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# LOS ANGELES ART COMMUNITY: GROUP PORTRAIT

Karl Benjamin

Interviewed by Robin I. Palanker

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
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Los Angeles

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LOS ANGELES ART COMMUNITY: GROUP PORTRAIT

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# INTRODUCTION

Karl Benjamin was born on December 29, 1925, in Chicago, the son of Eustace Benjamin, a doctor, and Marie Klamsteiner Benjamin, a high school biology teacher. Although the family was steeped in culture--particularly music and literature--there was little feeling for the visual. Young Karl felt utterly incompetent in his elementary school art periods, nor did he show any particular inclination toward art in his high school years. Indeed, he today feels his first eighteen years to have been virtually irrelevant to his later development: one of the few strands of connectedness is to the gridlike hives of wall and window which formed the view from his family's Chicago apartment.

In 1943, Benjamin entered the U.S. Navy officers' training program at Northwestern University, but he soon dropped out and entered air gunnery school in Florida, subsequently serving in combat in the South Pacific. Upon leaving the navy in 1946, Benjamin joined his parents in their move to California and enrolled at the University of Redlands. Sampling every conceivable major except art, he received his BA in 1949 with a joint concentration in philosophy, history, and English.

During his senior year, Benjamin married Beverly Paschke, and upon graduation he immediately sought employment,

partly to support his new bride through her last year of college. The only job he could find was as an emergency sixth-grade teacher in Bloomington, California. It was a job which, with a few variations, interruptions, and transplantations, was to occupy the next twenty-eight years of his work life, up through his resignation in 1977.

Having pursued a writer's vocation during college, Benjamin found most of the elements of teaching fairly easy. Art, however, initially eluded him. He contrived a series of general exercises for his young students, based largely on the techniques he used in teaching writing, and his kids' resultant work both puzzled and fascinated him. He began checking out art books from the library. The subject possessed him. Between 1949 and 1951, he took to frequenting local galleries with growing passion; and in 1951, around the time of the birth of his first child, Benjamin bought himself some canvas and oils and simply began painting.

In his elementary school classes, Benjamin gradually evolved a framework of rules within which to encourage the greatest free play of his children's imaginations. Anything was acceptable, but the activity had to transpire in an environment of quiet concentration, every drawing ventured had to be completed ("First you finish what you've started and then you get a new sheet"), and figurative attempts were expressly forbidden. He found that for years his students

had been both praised and criticized for all the wrong things, and that by redirecting their energies toward the celebration of shapes and colors, he could tap vast reservoirs of unexpected creativity. In 1953 he relocated to El Rancho Elementary School in Chino (transferring ten years later to Gird Elementary in the same district); and although his students were primarily lower- and lower-middle-class youngsters from rural and barrio neighborhoods with no previous exposure to art, year after year Benjamin generated such energies among these sixth-graders (and whole classes, not just individuals) that they were frequently featured in special museum shows of their own.

Meanwhile, Benjamin spent evenings and weekends mapping his own creative imagination. Between 1951 and 1953, he returned to college, studying under Jean Ames at the Claremont Graduate School, from which he finally received a master of arts degree in 1960. Removed from the bohemian, expressionist tendencies which characterized much Southern California art in the fifties, Benjamin favored an understated, formalist idiom--hard-edged, geometrical interpenetrations of pure colors, composed in an environment of secluded concentration.

Benjamin's first one-man show was at the Pasadena Museum of Art in 1954, with subsequent shows in 1958 at Occidental College and the Long Beach Museum of Art. In 1958, Jules Langsner and Peter Selz initiated and organized the Los

Angeles County Museum of Art's famous "Four Abstract Classicists" show, which deployed the work of John McLaughlin, Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersley, along with Benjamin's, in an attempt to articulate a continuing tradition of formal classicism (David, Ingres) in the nonobjective, geometrical, form-intoxicated work of these four Southern California artists. The show was quite successful and subsequently traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and Queen's College in Belfast. Benjamin was subsequently included in the Museum of Modern Art's "Responsive Eye" show in 1965, which signaled the epiphany of "op art." Benjamin himself remained unimpressed by labels and groupings, and he just continued working, day in and day out, in an extraordinary succession of visual styles. Some of his other one-man shows have included those at Scripps College in 1960, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in 1962 and 1968, and the La Jolla Museum of Art in 1970. His work was included in the 1967 and 1977 Biennials at the Corcoran Gallery of American Art in Washington, D.C. In 1977, the Los Angeles County Museum brought together its 1959 quartet once again for "Los Angeles Hard Edge: The Fifties and the Seventies," and Benjamin was, of course, prominently featured. Meanwhile, over the years Benjamin has shown with a number of local galleries, including one-mans with Jack Carr (1955, 1956), Esther Robles (1959, 1960,

1962, 1964, 1965) and the Tortue Gallery (1975, 1977).

