stay there until I really felt something. And so I found a studio in one of the bank buildings; it was an empty office. And my father said, "Why don't you use that to work in, draw in?" So I did that.

PHILLIPS

You were living at home then? And getting along all right with your parents, all things considered?

MULLICAN

Oh, yes. Yes. That's right. Then [there was] my friend Jack Stauffacher, who I had met in the army, who had since' been discharged, maybe a year, two years before. We had corresponded. And I realized that the time had come when I had to leave Oklahoma again, and I didn't know whether I should go to the East Coast or to the West Coast. But I knew that those were the two

choices. And so Jack---his parents had just died--- was living in San Mateo with his brother, Frank. And he said, "Why don't you come out and visit us? Come stay with us?" So I decided that's what I would do. Also, before I went , I went back to Santa Fe .

PHILLIPS

Oh, good. Let's talk about that a bit. There's just a bit of tape left, and I think we'll leave San Francisco for next time. So tell me about Santa Fe , and then whatever else you might want to bring up about what you've said.

MULLICAN

Well, the only point of going back to the Santa Fe experience was that at this time, I really discovered *Santos* . I'd discovered them before, but this was something that I could relate to in the way of primitive art, which was part of my world.

PHILLIPS

Where 'd you see them there, at the museum?

MULLICAN

Well, the first ones I'd seen were in the museum, and in Taos at the Harwood Foundation; Mabel Dodge had loaned a lot of them to the Harwood Foundation. And then they were in the shops; they were available. I mean, there were several shops that were just filled--*bultos* and *retables*, at prices which I thought I could afford. So a lot of the money I'd saved up during the war was spent on *santos*, and when I went to San Francisco, I took them with me. [laughs]

PHILLIPS

Tell me how you felt about the *santos* .

MULLICAN

Well, as I say, those issues of *Dyn* magazine, and the books that I had seen on primitive art and African art--there weren't very many, but there were things around, and there were reproductions. And I hadn't come across anything that was available to me. These santos were there; I recognized them as being primitive works of art. They were there on the shelf, and for thirty dollars I could buy one. So there was this thing of wanting to own them. And they were a part of that country which I had learned to love; and even before I was drafted, I had planned to go back to Taos on my own and live there alone. It was a trip that never worked out.

PHILLIPS

Not till nearly thirty years later. .

MULLICAN

I kept going back. I arrived in San Francisco, with my *santos* , looking forward to a new life, away from the army, away from Oklahoma, and hopefully one in which I would be able to have as much time to myself as I wanted--and that's what happened.

PHILLIPS

Well, we can stop now, unless there's anything that you think of that you'd like to . . .

MULLICAN

Thinking back . . .

PHILLIPS

. . . thinking back about your childhood, and the schools, and all of that.

MULLICAN

This whole time up to my twenty-seventh year was, of course, one of great excitement and formulation. All during the war years, I read a lot, and tried to write, and listened to music whenever I had a chance--good music. And so I felt that I was forming something.

PHILLIPS

You mentioned that during that one period in the army that you were really very depressed because you didn't feel you were doing the right thing, and that the situation was all wrong for you. During this formative period with the schools, were you in pretty good shape emotionally, as you look back on it?

MULLICAN

Well, I think so. There was only that time of despair in Texas, and then there was a time. . . . Of course, once I really began to do something, I was really contributing something toward ending the war, I thought. I remember once, on Guam---or it may have been Hawaii-- photographs of an island, Iwo Jima; and they said, we want you to put the contours on this mountain. And that was Mt. Suribachi. You know? Mt. Suribachi, where the marines later raised their great flag. But aside from that, on Guam, before the war ended, there were moments of despair. You did not know when it was ever going to end. We were making maps to invade Japan, and we thought, my God, if we invade Japan, if all this comes true, I mean, where are we going? Where is it? Where will it all end? Then one day, I got a terrible headache, and I said, "I've got to go back to the barracks." And I got into the weapons carrier and

was driving back to the barracks, and one of the men who was driving said we just dropped a big bomb.

PHILLIPS

You were probably one who felt that Truman's decision was the correct one, at that point.

MULLICAN

Well, at that point, it ended the war.

PHILLIPS

That's right.

MULLICAN

And it was only a year later that I realized the horrors of it all, and what a mistake it was.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side One (JANUARY 16, 1976)

PHILLIPS

Thinking about our session last time, there's one thing I wanted to ask you about, and that was the role of religion in your family and in your growing up. I know your father was quite religious and that you went to Abilene Christian College, and I wonder if you feel that that particular fundamentalism or whatever was going on in the Southwest at that time had much of an influence on you.

MULLICAN

Well, of course, it's true. My parents were very religious, and I grew up knowing that I had to go to Sunday school on Sunday, and certainly church on Sunday morning, and quite often even church on Sunday night, and occasionally even the Wednesday night prayer meeting. Quite often I would go with my father; I think that was more in later years, just to accompany him. I am very religious. I have not really taken to the church per se, but I do believe in some kind of supreme being, and I believe certainly that He exists, and that He may have some control over what happens to us. I do not go to church. I do not keep up any kind of membership in the church. If I have gone in recent years, it was to accompany my parents or my sister on Sunday mornings when I'm back in Oklahoma.

PHILLIPS

Is there anything else that you want to add to what we went over last week?

MULLICAN

Well, yes. I want to mention a fact which goes back to my being inducted into the army at such an early age--or I thought it was an early age. And, my God, if you look at photographs of myself at that time, I look like I was about fifteen years old. And I must have felt like I was fifteen years old. So I really feel that I was coerced; I mean, I was swept into the tide of all this, without any thoughts of where I was going or why I was there. I was, of course, aware of what was happening in Europe, and I knew that was all wrong. But what I could have done about it--I mean, what the alternatives were to being drafted--I did not know until much later. Once I got into San Francisco, I met people, and I began to realize that there had been an alternative, if I had just known about it; and that, of course, would have been to be a conscientious objector, which I feel now that I probably would have been. I mean, certainly in the Vietnam War I would have been, and in the Korean War. But at that time, I had no sense of what I was getting into or where I was being taken. So I think that's an important thing to say.

PHILLIPS

Last time we got up to your coming home from the army. You spent nearly a year at home in Oklahoma?

MULLICAN

Yes, I set up this studio in one of the bank buildings--just an office, but at least it was a place for me to go out, away from the family home. The important thing that happened during that year was a trip to Chicago. It was a reunion with three men I knew in the army. There were four of us who were very close, and we always took leaves together, and we had a great deal in common. So we decided that after the war we would all meet in Chicago. Two of the men were married, and so we met them with their wives, and we were in Chicago for, I don't know, three or four days. And of course, this was my first visit to Chicago Art Institute, to see the great Seurat, *La Grande Jatte*, and what I considered really triumphant painting. Also, this might be a good time to bring up the kind of temptations that I was heir to as a young artist. Everything that I saw seemed to go right into my being, and I wanted to express something similar. So curiously enough, in Chicago, I ran across the paintings of Ivan Albright, which I had seen reproduced, and I had seen lithographs--I may have even purchased a lithograph when I was at the University of Oklahoma. In any case, I was taken by these paintings. Not that I really wanted to use Albright's kind of subject matter--I think I was more fascinated with the technique, and the intricate surface detail, and the patience with which he worked surfaces and patterns. When I got back to Oklahoma, and back to my small studio, I began to work out similar things in a much more abstract sense. But I think that helped to develop my sense of an intricate and more tightly woven kind of surface, which I really got involved with. So I did have that visit in

Chicago. But I really felt that time was running out for me in Oklahoma. I had corresponded with Jack Stauffacher, and he said, "Come, stay with me and my brother." So that's when I went to California, and just as I had considered that going in the army was like entering the Dark Ages, I felt that coming to California and San Francisco was like the beginning of the Renaissance.

PHILLIPS

And that was in 1947. And how old were you then?

MULLICAN

I was about twenty-seven.

PHILLIPS

And you didn't have a serious consideration of going to the East Coast, to New York, instead.

MULLICAN

Well, I did. I knew that I wanted to go either place. But of course, I didn't know anybody on the East Coast. Jack had offered me a place; it would be easy to go to. And I had been in California, that brief time, in the desert. I wanted to be near the ocean. And I don't know; it seemed like the logical place to go.

PHILLIPS

Well, tell me about the move. What happened? What did you go into?

MULLICAN

Well, Jack and Frank Stauffacher were living in their family home in Burlingame on the San Francisco peninsula. Their parents had died within the last two or three years, and they were living there alone, and I moved in. And right away a whole new life opened for me. I remember it was spring: what I found in the house, what Jack and Frank had to offer in the way of things that I had been neglectful of, in the sense of music and literature. And there were art magazines and books, and things were happening--mostly in San Francisco; Burlingame was the quiet peninsula. But I found a whole new life beginning with the Stauffachers and through the many friends that I met through them.

PHILLIPS

What were Frank and Jack doing then?

MULLICAN

Jack had a small print shop, called the Green wood Press, in a small building at the back of the house. He had his presses in there, and he had been printing small volumes of poetry, and also doing some printing for people like Henry Miller. He had printed--I think it was a book that Henry Miller had done the preface to. [H.D. Thoreau, *Life Without Principle* (Stanford, California; Delkin, 1946)] In any case--this was before I had arrived-- he wrote to me that maybe I would like to do something for the cover. And I had sent him a portfolio of drawings to show around before I arrived. And he had a good response, and Miller had seen them, and he wrote me a letter about them. And so one of them was used on the jacket of the book. Anyway, he was doing all kinds of very select printing. Frank was a commercial artist working in San Francisco, very involved in film making and the history of film. He was in charge of a series at the San Francisco Museum of Art called "Art in Cinema." We would frequently go in there on Friday night, and this was my first introduction into the world of film making, and the art possibilities--all I'd ever known was just commercial, Hollywood, So suddenly I was aware that film was a very important art form.

PHILLIPS

Tell me about the other people that you began meeting and how they influenced you. When did you run into Paalen and Gordon Onslow-Ford?

MULLICAN

I'm thinking how to get this in order. Another thing to say is that when Jack and I were in the army together for that brief time, we spent a great deal of time talking and thinking about what we might do after the war. He was a printer and I was an artist; so I think one of the first things we did was to collaborate there in Burlingame. I had been writing some poetry, so we decided to put a lot of it together with some drawings into a small book--pamphlet, really--which he printed. It was called *The Gain of Art* . We decided this was going to be the first of a number of publications, and we called it "From the *Illuminati*." Anyway, this was our first attempt, and unfortunately, it was also the last. We were never able to do anything again of that nature, although he printed things. He printed my first catalog for my show at the San Francisco Museum. But if I think back to the peninsula and the life down there, all kinds of people showed up, Kenneth Rexroth; Dr. [Frederic] Spiegelberg, who taught comparative religion at Stanford; James Broughton, the poet and film maker from San Francisco, with whom I later had more contact. One of my colleagues now at the university, Oliver Andrews , appeared one day. He was a student at Stanford. He arrived in an army jeep with a roof built on it, and on the roof was painted a checkerboard, so it was possible to sit up on the roof and play chess or checkers. Then there were people like Varda , even Henry Miller; James Laughlin arrived, who was at that time publishing . . .

PHILLIPS

. . . New Directions.

MULLICAN

. . . New Directions Press. In fact, he bought a drawing from me which was used on the jacket of one of his annuals. [*New Direction 10* (New York City: New Directions Press, ca. 1948)] I guess it was around '47. There was a man, a young man, named Martin Metal, who appeared at the house and became very interested in my drawing. He was doing graduate work at Berkeley, as I remember. He had come out of the Chicago School of Design with [Laszlo] Moholy-Nagy. And he wanted to reproduce some of my drawings in a book that he was working on. This gave me a chance to talk with him. And I think one significant thing happened. Until that time in California I had done nothing but drawings. Since I didn't have a studio, it was very difficult to try and paint. But I was doing a lot of what you'd call automatic drawing, and that is maybe spending just a few seconds, a few flourishes of the pen on each page, into a kind of abstract imagery. And I would go through hundreds of these pages. I worked very intricately into other drawings a technique I had learned as a topographic draftsman. So in my discussions about drawing, I remember Martin said, "What do you think about when you're drawing?" And I found that I couldn't answer him, because I realized that when I was drawing, I really wasn't thinking about anything. I think this was the first time that I suddenly was really aware of this, to actually have said to him that I really don't think about anything when I'm doing these drawings. And I think that this was an important element I had discovered and had been using without really being aware of it.

PHILLIPS

The important discovery being that the drawings were automatic, that you weren't thinking, that they were coming from your unconscious.

MULLICAN

That's right. That I did not have, quite often, any preconceived ideas of what I was going to be doing other than just what had happened in the drawings before that. So that one went through a long scheme of things. This automatism was later developed in my painting. I did begin to paint that year at the Stauffacher house. I would almost say that up until that time, I had really not done anything of any significance with my painting. It was there that it really started. And one fateful day, after I began to paint, I was working outside on the sidewalk, on the driveway, working out in the open air. I didn't have a palette knife to move the paint around with, so Jack said, "Why don't you try my printer's ink knife?" So he passed it on to me, and of course that was my undoing, [laughter] Anyway, I've been using it ever

since. I later discovered that an ordinary putty knife is very much like a printer's ink knife, so that's what I began to use. Anyway, it was a way of applying the paint to the canvas. I discovered that I could pick up the paint with the knife and put it on the canvas, and this excited me. So these were my first paintings in California, and, as I say, I feel that from that moment on things really began to happen for me. I began to think in different ways, and I also began to recall things, such as those *Dyn* magazines, that I'd seen in Honolulu, and so forth.

PHILLIPS

Were you able to talk with anyone about that at that point?

MULLICAN

Well, I had not met any painters. They were mostly writers or film makers.

PHILLIPS

People who were very accepting of what you were doing.

MULLICAN

Yes. That's right. But there were not that many painters around, certainly not down on the peninsula. Of course, little by little, I began to move into San Francisco. But even there, I guess you would say I was very select. There were very few painters that I ever really came in close contact with.

PHILLIPS

How were you supporting yourself during this period?

MULLICAN

Well, the support came almost wholly from my parents. I had no other way. And my father kept referring to my time there as continuing university work, school-work, which was interrupted by the army; and he could see no reason why he shouldn't continue with that. Which was done, of course, on a very simple scale. My needs were practically nothing, and the three of us batching together--it was easy to scrape meals together. And I had no car, no problems there. The only thing was paint and canvas, which I must say was very scarce. And that's another reason that I worked so much on paper, I think. I couldn't afford to buy as much canvas or use as much paint as I wanted to. That changed a little bit in the following year, when I began to realize that I was in a position where it was necessary to do some major canvases, and then I was forced into debt again. And then it wasn't too long after that that I began to make a few sales and win some prizes, and so I always managed to get by--I guess that's the way we can put it. But this didn't last long. The Stauffachers decided that they had to sell the house, and almost a year later we all moved to San Francisco. Jack moved his press

into a building on Sansome Street, a nice shop where he could operate his presses. The three of us found a small house on Russian Hill; I think it had three rooms. [laughter] But we started out in San Francisco together with this small place. And it soon became too small. And then Jack married and he took over the house. And then Frank moved somewhere, and then I began to hop, skip, and jump all over the Bay Area--in different studios and living in different places. I had given Jack a painting to hang in his press in San Francisco, And it was seen there by Gordon Onslow-Ford, who inquired of me. And within a very short time I met Gordon. . . .

PHILLIPS

Why don't you tell me a little bit about Gordon, where he came from, and how long he'd been in the country, and Jacqueline and so on, so we'll have that down.

MULLICAN

Gordon was English and had spent most of his young life in the British Navy. And as he says, in 1937, his whole life was changed when he met Matta [Sebastian Antonio Matta Echaurren], and they became very close friends. They became the youngest members of the surrealists. Gordon was swept up into his own world, painting and drawing, so much so that he left the navy and came to New York. By that time there was a great influx of artists from Europe. He was one of the first to lecture on surrealism at the New York [New] School of Social Research,

PHILLIPS

Yes.

MULLICAN

And that's where he met Jacqueline Johnson.

PHILLIPS

Is she American?

MULLICAN

Yes, she was. She was a Stanford graduate and had grown up in the San Francisco area. The Onslow-Fords eventually moved to Mexico, where they spent the war years. And, of course, they met Wolfgang Paalen there, even though I think Paalen and Gordon had known each other from Europe as they were part of the surrealist movement as it existed at that time. Then in time, Gordon and Jacqueline decided to move to San Francisco, and that's about the time . . .

PHILLIPS

That was after the war.

MULLICAN

After the war. And that's when I met him.

PHILLIPS

And was Paalen German?

MULLICAN

Austrian, an Austrian count. And he had made his way to Mexico through Alaska and the Northwest coast, picking up a magnificent collection on the way. And he eventually arrived in Mexico City, where he, too, spent the war years and published his magazine, *Dyn* .

PHILLIPS

And they were, both of them, somewhat older than you.

MULLICAN

I suppose so. But not too much. I think Gordon always seemed older because he was, I think, certainly, much more mature in his thinking and in his experiences. I really felt, though, that once the three of us got together that I was really the youngest, the novice almost, [laughs]

PHILLIPS

Well, of course, they both had a very different kind of educational and social background than you.