Benjamin's aesthetic concerns have remained constant throughout his career: a wide range of colors articulated in strict, formal configurations. The hard edge has persisted throughout, but the canvases have seemed to evolve organically through a succession of formats as his imagination has mined one vein of possibilities after another. His studio is immaculately neat; his principal tools include masking tape and guitar picks; he is one of the few artists he knows who has to wash his hands before he paints.

In an artistic community of eccentrics, Karl Benjamin is a recluse among iconoclasts, a curious bird indeed. For twenty-five years he has lived a suburban existence on the east side of town, holding down a continuous job the entire time. His marriage has survived almost thirty years and brought forth three children, and now two grandchildren. He has been active in the teachers union and the Peace and Freedom party. He is passionate about gardening (which he sees as an analog to painting), and he belongs to a local bowling league. His artistic vocation is utterly quotidian. He has weathered the crises of male mid-life and artistic mid-career ("double poison," as he says) and has emerged vibrantly intact. Upon occasion he refers to the book Zen and the Art of Archery, and indeed, the overwhelming

impression left by these pages is of a man centered and on target.

Lawrence Weschler

Los Angeles, California

February, 1978

# INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER: Robin Palanker, Interviewer-Editor, UCLA Oral History Program (for "L.A. Art Community: Group Portrait"). Artist. BFA, Art, California Institute of the Arts.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Karl Benjamin's home, 675 West Eighth Street, Claremont, California, and the Gird Elementary School, Chino, California.

Dates: July 30, August 9, 19, 25, December 16 [video] session], 1976.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of recording hours: Since the interviewee was a full-time teacher at the time of the recordings, sessions were conducted in the late afternoon, after school hours, and averaged about two hours each. Six and one-half hours were recorded.

Persons present during interview: Benjamin and Palanker. Nancy Olexo and Sally Shapiro were present at the video session to operate equipment. Mr. Benjamin's sixth-grade class also participated in the video session.

CONDUCT OF THE INTERVIEW:

The respondent's own art provided the basis for the interviewer's research. She studied slides of Mr. Benjamin's work, available at the library of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and at the Tortue Gallery, where his paintings were most recently exhibited. In addition, she consulted both oral and written sources. She spoke at length with Mallory Freeman, director of the Tortue Gallery, who provided many valuable insights, and she studied Jules Langsner's foreword to the catalog Four Abstract Classicists. Personal discussions with Mrs. Benjamin added yet another perspective.

The interview began with a chronological approach; however, both the interviewer and interviewee found themselves more comfortable attacking specific subjects at each session. Hence, one tape side deals

with teaching, another with Mr. Benjamin's shows, yet another with painting technique. Though the interviewer posed questions that required only simple responses, she found the interviewee eager to explore the concepts that loomed behind the easy answers.

EDITING:

Editing was done by the interviewer, who checked the verbatim transcript against the tapes and edited for punctuation, paragraphing, and verification of proper names. Words or phrases introduced by the editor have been bracketed.

Mr. Benjamin reviewed and approved the edited transcript, making few additions or deletions. He supplied a number of names not previously verified.

Lawrence Weschler, Assistant Editor, Oral History Program, prepared the index and wrote the introduction. Joel Gardner, Senior Editor, Oral History Program, reviewed the transcript prepared by Program staff.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tape recordings, video tape, and edited transcript are deposited in the University Archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of permanent noncurrent records of the University.

Records relating to this interview are located in the office of the UCLA Oral History Program.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

JULY 30, 1976

PALANKER: Do you want to start at the beginning? Where were you born?

BENJAMIN: Born in Chicago. In 1925.

PALANKER: How did you like Chicago?

BENJAMIN: That's the strangest question. It seems so far away that I can't even--it seems so irrelevant, Chicago does. And it actually is. I mean, for all the rest of my life it's almost like there's no connection to that. Somebody at school was saying how they were going back this weekend--this guy's about sixty, and he was going back to a high school reunion. And I just thought, you know, when you leave a place right after high school and you never go back again, the whole first eighteen years of your life is cut off. And I've often wondered what those guys did and what became of them and how you could--what you're like in relation to them now. It goes down the drain when you just totally sever all ties like that.