MULLICAN

It's amazing, when you think back, how the three of us ever really got together. Even though it was for a very brief time, it was long enough to have made this manifestation. The Dynaton.

PHILLIPS

Well, anyhow, Gordon saw your painting at Jack's press.

MULLICAN

That's right. And so we eventually met. By this time I had met a young architect, Philip Mutrux, who had some property on Green Street, including a downstairs room which he rented out to me as a studio. This was really my first studio, with space that I had to myself. And I moved in with my *santos* and Indian blankets and baskets and began to work. Eventually I invited Gordon to come and see what I was doing, and he became very excited. We began to see a great deal of each other, and I remember the first time he arrived--I believe it was the first time he arrived at my studio--

he brought me a watercolor, already framed, and just presented it to me as he walked in the door, which pleased me. I still have that.

PHILLIPS

One of his watercolor?

MULLICAN

One of his watercolors--an important one, I think, one he had done in Mexico. So we had a great deal to say to each other, or perhaps he had more to say to me than I to him. In any case, he opened my eyes. For one thing, the Onslow-Fords had a magnificent collection in San Francisco. Well, the times I remember in their house on Chestnut Street, which looked out over the bay: to walk into those rooms was like walking into a small museum. It was all there, everything from a magnificent cubist, oval-shaped [Georges] Braque to [Pablo] Picasso.

PHILLIPS

The wooden Henry Moore.

MULLICAN

Well, the wooden Henry Moore was at the San Francisco Museum, but there again, that was Moore's masterpiece, which Gordon had the foresight to buy. He knew Moore. And so, there was everything: [Paul] Klee, [Max] Ernst, [Joan] Miro, dozens of Mattas, and of course his own work. And [Giorgio di] Chirico, [Paul] Delvaux--all of the surrealists were represented in this fabulous collection in their house. I remember Gordon taking me to an adjoining room, which was more like a storage room, and pulling out several of his early paintings, surrealist paintings; and, handing me a drink, he left me in there while he disappeared. "All right, here's a half an hour for you. You sit and absorb this." I never really felt like he was a teacher, and certainly never felt that I was a student. He must have known he was presenting things to me that were going to form my ideas.

PHILLIPS

Yes, both he and Paalen and Jacqueline were very intellectual and very conversant with all philosophical thinking and the philosophy of science and very articulate, and it couldn't have been the sort of thing that you had run into too much before that.

MULLICAN

Not at all. No, of course--not at all. So I was really taken in and accepted, and I think it began to show in my work. Not that I began to emulate them, but I began to realize what my philosophy about painting and the world was, and how it related to theirs.

PHILLIPS

Do you want to talk about that some now?

MULLICAN

Gordon was working with Jack in the print shop. Gordon was preparing an exhibition of his work at San Francisco Museum, and at that time he was planning to publish a book. It was published in conjunction with this exhibition [*Toward a New Subject in Painting* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art, 1948)]. And he was kind enough to include me in the book. And for the first time, he had put into words which could be easily read many of the things which I felt I was coming close to but which I had not really seen fit to write out or to even give serious consideration. Just as my response to Martin Metal: "Well, I'm painting, but I'm really not thinking about painting; I mean, I'm not thinking about what I'm doing." I was going through some kind of formal painterly exercises, but just what they are, I wasn't sure. I think a great deal of it may have had to do with emulating other artists and transcribing what I saw and felt in my own way. Anyway, Gordon had these thoughts in his book, *Toward a New Subject in Painting*, which had to do with a number of things. First of all, there was a communion with nature, something we had in common and something which we still have very much in common, and also the utilization of ideas which one could present in a canvas, but things that one felt more than one could actually see. I mean, we were painting things that no one had seen, or could be seen. So this was a sense of what this new subject was. If I may quote: [reads] 'The subject will be derived from, a world of vision, incorporating a new poetic subject in terms of a new plastic form. ' So this was very meaningful to me. And he also pointed out that he had arrived at this through looking at [Vasili] Kandinski and [Piet] Mondrian, which also made very good sense. He had been a friend of [Yves] Tanguy in Europe and in New York and he, [reads] quote, "I hailed him- as a visionary, and as a prophet of the poetic aspect of the new subject, as I hail the cubists as prophets of the formal aspect. " So again, here it was, all spelled out for me, that I was dealing with poetry and the essence of nature, at the same time as I was very involved with abstract and cubist thought as picked up years earlier at the University of Oklahoma. Gordon also spoke of Matta as being the most marvelous manifestation of the poetic aspects of the new subject, [reads] "a vision of the world, binding men to architecture, to earth, to vegetation, to mountain, to sky, in a space-time continuum. " And I wanted to quote that, because it will, later have some relevance to a game, the surrealist game, that we began to play. And I will get to that. I don't want to make too many quotes. But for the first time, I found myself in the company of great art, and great artists. This is the other quote from *Toward a New Subject*: "In the jungles of the mind, there is a tree that a few have found. The leaves rustle to Klee's music. Miro carved 1936 on its bark. Tanguy is

squatting motionless in the shade. Matta is tasting the ripest fruit." Only Gordon could have written this. [laughter] "Paalen is finding its position in the tidal landscape. Mullican is peering into a bird's nest at the top. And on a branch is my Cheshire cat grin." I must have felt, upon reading this, that I was certainly in very good--great, grand--company. And for the first time, I began to feel some sense of growth as an artist, even though, my God, it was just the merest beginning, as I think back. Suddenly being plunged into this was quite remarkable.

PHILLIPS

You had arrived by yourself, so to speak, at the kind of image making you were doing and your kind of automatic drawing, and they were so drawn to you because you were doing this thing already that was so similar to the emotional knowledge and poetic knowledge that they were talking about. And so you all felt birds of a feather, but they were able to put it in the historical, epistemological context with which they were so familiar.

MULLICAN

Yes. Well, it was shortly after this that Paalen arrived.

PHILLIPS

He wasn't in San Francisco at that time.

MULLICAN

I cannot remember the exact chronology; it all takes place within a year, or a year and a half, but. . . .

PHILLIPS

Speaking of chronology, you had your first one-man show at the San Francisco Museum in 1949. Was this after Paalen came?

MULLICAN

Yes, this was after.

PHILLIPS

So he probably came around 1948 or so.

MULLICAN

I would think so. He arrived. And I was very excited about the prospect of meeting him. I knew, of course, who he was through the *Dynmagazine*. By that time, a great many of his articles from the magazine had been published by Wittenborn into a book. *Form and Sense*, as a part of the *Documents of Modern Art*. I had read this. Also Paalen had an exhibition in New York--I think at Peggy Guggenheim's [Gallery]. It was written up in *Time* magazine,

and this was before I had met him. And I was impressed that the article in *Time* pointed out that he was an Austrian count and what he had published during the war and so forth. And then it quoted Paalen as saying, or suggesting, that just as the viewer looks at the painting and says, "What does it represent?" the painting looks back at the viewer and says, "What do you represent?" Well, this impressed me. So I had known his work. Now I'm a little confused as to whether his exhibition at San Francisco Museum of Art was at the time of our meeting; I think it must have been. I think that he had arrived in San Francisco with his exhibition, which Dr. Grace McCann Morley had planned for him.

PHILLIPS

She was the director.

MULLICAN

She was the director of the San Francisco Museum, and she had invited him. I feel that we met at the time of that exhibition. Anyway, there was the exhibition in the museum--most impressive. I'd never seen anything like it. To enter the exhibition room--it was just one room--it was like entering a chapel, entering a church, and being surrounded by these apostles of the spirit and mind, standing there. You felt they were looking at you and saying, "What do you represent?" I spent hours there, walking and looking. So then Gordon and Jacqueline arranged a dinner party; rather, we arranged a dinner party, for Paalen--Frank and Jack Stauffacher and myself. We were still living in this small house on Russian Hill. Paalen and his wife, Gordon and Jacqueline arrived for dinner. This was very funny. I think it's the only dinner party we ever gave--the living room couldn't have been more than fifteen feet square, and this had been my bedroom. I slept on the couch. So it meant trying to get a table in the room in order to seat everyone and to have an entertaining evening in this cramped, cramped space. Well, they arrived and Paalen was charming, gracious, as he always was.

PHILLIPS

His English was very good?

MULLICAN

His English was excellent. And with him was his very beautiful wife, Luchita.

PHILLIPS

Then known as Amalia, was she?

MULLICAN

Uh, no.

PHILLIPS

She's referred to as that at the beginning of the Dynaton publication.

MULLICAN

Oh, yes, she may have been.

PHILLIPS

But she was known as Luchita?

MULLICAN

She was introduced as Luchita. Well, one sad thing about that evening that I remember--which was very unfortunate, and yet it opened up our friendship--is that Frank decided to show some experimental films, which was even more of a farce.

PHILLIPS

Hardly had room for that in a fifteen-foot living room.

MULLICAN

To push all the dishes aside and set up a screen in order to project some films. Anyway, this was done. And there was--I don't remember what films.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (Not Recorded)

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side One (JANUARY 16, 1976)

PHILLIPS

Okay, we were at the dinner party in your crowded room.

MULLICAN

We were showing films. There was a French film, and then--I can't remember now; one of the films that Frank showed may have been one that was done in San Francisco, There were a number of film makers there at the time. Anyway, there was a scene in one of the films that had to do with the death of a child. And I remember a tombstone with the word "baby" written on it. Which, you know, was fine; this was a part of the film, and why shouldn't we look at it? It was a documentary of some kind. And later we were all very embarrassed to find out that Luchita had lost a child in Mexico, perhaps within the year. But other than that, the evening went off very well. I had a painting. I remember I took a great deal of time trying to decide just exactly which painting I would have hanging on the wall, [laughs] for them to see, because it would be the first painting of mine that Paalen would have seen. And I actually chose the wrong one, because later, he and Luchita both told me that they had no reaction to it, and they couldn't understand why I had

chosen that to show them first. Anyway, I had the studio on Green Street and invited them to come within the next day or so. They were staying in a hotel, and they came, and Paalen was very impressed with what he saw, as was Luchita. And we talked, and later had lunch together. And by this time, I guess Gordon had introduced me to Richard Freeman of the San Francisco Museum, who was in the process of inviting me to have an exhibition. So I mentioned this to Paalen, and he said that if I did have such an exhibition, he would be delighted to write something for the catalog. Well, I became very excited about the prospect of that. This he later did. So it was a great social time with the Paalens and the Onslow-Fords, meeting at the very finest restaurants, and hours of intellectual talk and planning. I wasn't aware of it at that time, but the Paalens were in San Francisco to look for a house to move to. They had decided to move from Mexico City to the San Francisco area. In Mill Valley, they found a magnificent old Victorian house on a very quiet street.

PHILLIPS

Did they stay in San Francisco then?

MULLICAN

Not for long. As I remember, they were not there more than maybe a week. And during this time, Paalen said that he would be very pleased to exchange a painting with me. This also was very exciting. And he promised that he would write the foreword to the catalog. And they showed me their house in Mill Valley. It had four floors with great, wide porches, and stained-glass trimmings. There was a large garden plus maybe two acres of redwoods and ferns and a stream running through it; it was a magnificent place. There was a greenhouse, and there was a formal garden, which they were concerned about watering. So I told them that I would go over occasionally and check on it. If something needed to be watered, I would water it--with the summer coming on. As it turns out, the Onslow-Fords later moved in and spent the summer there, and I moved in. So we had the house together for one summer. We thought it was haunted. All kinds of strange happenings in the night. [laughs] But it was a quiet, productive summer. We played these surrealist games, which I referred to when I was speaking of Matta. We would set around the dining table. Really there were four of us for the game. Jacqueline would also play, even though she wasn't an artist. Richard Bowman, at the time, would quite often drop in and play the game with us. In the game you created a world, with each artist working on each other's drawings. Crayolas and watercolor--all the materials were thrown on the middle of the table. You could reach and pull out and make any kind of a mark you wanted to. The rules of the game were: the first person drew in the first beginnings of the cosmos or atmospheric beginnings of the world. The drawing was then passed on, and the second person did step two, the

vegetation that grew there. The drawing was then passed on to the next person, and the third person did the creatures. The final step was the architecture. And you could do anything you wanted. So quite often you couldn't tell the architecture from the personages that were represented, or the architecture from the vegetation. What one ended up with was a remarkable kind of drawing. Some of these ideas I have kept all this time. And by keeping up I mean this is still something I'm involved with in my painting--the creation of a private world, with all these elements that arrive from all sides and in different forms, different ways.

PHILLIPS

Let me interject a question here. You talked about your art being very involved with poetic and emotional meaning and knowledge, and not the objects depicted being important but rather the feeling and the knowledge behind things. Do you, when you look at other forms of art-- for instance, art from the Renaissance, in which there were different objectives, such as perspective, and dark and light, and modeling, and all of that--do you respond to some of that art as if those people were after the same thing that you're after?

MULLICAN

What I'm involved with is a completely different kind of space, a different kind of space-time continuum, you might say. Oh, I very definitely respond to that kind of painting, and I can even see aspects of it that come very close . . .

PHILLIPS

... to what you have in mind . . .

MULLICAN

... in certain painters, or certain areas of a painting.

PHILLIPS

Those are what we call great painters. [laughter]

MULLICAN

Certain areas that one will have a great response to, which have to do, in my case, with ideas very much related to nature. The skies, the elements, and so forth. A lot of this had been developed by the surrealists, in the case of 'Matta and Tanguy and Chirico--metaphysical space, those metaphysical ideas.

PHILLIPS

And the great emphasis on the unconscious.

MULLICAN

Very, of course. We did all kinds of collage games that summer and surrealist work games, a lot of communal creativity, like a great and grand kindergarten. [laughter]

PHILLIPS

And that summer consisted of you and the Onslow-Fords. The Paalens weren't back?

MULLICAN

No, no. They were in Mexico, planning to make the move. And Luchita, I think, had gone on to New York and was spending some time there. I guess it was the following summer; at one point I went to Mexico. It may have been the fall; I think it was the fall of that same year. I'm sure it was now. And that was the summer we were in the house. In the fall, we had agreed that we would all meet in Mexico--Gordon, Jacqueline, and myself. But we arrived separately. Anyway, I flew to Mexico City, and the Onslow-Fords arrived soon after, and we spent about a week, ten days together, making plans for San Francisco, where we knew we would eventually have an exhibition. We knew that there would be a publication--a publication more than a catalog. In Mexico I had the chance to see the Pyramid of the Sun, Pyramid of the Moon; we made trips to Oaxaca, Puebla. And in Oaxaca the thing that impressed me the most were the ruins of Mitla. And then we decided that we would meet again in the winter back in Mill Valley, and I flew on to Oklahoma for, I think, Christmas. Now again, chronology. We have overlooked my exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art. [laughter]

PHILLIPS

I know it was in 1949. Tell me about the exhibition.

MULLICAN

Paalen, indeed, wrote the introduction, and Jack Stauffacher printed the catalog. There were about four or five black-and-white reproductions. I had a beautiful gallery to myself. I gave a very fancy tea-time opening. All my friends came, and I thought it was a great success, that it had gone off very well. What ensued? I had a glowing review from Alfred Frankenstein. There was a response from the architect, Eric Mendelsohn.

PHILLIPS

Was he living in San Francisco?

MULLICAN

Yes, he was living there. He had established his offices there. Suddenly one day I was given word that I should call him immediately, which I did. And he encouraged me to come down to his offices, that he had found the exhibition very exciting, that he wanted to talk with me. So I got to know Eric and his beautiful wife, Louise. They bought two paintings out of the show. His enthusiasm overran all possibilities or probabilities of ever being satisfied. He wanted me to, immediately, do sketches for murals that would cover the interior of a synagogue in St. Louis. He said, "If this works out, I'm also doing a synagogue in another city." (I can't remember where.) He was entering several competitions within which a mural might be possible; he wanted me to work on that. So I did a great number of drawings, but I could not see myself covering such a space, you know, with just paint. So he decided that maybe it could be done with some kind of stenciling. So I tried to work that out. And I did a great many sketches--which, just last year, his widow gave to Berkeley. I was surprised. She showed them to me. I thought they'd been lost years before. Anyway, things didn't work out. I met Mendelsohn in St. Louis; we looked at the synagogue and showed some sketches, but nothing ever came of it.

PHILLIPS

Even though his enthusiasm was perhaps too boundless and couldn't be fulfilled, as you were pointing out, the recognition that you received at that age by Grace Morley and the museum show and the Alfred Frankenstein review is the sort of thing that's terribly important to someone at that age.

MULLICAN

Well, it was. I was thirty years old, and I thought, "Well, now, this is a good time to begin." Anyway, Eric was enthusiastic, and I really feel that something could have come from it all, but, unfortunately, he died before we really had a chance to consummate anything. But that was one of the important things that. . . .

PHILLIPS

Did you have a dealer in San Francisco then?

MULLICAN

No. Before my exhibition at San Francisco Museum, I had a small exhibition in Monterey. Gertrude Harris had a small gallery there (Pat Wall Gallery) . And, really, I had my first exhibition with her. And this came about through a previous exhibition she had given Gordon. So I moved from Monterey into the San Francisco Museum of Art. No, I was not involved with a gallery at that time. It must have been during that same year [that] Paalen told Marian Willard about me and my work. So I got in touch with her and found she was coming to San Francisco. We arranged a meeting at my studio, and she came

and was very enthusiastic about what she saw. She offered me a show in New York the following winter, which I think was about 1950. I used the same Paalen introduction in the catalog. I didn't go to New York for the exhibition, so I didn't see it. I sold several things out of the exhibition. There was a one- paragraph review in *Time* magazine, which I'll never forget, that made fun of my Navajo titles, saying also that the garishness and the primitive- ness of the color, and so forth. . . .

PHILLIPS

Do you, know who wrote that review?

MULLICAN

No, I don't. I haven't the slightest idea. It was lumped in with what's happening in New York, one ridiculous little paragraph.

PHILLIPS

You talked about Navajo titles. Were you at this point consciously aware of the relationship of your work to Indian material?

MULLICAN

Very much so. I remember that in the Amerindian issue of *Dyn* there was a color reproduction of a sand painting, the first one I was aware of. There was a publication by Maude Oakes, who was a friend of Marian Willard, which I came in contact with. This had to do with sand paintings. And I became very influenced by what I saw there. I used these Navajo titles, things like "Happily the Chiefs Regard You," and things like, you know, very long poetic titles on paintings, so it must have seemed strange. But very meaningful. So that takes us up to the arrival of the Paalens in Mill Valley, which was a great occasion, because they did have this tremendous collection of pre-Columbian, Pacific, Northwest coast art. And I remember opening case after case, crate after crate, of all of these extraordinary things. And the house was worked on; a lot of the stained glass was taken out. The collection was installed. The walls were covered in every corner; it was quite an atmosphere to live in. It was decided that I should live with them. There was an attic room on the fourth floor which was just right for me. Also, since neither one of them could drive, we got a car so I could chauffeur them around. Then we began to work on our exhibition, which Dr. Morley had arranged at San Francisco Museum. By now, Gordon had had a show there, Paalen had had a show, and I had had a show. So what was to follow was one for the three of us. We had talked a great deal about what the exhibition would consist of, what works, and what the publication would be like. It was decided that Jack Stauffacher would print the publication. Paalen arranged to have some of the color reproductions made in Mexico City, which could later be included in San Francisco. He wrote three articles for the publication. Jacqueline also wrote

an article. Neither Gordon nor I wrote anything. In fact, I didn't really participate openly in the exhibition, in the way of writing anything or lecturing. Previous to our showing together at San Francisco Museum, we showed together at the Stanford Art Galleries. I can't remember the exact title of the exhibition--anyway , it was not called the Dynaton. It had more to do with the word "metaplastic." There were a series of lectures given in conjunction with the exhibition: one by Gordon, one by Paalen, and one by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, who had arrived on the scene some months before.

PHILLIPS

She was in San Francisco?

MULLICAN

Moholy-Nagy had died. Sibyl came to San Francisco to be with Martin Metal, my friend who was writing the book on drawing. I met her through him. She decided that she would move, with her daughters, to San Francisco, and they found a house on Twin Peaks. Martin and I moved into the house ahead of her. I lived there with him for maybe a month before she and her daughters arrived.

PHILLIPS

How were the Paalens and the Fords and everyone getting along in the Victorian house in Mill Valley?

MULLICAN

Oh, the minute that the Paalens moved in, the Onslow-Fords moved; they were only there for the summer. We only camped there for that summer.

PHILLIPS

House sitting.

MULLICAN

That's all. Paalen and Sibyl got along fairly well, I think, although when Sibyl was not present, Paalen would often refer to her as "holy Moholy." But they did get along; I mean, they would have had to for him to invite her to lecture at Stanford in that way. I became very close friends with Sibyl and found her a remarkable woman. She indeed did arrive with her two daughters plus. . . .

PHILLIPS

Was Sibyl Hungarian?

MULLICAN

Well, she was, I think. She was German. Her name was Sibyl Peach. She was on the stage in Germany, and she used to tell how she was one of the first to

appear nude on any stage during the great Berlin days before the war. Anyway, she played the guitar and sang, and she was filled with stories and filled with fun, and we liked each other. She liked my work; she encouraged me. And of course I saw a great deal of her until her death, just a few years ago. One thing that impressed me was that when she moved, she moved the entire body of Moholy-Nagy's work with her. And it was installed in the garage. Martin spent days building shelving, and also shelves for all of the books and manuscripts in the house and for the paintings that were put in the garage. And it was amazing to me, and I think it certainly must have been amazing to her, that all the time she was there, she was not once offered a teaching job, or even the chance to lecture on the Bauhaus or on Moholy-Nagy, or anything. This was all just pushed aside.

PHILLIPS

Was that because people just didn't know, or there wasn't a structure set up to accommodate something like that?

MULLICAN

Well, I think that there was just no interest in it. It's amazing. I mean, at the time of the Stanford show, we were there having dinner, and the director of the gallery spoke of how only the year before that, [Bela] Bartok had come for a lecture and five people appeared. So it was not unusual; I mean, it was just accepted. Moholy was who he was, but there was no need to give lectures; there was no need to glorify the Bauhaus at that time. Which was unfortunate. I know that Sibyl was disturbed by this.

PHILLIPS

She eventually went to New York, didn't she? She got more recognition there.

MULLICAN

That's right. She lived in San Francisco and eventually she and Martin ended their relationship, and she moved to New York with her daughters. As we will get to, there was a grand exodus for everyone, to all directions.

PHILLIPS

You'd had this very fruitful year with Sibyl Moholy-Nagy and the people. . . .

MULLICAN

Oh, yes. There were many parties, many introductions. Exhibitions. Lots of exhibitions. San Francisco formed a Municipal Collection, a large competitive exhibition. and I won one of the purchase awards. Katharine Kuh happened to have been involved with that. She was one of the jurors.

PHILLIPS

She was at the Museum of Modern Art then?

MULLICAN

No, Chicago. Anyway, we were leading up to the Dynaton exhibition. Paalen and Gordon and myself were having conferences and discussions. We did not know really what to call this manifestation. I remember Gordon, in his very marvelous way, suggesting "The Great Haunts" as one of the titles for the exhibition. Gordon also used this as the title of a painting. Anyway, I think Paalen was very insistent, eventually, and we agreed on Dynaton, which was the full word. D-Y-N, which he had called his magazine, was just the first three letters, but came from Dynaton. Before too long, we were in the museum installing our show. We ended up doing it ourselves. We were there with the curator who was installing the exhibition, and Gordon had his own ideas as to how it should look, how it should be installed, as I'm sure Paalen did, too; I was very quiet about it all. Anyway, the curator went to Dr. Morley and said, "Either I install the show or they install it. We cannot agree how it should be done." So Dr. Morley gave us the choice, and Gordon said, "We will hang the exhibition." And I remember him waving the hammer in his hand, as he shouted at this curator, "We are going to transform this museum." So we did. We had a very unorthodox hanging, in some ways. We did not hang things in a horizontal line around the gallery. We would hang things up high; we'd hang things low. By this time I was making painted wooden objects which were included in the show. Paalen suggested I call them "tactile ecstasies," which I did. Gordon had done some paintings on hide, which had been strung up inside of a frame. I had finished a very large gesso painting. There were a lot of Paalen's earlier works and new works, plus several pieces of his sculpture. We put up a column on which I had pinned some free-form drawings; they were wrapped around the column. There was one room, called the "ancestor room," which had glass cases in it and was filled with things from Paalen's and Gordon's primitive collections. Marvelous things, everything from Easter Island statuary to pre-Columbian masks.

PHILLIPS

You referred to the primitive things filling the "ancestor room." You all felt that your work went back to the same kind of spirit that was imbued in these early relics.

MULLICAN

I think so, yes. And we felt it was necessary to have them; they were such a part of our lives. These artifacts had only recently been introduced to me, but Paalen had formed this great collection and had written so meaningfully about it. He was one of the first to recognize that these so-called primitive things were really great works of art. And that was something we very

definitely wanted to include. There were photographs taken of the exhibition, which I have. And then one day that exhibition seemed to be finished. There were reviews. One review--I'm sorry I don't have it here--was hysterical. You know, you'd think that we'd been far-out surrealists that had moved in and desecrated a gallery. I mean, really, it was nothing. Our installation was really quite sedate. But at that time, I guess it seemed rather unorthodox. The other reviews, I have not seen in years, so I don't remember what they were, or what happened with the exhibition. Many people saw it. And people still speak of it. Curiously enough, this year, it's twenty-five years.

PHILLIPS

Well, the publication [Dynaton 1951 (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art)] that went along with it is very significant, and marvelous to have.

MULLICAN

Yes, it was. As I say. Jack was responsible for the printing of it. Paalen designed the cover, and there was a particular kind of Dynaton sign, which was used in the exhibition, a sign or mark.

PHILLIPS

Is Dynaton a Greek word? Or was it made up from a couple of words?

MULLICAN

It comes from a Greek word. At Stanford, the the exhibition had more reference to Paalen's term "metaplastic" than to the Dynaton. By metaplastic, he meant that what we were involved with was beyond just plastic form. Painting was changing from purely plastic terms into something else, which eventually became the Dynaton, a word Paalen translated freely from the Greek, which really meant the possible -- that which is possible-- which also paralleled in some respect Matta ' s psychological morphology, which had to do with form and the structure of things. So it was really the opening of a new world, opening of the mind into a kind of cosmic thought, ideas that went beyond what one saw, beyond form.

PHILLIPS

When you're teaching students, how do you integrate this kind of material into studio classes?

MULLICAN

Well, I sneak it in in different ways, under different terms, which I break down , in the beginning, to working with nature. If one looks at the details of nature, one senses abstract ideas. And one eventually begins, through these abstract ideas, to develop atmospheres, and one can begin to speak of time, and psychological morphology, and so forth. But Paalen would have said that

painting has always been abstract: the fact that--I bring this up in my classes also--anytime you try to reproduce three dimensions on a two-dimensional surface, right away you're into an abstract idea. We begin to work with a different kind of space. The volume is no longer of any interest. And what we were involved with was a kind of meditation, and for me this had a great deal to do with the study of nature, and the study of pattern, and the study of that sort of thing from which one could receive a meditative response. So we were dealing with art as a way of meditation.

PHILLIPS

Rather than the depiction of something, instead it is an object upon which to meditate.

MULLICAN

That's right. So this was, in a sense, a metaplastic vision, which also, in the Dynaton, was included in this kind of time-space cosmic continuum that made anything possible.

PHILLIPS

These ideas are still very much the ideas you're involved with in your work.

MULLICAN

Yes. However, I find that over the years there have been many changes, many diversities, and as always, many temptations. [laughter] . I mean, there's always been a constant battle between the abstract and the image: where do the two meet? And how abstract do I want to get? What realism do I want to involve myself with? But there's no question, from that day to this: what I've been involved with in my own work is the creation of my own world, which has come directly out of what Paalen and Onslow-Ford were involved with.

PHILLIPS

And if we see art making around us changing and going into conceptual art and film making and process and happenings, none of that is in contradiction to the creating of this individual cosmos. I mean, the same spirit could imbue other forms of art making, other than just painting.

MULLICAN

I don't follow that.

PHILLIPS

Well, people aren't just painting any more. All different kinds of art making are going on. But this same spirit of which you speak, the same spirit of Dynaton could be going on in other forms of art.

MULLICAN

Oh, I think so. I think it could. Certainly it exists in poetry, very much so. And in music. And a great deal of contemporary painting, of course, is still involved with that. I mean, I don't want to say that we were the only ones either. There have been other similar ideas pre- sented.

PHILLIPS

But I'm talking about the younger people who are outside of painting at this point, who are making their art in other forms, like conceptual art and video tape.

MULLICAN

Of course, I think that requires just as much thought. And reverence. And, I mean, if it's done properly, if it's done well, you see it happen. Because I think even so much of that came out of surrealism.

PHILLIPS

Yes, that's right.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: III, Side Two (JANUARY 16, 1976 and JANUARY 23, 1976)

PHILLIPS

We'll just go on for about twenty-five minutes, half an hour, and let's go back to some of the chronology of that summer of 1951, because you weren't in San Francisco much longer.

MULLICAN

Well, while I was living in Mill Valley, I had a studio in San Francisco. It was a studio that Jean Varda was giving up, and I moved in immediately. I also lived there for a while. I mean, I was back and forth between Mill Valley and North Beach. But it was in this space, which actually I had before my exhibition at the museum, that I was really able to do my best work. And I was involved not only with painting, but all kinds of drawing, and I was dipping things and stamping things, and writing, and so it was a place that I look back upon as having been very rich.

PHILLIPS

Very creative period.

MULLICAN

A creative period, and in a very interesting part of San Francisco. I remember having a party there after my exhibition at the museum, after the

"tea party." We went back to my studio, and [Mark] Rothko came, which was very. . . .

PHILLIPS

He was teaching ...

MULLICAN

He was teaching at California School of Fine Arts at that time. And James Broughton was there, which brings me to my own bit in film acting. Broughton was making a film called *Mother's Day*, in which he included all of his friends, Jack and myself, and a great many people. Very talented man. Also at that time, in Mill Valley one day. Dr. [William] Valentiner arrived from Los Angeles, and with him was Paul and Mary Wescher.

PHILLIPS

And Dr. Valentiner was at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art then, and Paul was the assistant director.

MULLICAN

That's right. They had just been married. And of course Mary has become one of my closest and oldest friends, and I remember we were seated by a window, looking out into that great Mill Valley redwood landscape, and talking, talking about Los Angeles. . . .

PHILLIPS

And here we are, sitting in Mary's bedroom. Small world.

MULLICAN

The very house which she built. And she was talking about her marriage, and problems she was having with her children. And, of course, she and Paul were amongst my first friends once I moved to Los Angeles. Also at that time we entertained Mark Tobey, who I came to know through the Willard Gallery.

PHILLIPS

Did you run into Claire Falkenstein at that time?

MULLICAN

And Claire Falkenstein--I remember going to an exhibition of hers at the San Francisco Museum. Morris Graves came through with his little dog on his way to Mexico and stopped off in my studio on his way back to Seattle. The time was very concise. Things that happened, as I think back, so much squeezed into such a short time that it's difficult to recount it all. Anyway, the Dynaton exhibition was over, and even though I had not been conscious of it, I was still very much aware that the Paalens were on the verge of divorce. And

they were divorced that same summer. It was decided that Luchita would go to Venezuela, and Paalen would return to Mexico.

PHILLIPS

What sort of broke up that marriage? Were they just too incompatible?

MULLICAN

I couldn't go into the details because, one, I don't know; and it's not really relevant to what was happen- ing at that time. He was a difficult person in many ways. European.

PHILLIPS

Yes, that was really sort of what I was getting at.

MULLICAN

Well, I think that things had really begun to happen in Mexico long before they ever came to San Francisco; in fact, I'm sure that one of the reasons for their coming to San Francisco was to see if they would make a new start, to save that. Also Paalen felt that there was an intellectual climate in San Francisco where something could really happen. The war had ended. We were all enthusiastic that here was a place, that this scene would be a growing center of culture. And the museum was sympathetic to what was happening. There was a lot happening at the California School of Fine Arts, which I had very little to do with, actually. I did, one summer, work with [Stanley William] Hayter in his print class. But I didn't really get involved with anyone teaching there, or even know very many of the students- -which was curious, because before I left San Francisco, I was put on the board of the school, which seemed very strange to me. But it was done through a mutual friend, who was on the board. I looked forward to offering my bit, but I resigned because I wasn't in San Francisco much longer. The school was dominated by [Douglas] MacAgy.

PHILLIPS

Do you remember Gurdon Woods at all?

MULLICAN

No, I don't. I knew he was there. I think he was teaching sculpture.

PHILLIPS

Yes.

MULLICAN

And I met [Clyfford] Still at several parties, and Rothko. But what went on in the school I was not really in sympathy with. I was not against it wholly,

either. It's just that I couldn't get involved. And I think there was a dichotomy between MacAgy and Onslow-Ford, Paalen. They couldn't get along either. At one point, the Onslow-Fords wanted very much to buy a Still painting; in fact, it had all been arranged. Something blew up; it didn't happen. I remember Jean Varda 's description of the California School of Fine Arts. He was of course a great colorist. I really should spend some time talking about our friendship and on his great enthusiasm for color. He was horrified to find that all the students of the California School of Fine Arts were painting in black. He said, "All the students and all of the professors have gone throughout San Francisco and bought every tube of black that they could find. There are so many black paintings in that school, when I leave, I have to leave by a tunnel and out the back door. One cannot escape the black."

PHILLIPS

How would you sum up the contention or the dis- agreement between Gordon and Paalen and yourself and the philosophy of the School of Fine Arts.

MULLICAN

The differences?

PHILLIPS

The differences, yes.