PALANKER: You left Chicago right after high school?

BENJAMIN: Yeah, went into the navy. The only connection, the only concrete connection, that I can find with Chicago--and I could show you if I had the paintings here now--[is] that so many times I've had grid works and rectangular formats in paintings, that look very much like buildings

and windows. And several are done purposely that way even; John Coplans mentioned that once. And when I was in my early years, I'd look out the window, and what I would see would be the apartment building next door, which was a great big wall, and there'd be no sky or no ground. All you'd see would be a big wall with a lot of rectangular windows in it. And that's recurred so often in paintings that I'm sure those early visual things stuck, and came out later. Even these paintings here, in a sense, are like that, the ones in the front. Not those, those are just pure aesthetic things. But I have had so many paintings that could have been like that. So that's the only connection with Chicago that I can see.

PALANKER: You came here in your late teens, came to Southern California?

BENJAMIN: Yeah, about twenty.

PALANKER: And you came to Redlands?

BENJAMIN: Came to Redlands, with my parents, and finished up college at the University of Redlands, where I did no undergraduate work in art.

PALANKER: What work did you do there?

BENJAMIN: Well, I had almost every major known. When I first started college at Northwestern, when I was in the navy, they gave me an aptitude test. And I registered highest in areas that they thought meant I should be in engineering school, in tech school. So they put me into

that and I flunked out. And I had no idea what that was all about. And later I found that what I registered in the ninety-ninth percentile in--I didn't find this out till a lot later--was spatial relations, and there was another category which were associated with math and engineering, and so they stuck me in there. And I can see now, on afterthought, that what I'd been dealing with, since I began to do what I do--but that is what I'm most perceptive in. But how do you tell somebody in 1943 that "We think that you should go into hard-edge painting because you were in the ninety-ninth percentile in spatial relations and allied things." So I flunked out of there. And then I was a philosophy major and English and history and botany and journalism--almost everything except art.

PALANKER: Did you feel that none of these subjects could hold your interest, or that they were wrong for you?

BENJAMIN: Well, I found I got turned on by a teacher. I would have a really good philosophy teacher or a really good history teacher, and then I would think, ah, this is finally what I want. So then I'd enroll in that the next couple of semesters and wind up in classes with turkeys, and then I'd take something else until I found another guy. So it really wasn't the field as much as a person giving me a certain insight into that. Which is certainly now how I got into art--it was just the opposite. But anyhow, I did all those things as an undergraduate.

PALANKER: When you finally graduated, what degree did you have?

BENJAMIN: Group major in history and philosophy and English. What I wanted to be by that time was a writer, and I was writing short stories and sending them to magazines and getting them rejected.

PALANKER: By this time, were you married?

BENJAMIN: I got married when I was a senior in college. And then I needed a job, because my wife had another year of college. And just almost by accident, because it was the only job available, I took a teaching job on a temporary, emergency credential in elementary school, in the sixth grade. And that eventually got me . . . could you turn it . . . [tape recorder turned off]

PALANKER: Okay, we're going to backtrack a little again. Would you like to describe some of your early childhood experiences in art, going back to, I guess, Chicago?

BENJAMIN: I had absolutely no childhood experiences in art. As I said before, I'm sure my mother took me to the art institute, but I don't remember going there. And growing up in a family that was . . . . My mother was a high school biology teacher, my father was a doctor, and I knew I was supposed to be something. But that was the one thing that I was sure that I would never be; I mean, it was just, nobody knew any artists in those days, and you just had the stereotype of artists from the Saturday

Evening Post cartoons. And there was a lot of music and literature and that sort of thing in my family, but art was absolutely missing. And knowing my negative nature, I really have the feeling that that's why I wound up as an artist, because it was just something that nobody ever even implied that I was supposed to do. I mean, I think that had at least a part in it. And in fact, that was the one thing in school I always felt I was terrible in, because in any art class in elementary school, I didn't know what to do and I always felt dumb and had no relation to it, at all.

PALANKER: Do you think it could have been because you had no exposure to it?

BENJAMIN: I'm sure I had as much exposure as, you know--think of all the, think of all the artists that are well known that were brought up in Wyoming or Montana or Idaho or Dodge City or, you know; all these guys come from places like that. And I'm sure I had more than that. My grandfather was a cellist in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; I mean, all the other arts were very much a part of our family. But in that there was none. And I played piano when I was very, very little, gave an elementary school concert, and I was considered to be a coming pianist. And then later on I wanted to be a writer, and I wrote a lot of short stories.