MULLICAN

Gordon and Paalen were perhaps, at that point, still closer to surrealism and surrealist ideas. The school, and what was happening there, was also close to surrealism and surrealist ideas, but they didn't know it. Or if they knew it, they wouldn't admit it. They had a whole sense of the automatic. It was certainly part of what was going in that school. Which was great--it was part of what we were doing as well. Actually, they seemed to be more involved in formal terms rather than any kind of visionary terms. And vision was, I think, an important part of the Dynaton and what we represented. The rest seemed to be nothing more than an action on canvas. And I do remember that there were times when I couldn't understand why no one spoke up at that school to let us know what they were doing. They completely denied that they were ever influenced in any way by nature. [Richard] Dienbenkorn was there. But he was very quiet. I didn't know him; but he was very quiet, certainly, as they all were. And yet, I do know today that: later Diebenkorn was in Albuquerque and was very influenced by nature and landscape. But no one said very much. I recognized nature in Clyfford Still, also; Rothko, not so much. I think Rothko had more of the, really, kind of pure vision, and I feel very much closer to Rothko. In fact one of the great things about that San

Francisco Museum at that time was the very beautiful Rothko which hung in the auditorium all the time I was there. Powerful painting.

PHILLIPS

Which George Culler traded in for a newer Rothko.

MULLICAN

MULLICAH: Which I heard. And can you imagine such a thing! The other important painting for me, and I'm sure for most young artists in San Francisco at that time was the Jackson Pollock, an early Jackson Pollock, which hung in the museum. Those two paintings were very influential as far as I was concerned, and I think for most of the young people in the Bay Area.

PHILLIPS

Sometimes schools and institutions and groups of people band together with an ideology, and anything that doesn't fit into it. . . . At the school, perhaps they couldn't quite find the place for surrealism, so they had to deny it, even though they were more influenced by it than they thought.

MULLICAN

They thought that they were onto something new, and they were. And I accepted it. There were occasions when I wondered. I can remember an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum. There were other things going on at the other museums, but it seems like everything went on in the San Francisco' Museum. An exhibition of small paintings by David Park and Diebenkorn, which I thought was one of the most repulsive exhibitions I had ever seen. I could not understand these smears, squashes, drips--on these very small paintings.

PHILLIPS

Were they abstract?

MULLICAN

Very abstract. And I understand later that David Park destroyed most of his. And Dick, of course, has grown into a great painter. I can only remember feeling very annoyed that this seemingly--there was nothing there, I felt. [laughter] So the time in Mill Valley ended. We had many friends. Shall we go on? It's a reference to music and the importance that music has played in my work. Everything from the purists--Bach, Vivaldi--to the moderns--Stravinsky , whom we met after a concert at the Opera House and the great influence all through that period, all through the war, really, of jazz. Because in my paintings, I felt that I was using some kind of sound. It's still a very important element, even today. I recognize sound as existing in the way that

I lay out the paint, my surfaces, and so forth. A neighbor of ours in Mill Valley was Lucien Bloch Dimitroff, who was the daughter of Ernest Bloch, the composer. And at one time, Steve Dimitroff showed some of my paintings to Ernest Bloch, who immediately said, "This is my music. If I could put my music into paint, this is the way it would look."

PHILLIPS

Ernest Bloch was a composer who was living in San Francisco?

MULLICAN

He was teaching at Berkeley. So he too: a number of my paintings to his class at Berkeley, and showed them what his music would look like. [laughs]

PHILLIPS

Oh , that's marvelous .

MULLICAN

It really was. It was a very important clue, I think, to what I was doing, I didn't meet the man, of course. And I remember that this was a growth time, seeing the beginnings of Dave Brubeck, and all the jazz people that were coming through town--Art Tatum and Billie Holiday, and the bebop and the bebop groups that were performing at that time.

PHILLIPS

But did you decide to leave San Francisco?

MULLICAN

Yes. Time there had run out. The adventure in Mill Valley was finished. I was going to drive Luchita and her son, Daniel, ten years old, to New Orleans, and she was then going on to Venezuela. Paalen went to Mexico. We didn't get any further than Santa Fe. [laughs]

PHILLIPS

You and Luchita? She never went to Venezuela.

MULLICAN

No, she never went to Venezuela.

PHILLIPS

You stopped in Santa Fe. And then did you drive back to Los Angeles?

MULLICAN

She decided that she wanted to come to Los Angeles By that time, one of her closest friends was Giles Healey and his wife. They had known each other in Mexico; they had visited also in Mill Valley and they encouraged her to come to Southern California. So she did.

PHILLIPS

Well, shall we stop?

PHILLIPS

(JANUARY 23, 1976) Do you want to add anything about San Francisco?

MULLICAN

Well, not at this time. There may be some things that need to be clarified later after I begin to work with the transcription.

PHILLIPS

I had one general question. You talked about your first one-man show at the San Francisco Museum of Art, and it seemed like a really marvelous experience for you at that time. And I wonder what you feel about the role of the museum and museum directors and curators with younger artists and with artists in general, in terms of encouragement and support.

MULLICAN

Yes, well, of course, I feel that it's very important. And it seems a shame that there are not more possibilities for young people to show. But of course at the same time I can understand that today there are ever so many more who are seeking exhibitions, and so many more who should be shown. So it becomes perhaps difficult to choose who is really deserving and who is not. Now, even though I seem to be quite a distance away from the scene in New York, I do understand that the Whitney Museum has one room where they constantly show young artists. Is that not right?

PHILLIPS

Yes, I think that it's that downstairs room.

MULLICAN

Because I know that a lot of young people from the Los Angeles area have shown there, so there's always some kind of activity there. And I think that's very good. No, I think that the museum certainly has a role and a responsibility toward young artists. And I know that in my case, as you said, it was a very fulfilling experience.

PHILLIPS

It in a way validated you as an artist.

MULLICAN

Yes, I think at that very age very definitely.

PHILLIPS

Well, let's talk about your move to Los Angeles in 1951 and what happened to you when you moved here. Where did you go to live?

MULLICAN

Well, after I left San Francisco, and Luchita and I had the summer in Santa Fe, I went on to Oklahoma and took care of some responsibilities there, in that I had three--was it four?--exhibitions over the state, a traveling show that went from the Philbrook Museum in Tulsa to Oklahoma City, to the Oklahoma City Art Center, then to the university at Norman, where I had been enrolled at school, and then the exhibition finally came to my hometown of Chickasha.

PHILLIPS

Who set that exhibition up?

MULLICAN

Well, there's a small college, a state college in the town. It was formerly a women's college and now it's a liberal arts college. And they had a very small art gallery and a small art department, so that was easily arranged. And it was a bright day for me and my parents and old friends and old schoolteachers, people I hadn't seen. They had a chance to catch up with what had happened to me as an artist since I'd left for the war. And I think at that same time I was preparing for a second exhibition at the Willard Gallery in New York. After the Dynaton show I had painted, and I was painting during that time in my studio in San Francisco, so I had a lot of new works to send to New York. And this time, I went along with the work. So this was my first experience of having a show in New York City and actually being there. And even though I had been in New York during the war and had been to the museums, and so forth, this gave me another opportunity to not only go to the museums, but to become acquainted with the whole commercial aspect of what was happening in New York City.

PHILLIPS

Tell me more about your reactions to showing in New York.

MULLICAN

Well, at this time, Marian had her gallery on Fifty-seventh Street, and it was a very small gallery. She had an opening party, and I met a lot of her friends and the artists who were showing in her gallery. I had the opportunity of

meeting [Lyonel] Feininger and [Mark] Tobey, David Smith, and others who came into the gallery quite regularly during the hours that I was there.

PHILLIPS

Then you decided to go back to Los Angeles.

MULLICAN

In the spring, sometime. And by that time Luchita had found a house in Santa Monica, and our son had been born. So our life together really was off to a big start. And in a new place, the excitement of Los Angeles was the way we wanted it. But it turns out that the next few years were quite a struggle, even though I found a gallery, Paul Kantor, and began to meet friends and other artists.

PHILLIPS

How did you find the Paul Kantor gallery? How did it work out?

MULLICAN

Well, I'm trying to remember. I guess it must have been through Paul and Mary Wescher. Luchita, shortly after her arrival in Los Angeles, made contact with Mary. And I'm pretty sure that it was through Paul and Mary, who in turn introduced us to James and Barbara Byrnes, and through them we met the Kantors, and also artists as Ynez Johnston and Jules Engel, and many people are friends we still have today.

PHILLIPS

As you look back on it, what was your impression of the Los Angeles scene when you got here, in contrast to San Francisco?

MULLICAN

Well, the one impression one usually had was that everything was very scattered, and I'm not sure that that situation is any better today -- perhaps somewhat. Things were spread out much too far to really get together. In San Francisco, there seemed to be a kind of meeting or nucleus around the San Francisco Museum of Art and in certain areas of San Francisco, even though people lived on the peninsula or in Marin County or wherever--Oakland--there seemed to be these places where one met and. . . .

PHILLIPS

Have you found anything comparable to that in Los Angeles in the twenty years or so you've been here?

MULLICAN

Well, I'm not going to say that it doesn't exist, because perhaps it does. It's just that I have not been a part of it. Now I do know that the Venice area has become very popular, and there are many studios down there. And even I eventually had a studio in Venice. But I was never really part of the social scene. And my other contacts have all come through the university, and through students, and through friends.

PHILLIPS

You gather that things are more cohesive in New York, too.

MULLICAN

Well, I have that feeling, certainly.

PHILLIPS

And do you think that Los Angeles really suffers as a consequence, as an art center? I mean, that has been said a lot, and people have written about it and spoken about it.

MULLICAN

Well, it shouldn't. That's one thing I feel. Now just why it has existed this way I really don't know. But it could be better and should be better, and I think it seems just as something really gets going or gets started, then it's over with. I guess I really refer to the recent happenings at the Pasadena Museum, which certainly everyone had great hopes for. But everything does not necessarily have to revolve around the museum, and I think I've been encouraged by what's happening in some of the galleries, and in private studios, and the new LAICA [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art] gallery in Century City. None of that existed during the fifties, when I arrived. All we had then was the County Museum.

PHILLIPS

Tell me what did exist.

MULLICAN

Well, as far as I remember, there was Los Angeles County Museum in the Museum of Natural History complex in Exposition Park, which gave us, I think, some extraordinary shows. Also at that time in the museum there was something called the Art Annual, which was a juried exhibition in which everyone sought to be included. I think that those were quite lively, and I believe today that there are such exhibitions happening in Long Beach, and maybe other places, but it was not all that central, or didn't have the stamp upon it, as the Los Angeles County Museum Annual.

PHILLIPS

What were the shows that you remember at the County Museum?

MULLICAN

I'm not certain of dates, but I guess that's not important. But there were great exhibitions. There was a Miro and a [Jean] Dubuffet show. Those two are the ones that come readily to mind.

PHILLIPS

I gather you think that it's very important for artists for there to be a good museum that brings worthwhile shows.

MULLICAN

Oh, I think so, yes. Oh, very definitely so. And one that can step out and really be active in contemporary terms, and not just as a massive vault for the past.

PHILLIPS

What do you think about the role of the County Museum in recent years?

MULLICAN

Well, I guess I do wish that there had been more exhibitions of local painters. I think there were one or two, and I had hopes that this would continue. Unfortunately it hasn't. And it seems to me that within that vast complex, there could be a gallery where this could happen. It's been relegated to the [Art] Rental Gallery, which in itself has become a kind of commercial gallery, with changing shows, with some editorializing ideas to pull the shows together. As far as local artists, they've been pushed aside, and they have, in that sense, probably had very little interest in what's going on.

PHILLIPS

And one of the things, too, that seems to happen is if they do have a show of local artists at the County Museum, it's apt to be younger artists.

MULLICAN

That's right. As it is set up, they're out seeking the newest and the latest, and I think we've overlooked a great many older painters, who by this time have accumulated a vast and extraordinary body of work that just cannot be seen.

PHILLIPS

How do you feel about the way middle-aged artists are treated in this country? [laughter]

MULLICAN

Well, I haven't really given it that much thought. I suppose pretty well. Those that have worked hard and have had some kind of vision, I think, have been rewarded. During the fifties there seemed to be more of this surge, I guess you would say, an interest; maybe I feel now that a lot of it has leveled off. Maybe it was because I was younger, but there was an excitement in what was happening. Speaking for myself, I was during that time invited to many exhibitions that were taking place: the Carnegie International; and the University of Illinois had a yearly, or maybe it was every other year; and there was a Whitney Annual--there still is, but I haven't been included in one for some time. There was a lot happening across the country. And maybe it still is and I'm just not aware of it, or I'm not included in it, and therefore I've not given it that much attention. But I think it was certainly exciting for me in the fifties to have been included in so much. Speaking of things that happened, I was included in the series in *Art News*. What was it called?

PHILLIPS

"Somebody Paints a Painting"?

MULLICAN

That's right.

PHILLIPS

"Lee Mullican Paints a Painting."

MULLICAN

That's right, and Jules Langsner wrote that article for me, so that was a push forward.

PHILLIPS

Did you see much of Jules Langsner?

MULLICAN

Yes, I think I did. I remember it was in the early sixties. I had a one-man show at the Pasadena [Art] Museum, and I remember him being excited and going around the exhibition with me. We talked a great deal about it and I think he eventually wrote it up for *Art News*, or some magazine that he was covering. Yes, he was always friendly, and very knowledgeable, of course, and a pleasure to be with, and it was sad that we lost him.

PHILLIPS

Who were some of the other people you felt close to in the fifties and sixties who were influential?

MULLICAN

Well, in the fifties, if I think of maybe one painter who was more influential and helpful--not particularly as far as my work goes, but just as a human being, just as someone to know, and who I felt really was interested in me as a person, and also in my work--this was Rico Lebrun, who I'm sure was very much responsible in getting me my Guggenheim Fellowship that I had in 1959, I guess it was, which was spent in Europe. And Rico and his wife, Constance, happened to be in Italy that same year that we were there, so I saw a great deal of them. And even though we had different ideas and different visions . . .

PHILLIPS

Yes, your painting is quite disparate.

MULLICAN

Yes, right. He was very open-minded, as was I. I remember being particularly excited when he chose to buy a drawing of mine; I couldn't imagine it happening. [laughs] And then after we returned to California, we saw each other up until the time of his death. This was in the early sixties. I would go to his studio on San Vicente and spend a great deal of time with him. This vast place filled with marvelous works, everything from his Goya studies to his most recent paintings, which had to do with burned tree trunks which were treated in a rather abstract way. And I remember that we were talking and discussing Zen, and I had a feeling that perhaps I'd had a little influence, I don't know. [laughs] Yes, he was certainly very influential at that time. Before his death he and his wife, Constance, built a home and a studio near Zuma. Then, it was sad he was not able to use it. Later, Constance suggested I might like to work there. I did many major canvases there during those few months, commuting from Santa Monica. It was a refreshing change of pace from my Venice studio.

PHILLIPS

When you first came here did you run into a lot of influence of the Lebrun-Warshaw school that emphasized a very 'realistic depiction of things?

MULLICAN

No, I really didn't. Not outside of Rico himself. I later met Warshaw; in fact, he happened to be in Rome also at that time, '59, just for a short period. But no. I kept feeling that all of that happened before I arrived, I mean the whole Jepson school. I was never a part of that. No, I worked out of my studio, and showed at the Kantor gallery, and made marvelous friends. Such as one day

I met Joann and Gifford Phillips [laughter] and was delighted when they bought a painting of mine. And Paul and Mary Wescher, and the friends that they had in the movie world --Albert Lewin and his wife, collectors, who eventually moved to New York. Those were festive days, the joy of the sculptor Cornelia Runyon and her home in Malibu. Writers as James Agee and our dear friend Maritta Wolfe. The actor, David Manners. And mad Iris Tree who bought a painting she couldn't afford during the days in Mill Valley. And eventually, the arrival of Emerson and Dina Woelffer, and there was Amalia Schulthess, Ynez Johnston, John Berry. Even so I have a feeling that it was a kind of closed circuit, really, but a rich one, as much as I wanted to participate in.

PHILLIPS

As you look back on it, how do you feel about your work during the early fifties as contrasted to later on in the fifties? As you look back on it, do you see quite a bit of change having gone on?

MULLICAN

Well, I think so. I think that in the early fifties, the work was more abstract in a purer sense, perhaps in a purer sense of mind.- I have a feeling that later, and this began before I went to Europe--certainly I was influenced by it once I got to Europe, where a kind of image began to appear, which was closer to actual human or animal form. And of course I was very impressed with what I saw in Europe, and living in Rome I was very influenced by what I found in museums, the architecture, sculpture, and so forth. So I think that had some influence. And through-out all of my work I have had a feeling that there's always been this battle, back and forth, between a sense of pure abstraction and a need for some kind of image, whether it is--and it quite often is -- humorous, satiric ... I have a feeling that in the end, the more pure, minimal aspects of abstraction are going to win out. I hope so. [laughter] I don't feel that there's that battle quite so much any more. I would give in to all kinds of temptations and impressions, always knowing that, well , I'll pass through this very quickly, and if I don't take advantage of it now, it'll be lost. So I did it, and a lot of that work has been put away. A lot of it existed only in drawings, or oils on paper. Quite often even some major oils have this decadent aspect. But I was never strong enough, I guess, to completely deny it. And I think things will be changing now, although I also thought that once I returned from Europe, I had given up the image and was back into a purer state of mind and being, considering the paintings that I began in Los Angeles after we returned. After we returned in '60, we lived in upstate New York through a winter, and I actually didn't do much work there, even though I eventually had an exhibition with Marian Willard, primarily of things I had completed in Rome. Once I was back in California, I showed with Rose Rabow

in San Francisco. I had previously shown there with her husband. (Alexander Rabow Gallery)

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PHILLIPS

Let me ask you what you were just talking about. You referred to the whimsical, satirical, comic strain in your work that from time to time comes up and seemed to come up quite a bit after the stay in Rome.

MULLICAN

Well, even before Rome, Probably there were aspects of this in very early drawings, and where it came from I really can't say.

PHILLIPS

And these were the drawings that were somewhat more realistic and depicted things?

MULLICAN

Well, they were realistic, even though they were mostly involved with shape and pattern. I remember doing a whole series of masks and heads. I guess I've always been more interested in the head than in a full figure. And I did a great deal of it, as I say, after returning from Europe, In my studio in Rome, curiously enough, I worked mostly in black and white on paper. There was a marvelous fabriano paper there, and also by this time the first acrylics were available. And so I worked mostly in black and white acrylic on paper. And it seemed to be easier, I guess. I suppose if canvas and stretcher bars and paint and all of that had been more easily available, I may have worked on canvas more, I worked mostly on paper, and some very large paper, I mean, you know, like ten, twelve feet long, and four or five feet high. A lot of these large drawings I had mounted on cloth. I had an exhibition of these in Rome. While I was there, through Marian Willard I met Frances McCann , who had a gallery on the island in the Tiber River, a very beautiful gallery in an ancient building. She had set up the Rome- New York Art Foundation and put on maybe three exhibitions a year. And I eventually had an exhibition with her during the summer of 19 . . . let's see, it was the year of the Olympics; well, it was 1960. I opened the exhibition, and then I was gone all summer, because Luchita and Matthew and I took a camping tour of Europe. What I showed was all black and white, and it gave me exposure in Rome, and by that time I had met interesting people and liked the city very much. I was, however, anxious to leave once we were back in the fall. I felt the time had run out. I felt that there was really nothing very contemporary happening there, and I was anxious to get back to New York and then California. Prospects of that looked very good.

PHILLIPS

But you went to New York when you came back.

MULLICAN

Yes, when we came back, we stopped in New York and found a farm near Croton Falls, and we lived there through the winter.

PHILLIPS

Tell me how you feel about New York as a place to live and make art as contrasted to Los Angeles. And are you sorry that you didn't do that, at one period--actually live in the city?

MULLICAN

Well, I've always wanted to live in the city. I think it's unfortunate that that year that we were there we chose to live in the country, but that just seemed to be the easiest thing to do. It was hard to find anything, a studio or apartment, in the city. Matthew had to go to school, and so it just seemed like a proper thing to do, to live out in the country. After all, it was only an hour, hour and a half into New York City. But the one thing we discovered was that nobody wanted to come even that hour or hour and a half to see us. I felt countless times when I tried to get even Marian Willard to come out and see what I was doing, she would always say, "Oh, that's too far away." [laughter] So we were really isolated; I mean, we might as well have been living in California, an hour and a half out of New York. So I've never really had the experience of living in the city, but I've always found it an exciting place. Just to drive in, you began to feel this great pulse begin to beat, you know. It was always exciting. There was always something to see in the galleries and in the museums; and theater, we loved the theater. I can imagine that today. New York would be ray first choice; if I were a young person I would definitely be in New York.

PHILLIPS

Do you feel that painters and artists living in New York get a different kind of recognition than painters and artists living in Los Angeles?

MULLICAN

I have a feeling that the possibilities are much greater. And there was a time when, I know, we in Los Angeles thought it was changing; suddenly there was a great deal of recognition of what was happening here, and I. think we felt that more would come of that than actually did. Yes, I'm sure that it helps to be in New York City, or even have contacts there. It's easier now; it's easier to fly in and out, and there's a lot of artists moving back and forth,

so that even if one chooses to work here, the possibilities of showing in New York are still very good, I think.

PHILLIPS

How often do you show at Marian Willard's?

MULLICAN

Well, I haven't had a show with her since 1967, and I think this has been out of mutual choice. Not very much ever really happened with my exhibitions in New York, although there were exceptions, like my first exhibition in her gallery on Fifty-sixth Street, when Duncan Phillips came in and bought a painting, and that was certainly a memorable moment. And Alfred Barr purchased one of my constructions for the Museum of Modern Art, and other museums bought things out of the gallery. But on the whole I felt that there was nothing happening for me there. I felt that perhaps I would wait until times got better, or, when I felt really strong about showing in New York, then I would. And Marian, I think, felt the same way. When I was ready again, I would show there. So it just hasn't happened as yet, since 1967.

PHILLIPS

When did you begin teaching at UCLA?

MULLICAN

I taught there in [University] Extension in '59. I had applied for a position on the regular staff, but I guess they felt that I was not quite ready for that, so they gave me this class in extension, which I enjoyed, and would have continued, except that I received the Guggenheim and had this chance to go to Europe. When we came back, we were spending that winter in New York. I received word from use offering me a position there during their summer session, which I accepted, and taught there that summer. They were going to offer me a position that fall. However, by this time, I had been talking with Fred Wight, who said that they were very interested in me at UCLA, and fortunately that worked out. I've been there since 1962.

PHILLIPS

Tell me a little more about the Paul Kantor Gallery, when you came here and were first showing there, and about your relationship with Paul and Jo, and how you reacted to them.

MULLICAN

At that time, I guess the Kantor Gallery and Landau [Gallery] were the two important galleries that I remember.

PHILLIPS

The two leading modern galleries . . .

MULLICAN

They were the two leading--well, Frank Perls [Gallery] , of course.

PHILLIPS

Yes, but he wasn't showing contemporary . . .

MULLICAN

He was not showing continual contemporary exhibitions . . .

PHILLIPS

He did show Warshaw and Lebrun, but that was all, as I remember.

MULLICAN

Well, and [William] Brice and [Sam] Amato. He had occasional shows. But it was Kantor and Landau that I remember, at least in those early days of the fifties, who were putting on continuous shows. And I was associated with the Kantor Gallery, and quite a bit happened for me there. I met marvelous people, of course, as I've already mentioned: Ynez Johnston and Jules Engel and the Woelffers. And I remember a David Park exhibition, when he was there, and Diebenkorn shows--whose work, by that time, I was very impressed with. The atmosphere in the gallery, I thought, was friendly, and perhaps a little antagonistic at the same time. I mean, you had the feeling that everything was kind of hands-off, I mean, as far as the public was concerned. And I had several shows there.

PHILLIPS

You mean, Paul was rather ambivalent about the public is what you're saying.

MULLICAN

That's right; that's right.

PHILLIPS

And he was showing these things but being a little surly to people that came in if they didn't know enough.

MULLICAN

Exactly, He didn't like them to touch the frame or get too close to the painting. [laughs]

PHILLIPS

How do you remember Jo Kantor?

MULLICAN

Well, I remember her as really running the place, actually, and she was always full of fun, and it was always a joyful experience to walk in when she was there. Yes, it was a center of things, I have a feeling.

PHILLIPS

Did you feel that Paul really understood your work?

MULLICAN

No, I didn't. I don't believe that he did. And after he moved into Beverly Hills, I know that he didn't. I really didn't get along too well with him, and the time finally came when he was too busy to even see me, so I said I don't really need to be here. So that's the way we left; I just pulled out.

PHILLIPS

He was beginning to change by then.

MULLICAN

Yes, yes.

PHILLIPS

Becoming very commercial.

MULLICAN

Yes, he was not interested in a stable of artists, certainly. He was only interested, by that time, in European art. So I guess it was a natural thing to have happened. He wanted it his way, and why shouldn't he? So once that happened, I began to look back and say, well, I wonder how interested he was in my work even in the beginning. Jo really ran the gallery; he had another job. In fact he provided us with dog and cat food, I remember, [laughs] for a number of years, because he was working in Long Beach .

PHILLIPS

At the tuna cannery.

MULLICAN

... he organized a union something . . .

PHILLIPS

He published the newspaper for the tuna workers' union, or something.

MULLICAN

We had lots of cat food. But those were difficult times, you know. And it was hard to sell paintings. So one really relished a sale every time it happened.

PHILLIPS

And they didn't sell for very much either.

MULLICAN

No, that's true. It was a problem everywhere, because we were dealing in something that was new, probably misunderstood, if understood at all. I remember Jean Varda, in San Francisco, had a story of a gallery owner who, when a client came in, or anyone walked in and saw a painting they liked, would say, "Oh, yes, I like that painting, but I don't know; it's just not quite what I'm looking for." The gallery owner would take this potential client down into the basement where there was a second gallery. He would push a button, and out of a chute would come the same painting seen upstairs as a coffee table, and it was immediately sold. [laughter] So I guess we were thinking of ways to turn our paintings into coffee tables, so that someone would buy them. But we were above that. It had to be taken as we presented, or not at all.

PHILLIPS

Had Henry Seldis arrived in town by then?

MULLICAN

I don't remember what date he arrived. No, he was in Santa Barbara at that time. I met him in Santa Barbara. The Santa Barbara Museum put on a Pacific Coast Biennial, and I won one of the purchasing awards; and I remember meeting him at that time. And then, of course, after he began to work for the [*Los Angeles*] *Times* . . .

PHILLIPS

Was he someone with whom you could talk about art?

MULLICAN

Oh, yes, he has been very responsive to my work. And of course we have been friends, and, yes, I feel he's done a good job.

PHILLIPS

You're going to tell me some more about your trip to Europe.

MULLICAN

Well, it was exciting living in Rome and seeing every gallery, every museum, taking trips to Florence and Padua and Venice, so forth.

PHILLIPS

And you had never seen any of these places before?

MULLICAN

I'd never seen any of this. I'd never really had much interest in it. I mean, one can attend art history lectures and one can see thousands of slides, but for it to really be meaningful, one has to be right on the spot and see it and smell it and touch it, and I was very excited by all of this. And when summer came, we decided that we would take this camping trip through Spain and through France, which we did, and eventually we ended up in London, coming back through Paris. We decided that we would try and visit as many prehistoric sites as we could, beginning in Altamira, but before that we had spent a week in the Prado and also at the museums in Barcelona, and before that through the south of France, Provence, and the Picasso museum in Antibes, and the Matisse Chapel. All of that was very influential, and I swore at the time that I was coming back within two years; we've never made it. At that time the Lascaux Caves were open, so we were able to visit there. And sites in Brittany, cathedrals, museums in Paris. So that year was my one real excursion into the past. Europe and the past. I've always felt very French. Well, of course, my beginnings in art were really from the French. And so I've always felt very strongly a part of that. In another life I must have been . . .

PHILLIPS

Your father's probably really Irish, isn't he? [laughter] What about your mother? Was she Irish, too?

MULLICAN

No. Well, my father and my mother both had been in this country for three or four generations, and I suppose there must have been a grandfather, great-great-grandfather who was from Ireland, yes. But we never really found out. Didn't get to Ireland; we didn't go that far. We camped on the outskirts of London, in Crystal Palace Park, and saw the museums there, and during the three months that we were camping, we rarely stayed in something other than our tent--three nights, four nights, maybe. It was a glorious way to see that part of the world. Once in Italy, we had hoped to go back to England, but we had run out of funds. The grant was finished, and I was anxious to get back to the states, and start life again somewhere, probably teaching, and that's what happened. I felt that year in Europe was a very important year.

PHILLIPS

You probably didn't see a direct relationship between that year and your work, but rather felt that you'd grown a great deal from those experiences.

MULLICAN

Yes. I don't feel that it had any great influence on my work. I think whatever had been founded in my work had been founded much before I got there. As I say, there was this artifice of something in grotesque heads, and mythology, that one comes across living in Rome, and that had a very definite influence. In fact, it was quite often hard for me to stay in my studio and work when I really wanted to be out walking -- through the Forum, through the streets, experiencing the past. We had originally intended to spend that Guggenheim grant in New York City, but I had read about the artists' life in Rome at that time, and was aware of a few Italian painters, contemporary painters, and the Lebruns were going to be there. So Rome seemed the place to go--reasoning , well, we could go to New York City any time, but to have this opportunity to go as far as Italy seemed the thing to do, so we did. But I do feel that everything in ray life as a painter had been formed through those actions which I had already discovered in my work, things already there. And since that time, my concepts have not been altered that much.

PHILLIPS

When you talk about the things that prompt your work having already been formed, what do you mean?

MULLICAN

Well, the whole concept of a personal vision of the world, of the creation of a new kind of world, which is based upon the one we all know. But there is a degree in that, of reality, of irreality that's very important to me. And just as we began to start these talks, and I was thinking about it, when I mentioned the marble head in the Corcoran, which was veiled with this cloth: seeing reality through, behind, and beyond something important which was pulled down in front of it. And I hadn't thought of this for a long time. I feel that's the way I operate. I also remember having an image, back in the forties, where I felt that I was truly working very closely with the essence of nature, and I described it as pulling a sack down over your head, kind of "essence sack" into which one submerged oneself and took out the important things, and therefore they became very personal. So that has continued with many different variations: sometimes more abstract, sometimes very simple, sometimes very complicated, through different range of palette, different kinds of textural, sculptural ideas, and at all times being involved with the contemplative aspect of painting. It's important also to mention [that] one day, Alan Watts appeared in Santa Monica. I'd met him first in San Francisco, back in the late forties, and he was a very good friend of the Onslow- Fords, so I spent a great deal of time with him. He was giving a lecture in Los Angeles which I attended. And during the evening, someone began to read *Zen in the Art of Archery* and as this was being read to me, I began to

realize that this person was really talking about painting, not archery. That this was the way I operated as a painter, so completely, that I was just flabbergasted. And from that moment on, I became interested in Zen and read a great deal about it, and the whole automatic process, and how one can hit that target in the middle of the night. And that had a great deal of influence on my work, as far as process goes, thought processes. I've never been completely saturated with Zen thought and ideas, but that was a very important moment.

PHILLIPS

In other words, you became conscious in your own work of just letting it happen.

MULLICAN

I realized what I'd been doing. It was set forth to me through Zen. And by this time, Gordon himself had become very steeped in it, and we spent a great deal of time talking about that. And I began to read Suzuki and other Zen writers. It was really the meaningful action to me. I mean, action painting was going on in New York, and to a certain extent I had always used it in my work, and now this gave meaning to that action, which before I had perhaps just been doing very naturally, unconsciously. And I was suddenly aware that these personal thoughts really existed elsewhere.

PHILLIPS

How do you set up a situation in which to work?

MULLICAN

Well, you mean as far as the studio space?

PHILLIPS

And painting. How do you get started?

MULLICAN

I was fortunate to have found a great studio in Venice in the early sixties, very large space. I operate best in a very large space. And I work on a table. I work with the canvas laid horizontal, and I proceed directly on that horizontal surface--which is not to say that there are times when it must be seen vertically; and of course, it's a constant shift back and forth between the horizontal and the vertical. But I find that in my technique, and the way I handle things, I can do better working flat on the table. And one should have quiet, although quite often I have music. It's important to have one's own surroundings, one's own things around, and to be familiar with a space, so that when one comes in the door, everything is there. Our house has always

been too small to work in, so I've always really had to work in a separate place, although I do a great deal of drawing at home and always have.

PHILLIPS

When you start on a canvas, on a painting, do you have anything in mind?

MULLICAN

Well, one has all of one's experience present, and what you choose to use of that is, I guess, the crucial question. What I usually have in mind concerns the canvases that immediately preceded the one I'm working on, so that one can continue ideas, continue thoughts. But as I say they're all variations on maybe just one or two ideas. But on the whole I like to keep myself clear and clean and open, and therefore do not always tie myself down. If I've worked very tightly on a great number of paintings over a year, I may suddenly want to do something which is free, then the paint is spilled out in puddles and moved around and painted back into and worked over. Things are in flux, really, from tight to open, to being free and being confined.

PHILLIPS

Do you sometimes evaluate your own work, when a whole series of things are done?

MULLICAN

Yes, I do, and perhaps that's not the best thing. I suppose we all do. I try not to do it too immediately. In other words, I very seldom throw anything away. Certainly I do not throw anything away until after I've had it for at least a few years--to go back to, because I do know that things that I gave little interest to, years later I may look upon with amazement and find things that I had completely forgotten, things of joy, or maybe things of disgust. But even so, it was always worth returning to. So I'm not so critical as to immediately destroy anything, and that's why I have such a storage problem. [laughter] But it's all there, and I feel it's all a record of where I've been, what I've seen, and so forth.

PHILLIPS

Do you still have that studio in Venice?

MULLICAN

No, I lost the studio quite a few years back now. The building was sold, and the new owner wanted me out, and since that time I've had a faculty studio in the art building at UCLA.

PHILLIPS

How does that work?

MULLICAN

Well, it's satisfactory. There's the good, and then there's the bad. The good is that first of all, it's a part of my job; it's gratis. Leaving class, or arriving early before class, or before seeing students, it's easy to go in and work; otherwise I would have had to have been commuting to Venice and back the way I did for many years. So being right on the spot, where my job is, is good. At the same time it's hard to get in and out without running into students or being stopped about something in the office. I find the best times are very early in the morning, maybe Saturday or Sunday morning, or during the breaks. I very much enjoy going there. It's very quiet; it's a great place.

PHILLIPS

How often do you paint?

MULLICAN

When I'm really working well, I try to get in three, four, five hours at a time every day. And I usually do not do much on Saturdays or Sundays, unless it's very early, because that's when I'm with my family. But if I had free time and was not interrupted by classes, I would be there every day from nine to one, or something like that. I find that I cannot work longer than four or five hours because it's a very tedious process, the way I paint--I mean, if I'm really into it, quite a bit of eyestrain. I also find that after that length of time, I'm not as fresh. And I'm more tempted to do things to hurry along, and quite often paintings will suddenly take a turn or a twist and go someplace that I really didn't intend them to go. I still work with these automatic processes, so that's what quite often happens.

PHILLIPS

I imagine that's quite tiring.

MULLICAN

If I get overtired then, as I say, I try to hurry something along, and suddenly I'm pouring paint rather than applying it, so that I try not to work any longer than that.

PHILLIPS

One thing we haven't talked about in quite a while is the influence of the Southwest on you, and I know that in the last couple of years, you've been spending a lot of time in Taos.

MULLICAN

We would go there every summer for the last five or six years, usually on the way to Oklahoma to visit with my parents. So eventually we knew we had to

buy land and build a house in Taos, because that was a part of our lives. I've always been a part of that country; that country's been a part of me. In fact, the whole West-- I really consider myself to be a western painter, even though I don't deal with cowboys and Indians directly, [laughter] But I'm very responsive to that landscape, and to the sky.

PHILLIPS

I think it's very evident in quite a bit of your work. Not all of it, but some of it.

MULLICAN

And if I've been influenced by the Indian, it is hoping that my responses to nature will have been similar to their responses to nature, so that if they look at a rainbow and set it down in a sand painting, I can look at the rainbow and use it the way I want in a painting. But there have been times when I have directly copied kachina motifs because I wanted to very directly put this response in realistic terms. Just how far I've succeeded with that I don't know. I suddenly am aware that the mudheads I'm drawing are really not looking like mudheads anymore; they're beginning to look like something from outer space, or really from my own inner space, I guess. Yes, that whole Indian influence has been a very strong one. I feel, as of today, that it's beginning to wane considerably.

PHILLIPS

I recall that the paintings, oh, about five years ago or so, when you were showing the series at Jodi Scully . .

MULLICAN

Yes, that's what I was speaking of. I showed drawings and I also showed paintings, but the drawings were from this Tamaha series. The paintings, I feel very good about. They were very ritual in nature, and rather clean, minimal ideas. Before that I was all involved in surface, in surface texture. In those paintings, I felt that I opened up a new kind of space. And since that time I fluctuate back and forth between highly textured, involved surfaces and areas of pure color. I probably will have another exhibition like that.

PHILLIPS

Let's see, you had two shows at the Jodi Scully Gallery?

MULLICAN

No, I only showed there once.

PHILLIPS

Do you remember what year that was? About five, four years ago?

MULLICAN

Nineteen seventy-one, as I remember. Before that I had several exhibitions with the Silvan Simone Gallery in West Los Angeles. We met through Rico Lebrun. Another important exhibition was arranged by Jack Hooper at Mount St. Mary's [College], Los Angeles. That was 1964, as I remember. I showed major canvases completed during my University of California Institute of Creative Arts grant the year before. We haven't covered the year that I was in Chile, which was 1968. We came back, and then I had my exhibition at the art galleries at UCLA in '69. Then I spent the summer in Santa Fe, so it must have been '71, my showing at Scully.

PHILLIPS

You went on the University of California exchange program to Chile.

MULLICAN

That's right.

PHILLIPS

Santiago .

MULLICAN

We spent the year there in 1968. It was set up between the two universities, the University of California and the university there.

PHILLIPS

You were teaching painting at the university there?

MULLICAN

I was sent down as an artist in residence. This was through a grant by the Ford Foundation. And there had been a professor at UCLA in art history, and Fred Wight, at that time chairman, thought it would be very good if Luchita and I were a part of the exchange. During Fred's time at UCLA he was always kind and helpful to me as chairman of the art department and especially as director of the art gallery at the time of my exhibition there in 1969. Anyway, Chile. I said, "My Spanish is very poor. If I can be an artist in residence, and participate and paint, I'd be pleased to go." And we did go. We stopped in Venezuela on the way to visit Luchita's family. Then we were a year in Santiago, and I must say I spent most of that year trying to find a studio and my place in the university, because no one knew ...

PHILLIPS

. . . the room , . .

MULLICAN

. . . not only the room, but my position, [laughter] It was incredible. No one seemed to know. The university was going through terrible times. All the faculty had resigned. Communists had taken over Belles Artes. So consequently, I was kept--being put off. You know, saying, "Well, we just have to wait. Eventually you'll find a studio." I couldn't find a studio for months and months; we looked. I worked out of the house we were given. It never really happened. I never really had anything to do with the university. I hoped that I would. But once I did make contact, I found that they were very antagonistic to me, as a North American, as part of the Ford Foundation. And my abstract art. Of course, they were into something very different.

PHILLIPS

Social realism.

MULLICAN

Of course. It isn't that I was so anti-Communist as they were anti-American.

MULLICAN

My year there ended with an exhibition of my work at the museum, but not sponsored by the university at all. But as I think back I do feel that my time there meant something, not only to me but I think to the art scene in Santiago. And certainly I regret what's happened to the country in the meantime; it's a beautiful place, and it was a very exciting year. Coming back, we stopped in Peru, saw Machu Picchu and Ecuador. So it's good, every few years, to get out and see the rest of the world. I think it's very meaningful.

PHILLIPS

By this time, you'd had John Lee--when was he born?

MULLICAN

Yes, he was born in '62. And that was at the time that I began teaching at UCLA. We were in Chile during 1968.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: IV, Side Two (JANUARY 23, 1976)

PHILLIPS

We were talking about John Lee on the last tape. One thing you haven't spoken too much about, which I know means a great deal to you, is your family and your very close relationship with Matthew and John Lee. I know how much they mean to you.

MULLICAN

Matthew, of course, has grown up to be a very interesting young artist, and I'm very interested in what he's doing. He's into a whole different world than mine. He's not a painter; he's not interested in painting. He's interested in the whole conceptual-performance scene, and is at the present time living in New York City, and will probably have a show there this spring. Yes, the family has always meant a great deal to me. I think it's the one thing that I knew that I wanted to have, because I can remember very lonely days in San Francisco as far as my personal life went.

PHILLIPS

You came from a very strong and close family yourself, didn't you?

MULLICAN

Yes, I did, and I kept up with it and still do, even though both my parents are dead now.

PHILLIPS

But it was really only recently that they died.

MULLICAN

Yes, in the last two years.

PHILLIPS

And I know that you've always visited them and been, in a way, close with them, even though I'm sure that . . .

MULLICAN

Well, I could have never continued to live there. I feel that Oklahoma is a strong part of me, and I enjoy visiting there, but it's too isolated. And if I'm going to be isolated, I'd rather be isolated in Taos. [laughter] So the scene in Oklahoma is kind of finished. I've been recognized there; I've had exhibitions there and was honored a few years back--I guess it was the fiftieth anniversary of statehood [that] the Oklahoma Art Center gave me a one-man show. And so I'm known there, but I feel my life has really been in California.

PHILLIPS

And you also haven't said too much about Luchita, who's really, quite remarkable.

MULLICAN

She's also a painter. She studied at the Art Students' League in New York City. She married very early, to a Chilean, and I've also not mentioned her son Daniel, who I met in Mexico and who eventually was a part of the time in Mill Valley . . .

PHILLIPS

Part of your family.

MULLICAN

Yes, and became my son. And [we] saw him through difficult years, at Harvard, and getting an education, and becoming a very responsible human being--which he is, of course, to this very day. There has been this close family. I have always put it almost first, even above my painting at times. That seems to be the thing that I've really held on to. But Luchita has showed at the Kantor Gallery in the early fifties. Then [she] became very involved with the children and so has not been able to do as much work as she would have liked, and only in the last few years has she established her own studio and exhibited. And I feel that I owe her a great deal as to what has happened to me.

PHILLIPS

I know you've always had a great interest in primitive art, but she has too--and has been marvelous about buying things, and very supportive in that area, so that you really have a very important collection now.

MULLICAN

Well, we began to work on that as soon as we discovered that we had any money to spend at all, and also through a number of exchanges, paintings for objects. We've developed quite a collection, which hangs in our house--covers the walls, covers the house. And consequently, we've left no room for our own work, which is the way it should be, at least as long as we're living in such a small place. I can imagine a larger place. I can imagine a larger studio. Thinking ahead, that will be one thing that will happen: a large studio, which we'll probably build in New Mexico, and will eventually have my own private archive of work, which is not scattered here, in storage, [including] things I haven't seen for years that have been put away. I long to pull it all together again and catalog it and organize it. I find that a lot of my works are still very meaningful to me. I do not really regret that there have not been more sales. If there had been, I would have fewer things for myself, [laughs] and so in that respect, it's worked out.

PHILLIPS

On quite a different subject: I wonder how you feel about the state of the world. From your impressions of things as a young man, having been in the army and getting out, and kind of what you've lived through in the last twenty, thirty years or so, are you more pessimistic, somewhat the way you were. . . ?

MULLICAN

Well, I find that I'm more optimistic, even up till this very day. I'm very optimistic about the future, about the world, and myself in it. I feel that somehow we will all survive, and art will survive as the most important thing. And I've had nothing but encouragement to continue. I do find that there seems to be less and less time for me to work, I guess partially because of the responsibilities of the university. In the past, I have had years on sabbatical, and shortly after I began to teach at UCLA, I was given a creative arts grant, which gave me a whole year free to work. And I've never had such a productive year. So it's hard to find the time to get as much done as I would really like. And there are not enough hours in my studio for me to accomplish all that I have in mind. Even though I find that I'm very productive, it never seems enough. If I stretch two big canvases and finish them, I immediately have plans for four more. And they are always surprising to me; in no sense do I repeat myself, over and over. I am constantly looking, constantly searching. Within my work there's this great range. And I have a feeling that it's certainly all mine, and yet it's very diverse.

PHILLIPS

Have you ever had periods in which you haven't been able to work very well, in which you've been blocked, so to speak?

MULLICAN

Only periods when I chose to do something else.

PHILLIPS

That's one thing we haven't talked about. Instant theater and so on. Tell me about your involvement .

MULLICAN

We haven't discussed my role as a writer.

PHILLIPS

No, that's right.

MULLICAN

Whatever that might ever lead to. But I've always been interested in writing, even, you know, from high school days. It didn't really begin to come to a head until 1952, '53, about that time. I decided to get involved in playwriting. I audited Kenneth Macgowan's playwriting class at UCLA. I met him at a dinner party with friends and told him that I might be interested in taking his class. So he said, "Well, show me something." Which I did, and he said, "All right." I worked with him for a year at UCLA, mostly on one-act plays, three of which were produced in the little theater. And as I remember,

Joann Phillips came one afternoon and saw a performance. [laughter] Well, that really pushed me into theater. And about this time Luchita felt that she and Matthew should go to Venezuela, that she wanted to be with her family. So they were gone. It was a sad time when they left, but we felt that some impasse had been met and that she should go to Venezuela for a time, which she did. During that time--I guess you'd say that was an unproductive time. I was painting, but not very much. And I became involved with an experimental theater group, which was headed by Rachel Rosenthal. She had an acting laboratory set up in Hollywood, which I became a part of, thinking in terms of playwriting, actually. And then I became involved with it and her methods, which were wholly improvisational . I began to become a part of it: acting, appearing on stage in many different roles and in different ways. The theater was improvised, from beginning to end. It was something very new, something that perhaps did not exist anywhere. The whole idea of "happenings" came about at that same time or shortly thereafter. So I felt that what Rachel and I were involved with broke new ground. This lasted for a whole year. We would give performances every week, wholly improvised. It was a small theater, with the seats taken out. One sat upon pillows on platforms. It was a white box of a stage, upon which anyone did anything they wanted to do. And we learned through experience, working together, to be able to put on some kind of a performance that . . .

PHILLIPS

"Instant theater," that's what you call it.

MULLICAN

It was called instant theater.

PHILLIPS

Not "living theater," instant theater.

MULLICAN

And we had a great following. Many of the Ferus Gallery attended. Wally Berman, I know, would come; he was one of our regular patrons, as was John Altoon. I talked to John Altoon shortly before his death, and he was telling me how much he'd enjoyed those evenings of instant theater. And not too long ago, George Herms spoke to me about how much he appreciated my talents as an actor. [laughter] We did translations of contemporary French playwrights of the time, like Ionesco, performed them from scripts. We also did improvisations on themes, a theater of the absurd. This was for a year. And then I realized that as exciting as it was, it was taking time away from my painting, and I really did not want to be an actor. My life was not in the theater; my life was as a painter. So I eventually gave that up. And to this day I spend a great deal of time writing, not in play form but more in novel

form, in fiction form. What I was interested in as a writer, curiously enough, had nothing to do with modern art, or what was happening here in modern theater. It was more related to folk theater, and I chose to write Oklahoma folk takes--very much influenced by writers as Inge, Williams, as opposed to Ionesco.

PHILLIPS

Did you know Bill Inge out here at all?

MULLICAN

No, I didn't. I met him, but I never talked with him. So I'm still writing, actually, and I enjoy it very much. I approached the typewriter as I would a canvas; with a sense of automatism, let things happen. There is this constant pleasure of invention and surprise that keeps me involved with it. But I have never considered that I'd be anything else but a painter.

PHILLIPS

Then Luchita came back from Venezuela.

MULLICAN

Yes, and shortly after that we went to Europe.

PHILLIPS

That's when you went to Europe. Well, let me ask you how you feel about the dealers and gallery system and selling paintings.

MULLICAN

Well, I really feel that as of today I'm out of it. It's something that doesn't interest me as much as it did before. I think it's possibly because I've had so much exposure to it. Just the idea of exhibiting because I'm given the opportunity does not excite me the way it once did. I mean, I see very little of it as being really meaningful to me in my work now. I'm no longer really involved with critics or what they have to say, or having just another exhibition. I'm sure that if I wanted to, I could arrange numerous exhibitions in numerous places; if I really devoted the time to this, it would be no problem. But it would take away from the actual work itself, the time to actually paint. It would be nice to have a proper gallery, someone who could handle my work for me, someone who really believed in it, and in which I would not be in constant competition with other painters, other artists. I mean, I guess I'm rather selfish in that respect. I don't want a token involvement with a gallery, just to say I'm with a gallery. There seems to be more of this, "Well, what gallery are you with now? Are you exhibiting? Are you showing?" As if this was the most important thing. And if you're not, then they say, "Oh, well, you must be--probably been forgotten." [laughs] I

think the time will come when I can have meaningful exhibitions. I'd much rather show in a museum, in a gallery that could really show my work to advantage. But I no longer feel that I'm a part of this race to get into the best galleries, and to have a show there every other year, and to be successful, with red dots on the walls. I personally feel I have escaped that. In the future--who knows? I do feel that painting is coming back into its own. It's been rather forgotten the last few years in the face of sculpture, and with the advent of conceptual-performance art, which I obviously feel very close to because I believe the theater was in some ways the beginning of that. If I wanted to, I could perhaps become a part of that again. Painting has been number one. And I do feel that painting is coming back into its own; I hope so. And I'm sure that I will eventually be asked to show all these things which have been stored away for so many years. I've yet to have a real retrospective. I had a partial retrospective at the Santa Barbara Museum about three years ago, which I enjoyed doing very much. The gallery space was given to me; I could show what I wanted to show--an ideal situation. So if that sort of opportunity reappeared, I would certainly use it. Other than that, I kind of depend upon things just happening, as far as sales are concerned, or people coming to see my work. And it always happens. I mean, within the last few years, there have been at least two collections that are being formed of the Dynaton painters. So I have a feeling that that's something that will grow, and I'll find my place.

PHILLIPS

I know you spoke of feeling quite close to Jules Langsner, and feeling that he understood your work well and wrote well of it, and that you also admire Henry Seldis. I wonder, are there any other critics whom you especially like?

MULLICAN

No, I have not been involved much with the critics. Not at all. I mean, reviews have always been rather short, as they always are these days. If you have a show in New York, if you're lucky you have half of a paragraph, in *Art News*, or something like that. And I've never been in the swim of things enough to get involved with critics who might meaningfully say something. I don't know. I have a feeling that all of that is still to come. [laughter]

PHILLIPS

One has a feeling that sometimes critics are asked to write about things which they simply don't understand.

MULLICAN

They are asked to cover so much, as reporters, it seems to me. And I think it's [critics' writing] probably given too much attention, perhaps by the artists who have been shown somewhere and were being written about, and I don't

think it adds up to very much. And certainly they should not give it any consideration, because they've got to find their own life beyond that. So more and more, as I get older, I begin to realize that art really is a way of life, and unless you're a part of that, or that's a part of you, then you'll falter somewhere. And so many have, of course, so many have, who've been given a great deal more attention than I've received.

PHILLIPS

I wonder what contemporary artists you admire.

MULLICAN

Well, at the top of the list would go a man like Mark Tobey. I was a great admirer of the paintings of Rothko. I am still very fond of Matta. I am certainly interested in what Gordon Onslow-Ford was doing, continues to do. It's unfortunate that Paalen is dead; I think he would have continued. I'm interested in what's happening with younger artists today; Maria Nordman is someone who I feel very closely allied to, even though I'm a painter, and she works with spaces.

PHILLIPS

Was she a student of yours?

MULLICAN

No, she was not. She was at UCLA, but at that time she was doing woodcuts--can you believe it?--and at that time had nothing of the vision that she has today. But I'm interested in things that are happening in art today, that which a lot of the young New York conceptual people are involved with. Video, I have yet to really be turned on by, and I think it's because my exposure's been too limited, and I have never really found the time to take that in. People like [John] Baldessari and their thoughts interest me'-- [Allan] Kaprow. But, of course, this is going into areas beyond painting.

PHILLIPS

Well, art has gone there.

MULLICAN

Yes. But if I think of painters today, there are very few really that I can get excited about.

PHILLIPS

How about Sam Francis?

MULLICAN

Yes, very definitely. I've always felt I understood what he was doing. He's one of the great painters, certainly. And I'm sure there are others, that if I could just think for a moment I would find. I also find that now--and I think this is a good thing--I begin to pay less attention to French painting. Which is not to say that I would still not be excited by an extraordinary Picasso or Matisse--I certainly would. But I began to feel that I have outgrown them. And isn't it about time? [laughs] Isn't it about time?

PHILLIPS

It's just" amazing the way one can be self-reflexive and look back and see the things that turned you on twenty-years ago, and then understand that it's not doing that to you anymore.

MULLICAN

In London in 1960, there was a great Picasso retrospective. And I have a feeling that if I walked through that exhibition today it would be with half the emotion that I approached that exhibition with at that time. Someone who still interests me is Miro; he's still alive and kicking, and that would excite me. But a lot of the surrealists, as great an influence as they were-- Ernst, Tanguy, Duchamp... And I think it's because I feel that my personal vision and attraction is turning more and more inward, and consequently I do not need all those fantastic images which, we were flooded with.

PHILLIPS

Things which were once great learning experiences for you.

MULLICAN

That's very well put. I've always looked ahead. I mean if I think back to the early fifties, I always had a sense of where I was going. And I've always had a sense that I didn't want to get there too soon. Even if I had to wait twenty or thirty years, I was going to wait. It's as though, looking ahead, I knew where I was going. I mean, I could tell you where but I'd rather not. And I could describe what that is, but I'd rather not. But it's there ahead, and I've come close to it at times, and then always turned away, almost as if I was saying to myself, "Well, you're not quite ready. Just get through this now. Let's get through the ritual Indian phase. Let's get through the patterns of Oceanic art. Let's look at Picasso one more time. [laughter]

PHILLIPS

Give him a chance.

MULLICAN

Let's don't kick him off quite so soon. And, "Let's make one or two more extraordinary drawings." I've always loved to draw, as I mentioned several

times. But I have a feeling that I'm no longer interested in drawing. June Wayne invited me to Tamarind for a fellowship. I did around thirty prints--all really concerned with drawing. I'm no longer interested in seeking many of those kind of images that excited me in the past. I'm more interested in a purer state, and just what that will be, in relation to painting. ... If one thinks of painting, one thinks of paint on canvas, and I have a feeling that I'll get there. And even if I don't, it probably won't matter. [laughter] But the years ahead, those are the important ones. I've always lived that way, I think: from this day on, from this year on. There's nothing greater than the beginning of January, looking ahead. And one always thinks of Miro, who once said that his dream was of a large studio. Sometimes it's almost that simple. Someday I'll have that large studio, and then I'll be able to really operate. And it may be what I'm really after is in a large studio. I have a feeling it has something to do with size, anyway. It has something to do, certainly, with spirit. In the past I always thought that mystery was one of the important elements. And spirit is of course involved with mystery. But spirit is indefinable for me as yet. But I do know that it exists, and that's what I'm really after. And I think it's the one element that goes beyond all of the other possibilities that one can have as a creative artist. And by spirit I don't necessarily mean that it's going to be closer to religion, either. It's going to be closer to atmosphere, or closer to those clouds out there, over the mountains.

PHILLIPS

Do you feel that this kind of thinking has really become a way of life with you--I mean, not just in terms of paintings, but in everything you do? Is that kind of a goal, too?

MULLICAN

Yes, well, I feel that these years, these beginning years of my fifties, which began about five years ago, that this was a time of looking ahead toward resolution, and by that I mean an almost immediate resolution that was going to occur in the next five or six years--that is, looking back. I mean up to about now, you see. The establishment of this place in New Mexico. Now, looking ahead ten years, when I'll leave the university: I feel that in some ways I'm preparing for a great period, which I hope to God I live to see. [laughter] And by that time, the children will be grown. Time will be free. I'll be able to see more just sitting still. And I'll be able to comprehend more. All of those things which I've given so much thought to in the past will be more meaningful, I think. I'm still preparing, things are still in preparation, and I have always wanted it to be that way. And I have thought how difficult it must be for those artists who arrive without any preparation to be suddenly thrust, you know, on the museum walls, to be suddenly thrust into a financial bracket, and they were there without any preparation. By preparation, I

mean those years of experiencing. Suddenly they are there, and then what happens. I think that would be kind of deadly. You'd have to start all over. So I feel that my vision is one that is continuing, and I will never reach that place where I say, "Oh, that's finished." It's always going to go on; I'm always hoping that it will. It's difficult to talk about, and it's even more difficult to show. [laughter]

**1.9. TAPE NUMBER: V, Video Session
(February 20, 1976)**

PHILLIPS

We're with Lee and Luchita Mullican in their home on Mesa Road, Santa Monica Canyon. Lee, would you like to talk about some of the objects in this remarkable space?

MULLICAN

Well, we really began our collection shortly after we met, maybe twenty-five years ago. Luchita started collecting things in New York City, and I guess the first things I collected were those santos in New Mexico. But since that time, we have been in different parts of the world and found things. We found things in galleries here; we've done some trading; but by now I think that we can say that the things that we do have hanging here are things that we really feel a great deal about; and enjoy looking at them. Which is to say that there are things one may acquire very quickly and then later say, "Well, they're really not for me." Or Luchita will say, "Oh, I don't feel good about that at all," and after we've had it a couple of years we trade it off. But they're from all parts of the world. This is a snake, baga snake from Africa, then a Northwest Coast carving, an African harp, a New Guinea house post. Hanging on the back wall is a saltillo blanket from Mexico, colonial period, a very fine one. And then we spend a great deal of time in the Southwest, so that we have baskets and kachina dolls and feathers and a great selection of peyote fans, which come from Oklahoma.

PHILLIPS

I've noticed you haven't left any room for any of your own paintings, or any of Luchita's paintings.

MULLICAN

Well, that's true. Although occasionally we will take something down and hang up a painting. I guess we feel that we both have our studios away from the house, and we are involved with our work there, and we have our work hanging there, so that when we come home, well, it's just not we don't really miss it being on the walls. Of course, guests who may come may wonder what we're doing. I mean, most artists will have their things hanging all

around; but, no, we've never done that. But I am sure that if we had a larger house, [laughter] if we had a larger house and more walls, we would mix it all up. Because if I think the way Luchita paints and the way I paint, this material is a part of us. So the paintings and the material really hang together very well.

PHILLIPS

You were going to say something about that blanket as it related to your paintings.

MULLICAN

Luchita and I both have been very involved with color and pattern and so forth. This is another saltillo blanket from Mexico--optical, you might say. We have several saltillos, in fact, we have quite a collection of--no, I won't spread them out, but anyway, we are very interested in fabrics and textiles and Indian rugs, blankets, and so forth. And we have, you know, chests of them put away.

PHILLIPS

You've said that you hoped that when you were creating art that you were moved by some of the same things that moved the Indians when they did their sand paintings.

MULLICAN

Yes, well, that goes back to what I told you about working from nature and responding to nature in the same way, say, that the American Indian has. Or even the aborigine in Australia. So, yes, I feel close to that. And I feel close to this material. I recognize in it that great surge of nature.

PHILLIPS

Luchita, would you like to say something about having lived with all of these objects all these years, including Lee, perhaps? [laughter]

LUCHITA M

Well, I've always had the disease. Collecting. And I usually travel with four or five pieces. I remember going to Venezuela to see my mother, and my mother didn't like the pieces. One was from New Guinea, a New Guinea scepter, and she just refused to allow me to have them even in my own room. So I kept the pieces under the bed, and at night, when everyone had gone to sleep, I would take out my objects and place them around the room. So it's exciting. Sometimes I'm amazed when people walk in and say, "My goodness, so many things." I don't find it crowded at all because I'm accustomed to living with it, you know. But it's a joy. It's an exciting adventure to find these things. It's marvelous. And this peyote fan--Lee

brought that back from Oklahoma once, and it was just the most exciting experience to watch it happen. You see, you hold it like so . . . and it looks very ordinary. But then you do that, [gestures with fan] and doesn't it hit your stomach when you do that? Isn't that beautiful?

MULLICAN

Yes. They are magpie feathers, so you really have the feeling of the bird flying when you do that.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: Yes, it's like flying.

MULLICAN

The others are not quite as spectacular. And I'm not sure that that's really a gesture that's part of the peyote ceremony.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: But how could it not be?

MULLICAN

How could it not be? [laughter]

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: I mean, can you imagine chewing on a peyote button, and then seeing that? How fantastic!

MULLICAN

They missed it if they didn't do it.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: Well, they couldn't have missed it. [laughter]

PHILLIPS

I know in the Dynaton show at the San Francisco Museum, years ago, that there was what you called an "ancestor room" there with primitive objects in it which had a kinship with the paintings of the three painters who were in that show.

MULLICAN

Yes, that's right, that's right. Our response was before that time, and of course it's increased after that time, to all of this that we've collected and live with. And also, I mean, a lot of the most exciting things are not necessarily large, or even standing around. Darling, get the little Northwest

Coast basket. Right there. This is one of the most beautiful things, and yet it's of a size that you're not . . . until you take off the cover. [removes basket cover] And it's a bit like the feather fan, just to reveal that beautiful tightly woven pattern.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: And how close it is to a Peruvian textile.

MULLICAN

Yes, it is. Even though it's from the Northwest.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: And that's another exciting thing, you know. It looks like a Tijuana textile, and it's Northwest Coast. They're all related.

MULLICAN

A lot of smaller things, which are, of course, put away. . . .

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: Or the Pomo baskets. We have a Pomo basket that you can put on the very tip of your little finger. It's woven with feathers, and it's an exact replica of the big ones, except it's tiny, tiny. [laughter]

MULLICAN

Well, I do feel--I mean, I can't declare this positively--that collecting has kind of quieted down for us now. Good things are hard to find; they've become expensive; so that we just feel fortunate and happy that we have what we have and we got it when we did.

PHILLIPS

PHILLIPS: Yes, and you learn so much from what you have that it allows you to appreciate things that you see in museums and other collections. And it's enough that they're there. you don't have to own them.

MULLICAN

Sure, sure. You don't have to--that's right. Luchita and I talked about this: You really don't feel that you ever own anything. You know, it's as though it's here for your protection and it's your responsibility to look after it. And, eventually, it belongs to everyone; we just happen to have it for the time being.

PHILLIPS

You're the caretaker.

MULLICAN

We're the curators. [laughter]

PHILLIPS

Are there some other things around the room you'd like to. . . ?

MULLICAN

Well, there are other things like--this is a very rare Hopi shrine piece that Luchita is particularly fond of. It's in four pieces, and it's filled with magic, like so many of the things are, if they are. . . . They're quite often--I mean they have a certain power without being all that decorative or all that spectacular or flashy.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: Would you like to look at it? You see, it's cut in four pieces, and inside was placed, I'm sure, a prayer or. . . .

MULLICAN

And it's very rare. It's one of those things that you would probably pass over unless you knew what it was.

PHILLIPS

That's right.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: It's really beautiful.

MULLICAN

So he stands here--she really--stands next to this little man from Easter Island, which we collected in Chile.

PHILLIPS

A couple. You got quite a few things when you were in Chile that year, teaching at the university.

MULLICAN

Well, there wasn't that much material around. Beautiful jewelry and a few pieces here and there, but most of it was hard to find.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: We did find the rehue.

MULLICAN

Yes, the big pole that stands in the garden, the witch's pole, which has been there now since '68.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: With your name on the back of its head.

MULLICAN

Yes, I found my name on the back.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: So it was yours.

MULLICAN

And it's protected the house, I think. I think all of this probably has meant good times and good fortune for us.

PHILLIPS

Are there any other objects that you'd like to point to?

MULLICAN

Darling, what do you. . . ? Do you see anything you immediately. . . ? Well, there are things which she really holds onto. I mean she loves this African harp very especially. So there are things, I think, through it all, that one gradually boils down to saying, "Oh this, this is. . . ."

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: This is a very magic piece, isn't it?

MULLICAN

Oh, yes. This is one of the few things we have from the California Indian. It's a Chumash steatite carving: a boat set with little shells. Boats are always magic, I think, taking us one place and carrying us over. There are also some feather fans. There are other things in the other part of the house, all the santos over there, a kind of religious corner.

LUCHITA M

LUCHITA M: Our son, John Lee, made that object in the corner, which is an instrument. And I think children respond to these objects, you know; they begin by making things like that instrument in the corner, with nails and string.

PHILLIPS

We're in Lee Mullican's studio at UCLA in the Dickson [Art] Center. Lee has been teaching at UCLA since 1962 and has been in this studio space approximately five years. And we're going to start out by talking about your painting and the development of your painting. What dates are we going to cover, approximately?

MULLICAN

I have nothing here which is prior to 1948, and so that's where we will start, during those early days in San Francisco, when I first really began to paint.

PHILLIPS

Now, the camera can't see this painting, so. . . .

MULLICAN

Yes, right. Well, this is an early one; this one [untitled] is even a little earlier.

PHILLIPS

Why don't you talk about this one then.

MULLICAN

Yes, all right. It's around late 1947 or '48. And it's one of the first expressionist canvases I got into, where I was really feeling my way. So I automatically let the brush move around, and then I later went back in and built up some areas with that knife technique.

PHILLIPS

When did you begin the knife technique in your paintings that is so characteristic?

MULLICAN

It was about that same time, when I was on the San Francisco peninsula. But at this time I really wasn't so concerned with the kind of stroke that the knife made; it was just another palette knife, I think, really. I was involved with energy and an expression within the paint and texture on the surfaces. So this is really one of the first ones, and I think it shows that it's a little crude and heavy. [laughter] But I think the directness of it is what comes about. The next one [untitled Garden], which was done just about the same time, or maybe a little after, began a period of more refinement of what I was doing, also, I think, a little closer to subject matter. And a painting similar to this was the first of mine to win a prize at the San Francisco Museum. [*Garden at Four-o'clock*] It's in their collection. It was a garden. It's a landscape, imaginary, with birds and creatures and strange kinds of plants. I began to put a little more structure into the canvas after this.

PHILLIPS

How much has your work been influenced by the formal things that you've learned from cubism and surrealism. in terms of the direction of the painting?

MULLICAN

Well, there's been a great deal of influence, of course, particularly as far as surrealism goes and what I was able to learn and understand very early, as far as an automatic technique where things really began to happen just spontaneously, and then after that, giving them some kind of control. And the canvases after this, which were made from about 1950 and '51, at the time of the Dynaton show--this is 1950--I began to work with a closer refinement of that striation technique and began to be aware of the way the light would strike the surface and the textural interest. [*Turning Worlds*(1950)]

PHILLIPS

It seems quite advanced from the earlier two.

MULLICAN

It does, doesn't it? Just in the matter of a year, two years, I began to feel where I was really going. And this gets involved--this is, I think, a good example of those paintings of that time, where the first kind of cosmic influences began, and we began to feel something of the Dynaton that Paalen later formulated. Also this was unusual for me to paint this size.

PHILLIPS

That seemed large at that time?

MULLICAN

That seemed large at that time.

PHILLIPS

My, how relative things are. {laughter}

MULLICAN

So, I think we'll find as we go through these--if this is to be a kind of general statement--that most all of the paintings are about something, that everyone is about something. So, in some sense, each one is anecdotal. In other words, it's complete within itself, and yet they're all a part of a whole as well. But each one is very different, as you'll find; everyone I put up here looks a little different than the other. I mean I didn't. . . .

PHILLIPS

They all have subject matter, even though the subject matter may be psychological and emotional.

MULLICAN

Yes, yes. This is also an earlier one [*The Appointed*]. This one was out of my first show at the San Francisco Museum. That was later also shown at my first show at the Willard Gallery in New York. And I think you can see the real totemic, Indian influence here. An imaginary world.

PHILLIPS

Did people catch that in the reviews of the show?

MULLICAN

Yes, there was. In *Time* magazine, I guess it was, they made fun of my Indian titles. I can't remember what this one was called now. Anyway, I think I had one which was called. *Happily the Chiefs Regard You*, [laughter] which was taken from an Indian poem--translation. But as you can see, this was where I got totally involved with density of stroke and being able to manipulate transparencies and space, just through the stroke, and the closeness of the stroke; and then, very decoratively, went back and picked up points on the surface, so that your eye jazzed around.

PHILLIPS

When you started a painting like this, did you have in mind how it was going to come out, or was it fully automatic?

MULLICAN

Well, one had to make certain decisions right away, of course--that's where the creative act begins--in that I had to decide the size and what medium it was going to be. And also at this time I was also concerned with a certain kind of palette, which contained earth colors, so that I pretty much knew what the color range was going to be. And also the knife itself dictated a great deal of what the surface would be. But beyond that, I just let it happen, and this has continued up till the present time. I mean, most people think because it is so tight and looks so planned, the strokes do, that it isn't automatic; and yet it certainly is. And it changes, and I find myself at times having to slow down. Otherwise it will just run away with me.

PHILLIPS

Well, I'm anxious to see some more of those paintings,

MULLICAN

If we can manipulate them around here. . . . This one [*The Ninnekah*] is also of that same period in San Francisco. This is part of the Dynaton selection,

having to do with the invention or formulation of a new planet, which was called the Ninnekah. So it has, again, that cosmic world which I was involved with.

PHILLIPS

What year would this be?

MULLICAN

This was 1950, '51. I did several like this, rays expanding out from a central core. This next one is out of the Dynaton show, called *Splintering Lions*, and is reproduced in the catalog. I think, as I remember, it was involved more with energy and movement and the whipping up of. . . .

PHILLIPS

What was the title again?

MULLICAN

Splintering Lions.

PHILLIPS

How did you come to that title?

MULLICAN

I guess just through the nature of what I saw there. Most of the titles always come afterwards--very few I ever title ahead of time. And I think it's what I saw in the action of the subject. And quite often the titles are just as automatic as the painting is, maybe just a key some- where as to what the relationship might be. After this, I moved to Los Angeles --oh, here's another one, a kind of curious one, which is 1951. I did a series of these in San Francisco just before I left. This one also has lion in the title--*Hunger License of the Lion*. And again it's a kind of a section of an invented world. I had an exhibition of these at the Willard Gallery.

PHILLIPS

Did you visualize that world, or did it come out on the canvas?

MULLICAN

Well, I visualized part of it, and yet, through the automatism, things are created, things are made, which can be very surprising; and from there, one carries that on to the next canvas. After I moved to Los Angeles, I began to work a little differently, and I have this one big white canvas.

PHILLIPS

Did you feel that your paintings changed when you changed your environment?

MULLICAN

Well, I wanted to make a change, you see. So you can see that there are more open spaces in the canvas. I mean, there are textural areas, and then other times it's on the formal side; the description changes and varies. As I remember, this is called *Frame of City* and it was in a show at the Willard Gallery in 1952. But I began to work this way; the palette also changed.

PHILLIPS

This begins to get closer to Indian sand painting.

MULLICAN

In some ways. Yes, yes. But there is also--I mean, this was the great time of abstract expressionism, you know, so I got in my few licks as well. And that's why I think it opened up and I began to play more with the brush and to find more that the brush could do. But, as I say, each canvas changes within itself, so that even something like this [*The Age of the Desert*]*--this jumps ahead to 1957, and yet at the same time, it's very much like those of the late forties in San Francisco. So that there is no real logical chronology. I mean, things jump ahead, they jump back--I guess, depending upon the weather. [laughter]*

PHILLIPS

You've talked about your continuing battle in painting between the need for abstraction and the need for an image--I can see that in this particular painting, because those forms do start to become images.

MULLICAN

Yes, and it was at this time that I began to realize that I didn't need to be quite such a purist--or quite that abstract--that I could use imagery, and therefore I began to employ certain aspects of heads and bodies and invented animal forms and so forth.

PHILLIPS

Was this before your trip to Europe or after?

MULLICAN

Just before. Here's another one; this is about the same time--1956 -- and I remember that this canvas [*Swimming Devil*] was in a show at the [Paul] Kantor Gallery.

PHILLIPS

You were doing blue paintings at that period, too.

MULLICAN

Right. About that same time, this was '58, I had an exhibition of them at Kantor, also the Rabow Gallery in San Francisco. You mean this period? [*Bark and Limb*] Yes, well this came about at a time when I felt that I had carried that knife technique about as far as I wanted to take it. So I abandoned it altogether. I began to work just with the paint surface as applied with brushes and rags, but still being involved with certain examples of transparency. So I did a whole series of these, and then that was kind of that.

PHILLIPS

It seems much freer; it must have been something you wanted to do.

MULLICAN

Yeah, that's right. It was. And then there were a great many things done at this time on paper.

PHILLIPS

All this time you were drawing and also making objects, weren't you?

MULLICAN

That's right, that's right.

PHILLIPS

Wooden objects.

MULLICAN

The objects started in San Francisco, where I think I really tried to make an extension of what was happening in the canvases so that they really could invade the space.

PHILLIPS

And a painting like this, as you pointed out, must have been influenced by abstract expressionism, which was kind of flourishing at that time and in the wind.

MULLICAN

I think it was. Or at least I was able to go with that thing--you know, as we talked earlier--that came out of surrealism. But there's no question that that whole thing that was happening in New York opened up my thinking as well.

PHILLIPS

Did you find during the sixties at all that you were influenced by the minimal sensibility in sculpture and painting that was so prevalent then?

MULLICAN

Only in certain drawings. Some of these are a little more elaborate. All of these preceded that trip--the Guggenheim trip--to Europe. And here you can see I was directly involved with imagery, being chairs and these strange kind of mirror shapes. [*The Mirrors*] And also some kind of ritual calligraphy, ritual morphology--a little bit of everything, I guess.

PHILLIPS

How do you start a painting like that?

MULLICAN

Well, you put in--they're all started the same way. You decide where to go from--once the ground is there, then you have to do some kind of under painting to create certain transparencies. To formulate it would mean to start out with just pure brushwork of color and then build up the surface on those. Here's another one of that same time. And I had an exhibition of these in New York, which went very well.

PHILLIPS

That looks like another cosmic view.

MULLICAN

Yes, yes. Here's a California landscape, 1958. [*California Landscape*]

PHILLIPS

Did you title that one after it was finished, or were you. . . ?

MULLICAN

I guess I was kind of thinking about it. I must have certainly--was aware that I was doing a landscape and a strict, curious kind of bridge and, I suppose, fish. I don't know, it just spoke to me as being the essence of Southern California. [laughter] And of course what comes through is the impressionism of applying strokes of color, and so forth.

PHILLIPS

Yes, well, all of the way through in your paintings, the small dabs of color is an impressionistic technique.

MULLICAN

Yes. But it was really about this time that I began to work myself out of some of those color prejudices that I had had. I mean, to think of using blue

and yellow together on a canvas in those early days--I just wouldn't have done it. That's why I stuck closely to earth colors and so forth. Suddenly I was able to manipulate the palette a little more. I only have a few things here, which is suddenly very surprising in some ways, and that is that these came about in the living in Rome, where I worked almost totally in black and white. I have very few color things to show for. . . .

PHILLIPS

Why do you suppose you worked in black and white during that Roman winter?

MULLICAN

I felt somewhat limited there. Paints were not easy to come by. I discovered these great sheets of paper, and great black and white acrylics that they had on the market there. So I worked almost entirely in black and white and on paper. I don't think I did one canvas the entire time I was there. I must have done two hundred of these during that time. [ink on paper: untitled; acrylic on paper: *Flute Player*; acrylic on paper: untitled]

PHILLIPS

You found that when you were in Europe you were more influenced to use images in your work--I remember your speaking of that.

MULLICAN

Yes, that's right. Then there was that interesting, crazy period when we came back from Europe, and we were living in--spent the winter in upper New York state [Croton Falls]. And there again, I didn't have much of a place to paint, and I spent more time working on things on paper. But I did do about seven or eight canvases. This is one of them. [*Fable*] Again, where I tried to abandon that technique, which seems to come in those periods where I feel that the technique gets in the way, and I want to get rid of it and just to have the pure excitement and explosion of working with pure brush and color.

PHILLIPS

I see something very whimsical in a painting like that.

MULLICAN

Yes. Well, that's true. There were quite a few. Right after that, moved to, we came back to Southern California; this [*Phantom Canvas*] is 1959. Actually, this was before, one of the last before we went to Europe. Or at least I was getting into this kind of more select, minimal optical sense of what could be in creating these kinds of ghosts and, as well, just abstract, simple abstract shapes. I did a great many within the yellow-orange color range, and then I

jumped into red. This [*Sounds and Stains*] was from a series called Sounds and Stains.

PHILLIPS

Now, what did you mean by the "sounds"?

MULLICAN

Well, I felt that the paintings had sound. And I was very conscious of sound. And a whole series of these came about after a Ravi Shankar concert in Royce Hall, where I was so moved and so taken by those sounds that he made with his instruments, that I think that had something to do with it, although I was aware that there was sound in my paintings even before that. So I always felt, you know, if you run your hand across there, you would make a great sound. And, of course, they are involved with vibrations. So I worked this way for a number of years.

PHILLIPS

Tell the story about Ernst Bloch and your drawings.

MULLICAN

Oh, yes. Ernst Bloch. This was around 1950, where I knew Ernst Bloch 's daughter, in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was teaching at Cal, and he happened to see some of my paintings at her house--they had a frame shop--and he got very excited about them and took them to Berkeley to show them to his students, and said, "If I could paint my music, this is the way it would look." So I was very flattered by that, to say the least. This is interesting, too. This is one of the few objects that I did that snowy winter in New York. [untitled painted construction]

PHILLIPS

How did you ever get it back to California?

MULLICAN

I laughter] It comes apart; it's in pieces in the back.

PHILLIPS

You can certainly see the snow motif in that.

MULLICAN

Here's another Sounds and Stains. Except this one is called *Suns and Filaments*. And there again . . .

PHILLIPS

It's called "suns" or "sounds"?

MULLICAN

Suns . . .

PHILLIPS

Suns and Filaments.

MULLICAN

. . . and Filaments , yes. It was about this time '65; I guess that sounds right--that I found my studio in Venice, and began to. . . This is a little later; this is about '67. And this is called--this is the prime example--called *Smashing Canvas*, where I tried to see how much I could put into it. I wanted to carry it to an extreme, not only of palette but of stroke, so that there are areas where there is that refinement of the vertical striations, and other things where they swirl and turn and they splatter and mark and jump about creating 'a real energized world. This is the preceding canvas; but put together, as you can see, with greater refinement. [*Strata Passage*(1965)] Here again, working with a very encrusted. . . [*Entrance of the Entertainers*]

PHILLIPS

That canvas, these canvases are much more activated than some of the earlier ones in terms of tension.

MULLICAN

Yes. I began to see how far I could push it. There was a time when I felt that was really what should happen. Little by little, I worked out of this and in recent years have come back to a real refinement of idea. This is another one; this is 1967, called *Space Mix*. You can see where the paint's been poured, then wiped out and then worked back in. Then again, to activate the surface of these points of color, squares of color--to the point where just one mark became very important. One mark and then lots of marks and then one mark again.

PHILLIPS

Your work really seems to predate psychedelic experiences, don't they?
[laughter]

MULLICAN

Well, that whole psychedelic thing began, I guess, shortly after this. And I had, I took no part in that. Interesting here is--I worked sometimes with a long knife, so I'd make these long strokes. And I realized that I was very close to making letters, so I did a number of canvases where I put my initials in the corner. Do you see there?

PHILLIPS

Oh, yes--the "L.M."

MULLICAN

I put my initials in the corner to become a part of the composition. Then as we move along chronologically, this is one of the few canvases (that I'm going to bring out) that I did in Chile when I was there for the year in Santiago. And there again, I got involved with color again. This is called *The Parrot Handler*; so there are kind of flying parrots and a strange personage, continuing the same kind of activated surface and energy as some of even the first ones.

PHILLIPS

When you have an experience like that year in Santiago where working was so difficult for you because you didn't have a studio for a long time, was it hard to get back to work?

MULLICAN

While I was down there? Well, there were all kinds of problems in trying to find a place to work, but I think once I found the place, I worked very hard, because I was trying to prove something. I was trying to let them know that I was there. I wanted them to know. . . . [laughter]

PHILLIPS

And that abstract painting was viable.

MULLICAN

Not only that, but I had had such a bad rapport with the university--where I was supposed to be--because of the Communist takeover. But one thing I was able to bring off was my show at the museum. So I worked very hard to make that just as important an action as I could. And I think I did; everyone was astounded that I had done so much work in such a short time. So I think under pressures--I'm sure all artists know this--you know, if there's a deadline for a show, or for whatever reason, one is apt to produce a little more.

PHILLIPS

Let me ask you something along the way here. How do you feel about people coming into your studio and looking at your things and commenting on them? Some people have a lot of trouble with that.

MULLICAN

Well, I try and regulate who comes in. But I found that there are times when that isn't possible. And then, of course, it can be a very bad experience. But the best experiences are those where whoever arrives is responsive. And this is another overdone canvas from 1967, when I had the studio in Venice. [*Colored Canvas*] There again trying to explode the rainbow, put in every color, put in every kind of action. And I may have done it as a kind of joke, but it turned out okay. And then I have several that are up, like just a few years back, which were a part of the Southwest pueblo series. [*Pueblo Music*]

PHILLIPS

Yes, you can see the Indian dancers in that, and the pueblo architecture.

MULLICAN

Yes, and a kind of sky and a kind of staged ceremonial--this isn't a particularly good example, but it seems to be right on the surface here. But I did begin to work with a certain formality of design and formality of action, and of course the symmetry of it really came off. So as things change--I mean, as time changes and I change--one tries different things. So then I began to work on a dark, dark ground, working on blacks and browns, heavy blues, reds, and suddenly was creating a world of the night, which I'm getting very excited about. [*Moonshift*] And the luminosity that the paint would take on just because one suddenly was working on a dark ground instead of a light one. In some ways they began to emulate a kind of night spirit. Well, let's see, in the time we have left. . . .

PHILLIPS

We probably have about five more minutes or so.

MULLICAN

I'll hide behind this one. [*Enclosed World*] I laughter]

PHILLIPS

That's very cosmic.

MULLICAN

This is one of the more recent canvases, where I tried to work with pouring and spilling of great cups of paint and then working over them with a very tight surface, which is really, as you can see by now, a trademark.

PHILLIPS

A painting like that has the feeling of being out in space, or it must be a feeling similar to what the astronauts had.

MULLICAN

That's right. Well, it is something I've been involved with ever since the early fifties--and I feel that I was out there before they were, really. [laughter] And not only that, but I always liked what Mark Tobey said--that it's about time also to explore inner space. So my inner space was really an outer space. And I think that kind of shows there. It has a great deal to do with the Southwest, also, as far as myths. So there's all kinds of secrets. There is secret language, and secret mystery--so much of it that I don't really know about myself. [*Myth of the Anadarko*]

PHILLIPS

Well, I was going to ask you what you meant by secret language. [laughter]

MULLICAN

Well, I don't mean in the sense you know, of something to read, but I do feel that it is a mystery the way colors can suddenly react--surfaces --and trying to work very tight over a loose shape creates a very kind of marvelous tension.

PHILLIPS

And you also must mean the language of nature and how things adhere and the structure of things and the psychological structure.

MULLICAN

This one is also very definitely a part of the cosmic spirit-world. This is called *A Shooting Chant*, which is based on an Indian idea, whether shooting prayers into the sky toward some being or whatever. I want to try and get one of these later ones, back here.

PHILLIPS

All right, we'll get one of those out and then we're just probably about out of time.

MULLICAN

Just about got it.

PHILLIPS

Just about got it, then. We've gone through nearly thirty years of painting; that's pretty good.

MULLICAN

Here's a strange one--how about that? [*Being One*]

PHILLIPS

That's nice. Does that have anything to do with Indian blankets?

MULLICAN

Might be. As we talked about at the house, all those saltillos [blankets] and so forth--all those woven textiles and so forth--have had a great deal to do with. . . . Well, I recognize that as being a part of the knife manipulation that I use. Everyone says, "Oh, that looks like tapestry." So I found myself saying, "All right, then I'll really give you one." [laughter] So in a lot of these later canvases [*Vox Santos*], I have really woven the paint into these very tight surfaces, although there were echoes of this 'way back then. But I'm now doing it over greater periods--I mean, over greater surfaces. (This studio would be really fine if I didn't also have to use it as a storage space.) You probably won't be able to see all of this [central canvas of Chapel series], except to point out the tightness of the surface and contemplative aspect of that kind of a woven surface. I've just completed one, an even larger one, back there. So this is what I'm into up to the present time.

PHILLIPS

Would you like to say something about how you see your painting going in the future, and sort of your ultimate move to New Mexico for more time, and. . . ?

MULLICAN

Well, I think that if I see it going anywhere, it will probably be that it will become even more refined and perhaps even more minimal. I feel that I have explored the excesses as far as I want to. [laughter] So that surfaces like this--they become more and more difficult to employ. So I think that I will try and quiet down.