PALANKER: Then after you tried everything came the art?

BENJAMIN: Yeah, and that was almost by accident, and it wasn't tried in the sense of something I was supposed to do or expected to do. It's just something I started to do, just very naturally. And as soon as I started to paint, I could feel that. The second part of that question was, something?

PALANKER: Are members of your family art-oriented or supportive of your early experiences? That was the second part.

BENJAMIN: Well, they were mystified. But my early experiences were when I was twenty-four years old.

PALANKER: That's what you call your early experiences.

BENJAMIN: That was when I started to paint, and that was my earliest experience, except for that year that I mentioned, that year and a half where I was just going to a lot of art shows and reading a lot of art books. And that--you know, you got to that place where it's suddenly not enough to read about something, look at something; you want to try it.

PALANKER: The year that you were looking at art as opposed to making it is the year before age twenty-four, when you started, is that right?

BENJAMIN: Yeah. And so once I got started, my parents helped me move out of Redlands, which was kind of a cultural wasteland, so I could come up to Claremont, which at the time was a lot more stimulating. And so

they gave me a lot of support, financial and otherwise, in making the move, because I didn't have any money at the time. But it was a very blind kind of support--blind in a nice way because they didn't really know what I was doing, but I think they were glad that I was finally, at the age of twenty-four, doing something. And so they were very supportive. But I don't think those were formative years, really. It wasn't like somebody at the age of seven that showed a talent, and their parents reinforced that. It was a much later kind of support.

PALANKER: Would you like to start talking about your beginning in painting, the first paintings you did? When you started, what happened?

BENJAMIN: Well, okay. I'll go over what we were talking about before again, because I can't get to that--I can't get there from here--that fast.

When I started teaching school--that was sixth grade in Bloomington, which was not a cultural hotbed--I was able to get really good poems and stories from the kids in my class. And I was also supposed to be doing art, and I had no feeling for that at all, and I didn't know what to do. So I just tried to go about it the same way I did with the poems and stories. And one of the ways was very nondirective but, I suppose, very firm. In other words, I remember I used to say, "You can't do long-division problems when you're chattering and fooling around." You know, at that

time, art was, in the public schools--or with children, let's say--successful art teaching was supposed to be equated with freedom. And too often, that disintegrated into a really chaotic situation, because that was free and you couldn't really create anything original in an authoritarian sort of environment. But I knew what it had taken me to write stories, and I had to have quiet and be able to concentrate. So I had a lot of success with the kids when I said, "Okay, when you're writing a poem or a story or a diary or whatever, you've got to concentrate on what you're doing." So I just did the same thing with art. And so my rules were the same rules that I have for this day, and I'd laid them down totally in the blind. We didn't have much paper. It's funny how prosaic things enter into what eventually becomes kind of good--not much paper--so I said, there again, making an analogy from stories, where a kid would get a piece of paper to write, so he'd make a sentence, then ball up the paper and say, "I spoiled it. I've got to have another paper." So I quickly knew that you don't spoil something. You build on what you've already done. I'm talking about the poems or the stories now. So, rapidly I caught onto that, and I said, "The rule for the stories is that you get one piece of paper, and you don't get another one until that's done." So I did the same thing with art paper, both for that reason, and because we

didn't have much. And so that was rule one: you had to finish; you had to fill in the paper.

And then also I saw all these terrible palm trees and mountains and sunrises and trucks, and so I said, "You can't do any mountains or sunrises or trucks." And they said, "What should we do?" And I said, "Well, just make pretty colors." And I said it kind of out of desperation. And so these really beautiful things came out, which intrigued me. I didn't understand what they were, but since I knew their written stuff was good, I knew this must be good, because it was the same kids and the same teacher, and so that's when I started to read about art and then started to go to art shows. The first art show I ever went to, I looked in the paper--we were in Redlands, and that was a long drive from Redlands to L.A. then--and I saw galleries listed. I saw Frank Perls. And so we drove all the way out to Beverly Hills on Sunday. I just assumed that galleries would be open on Sunday, and of course it was closed. That's how naive I was about it. And within about a year, a friend who was going to Claremont Graduate School--was an art major, was doing graduate work in art--brought her teacher out to Redlands to see the things that my kids had done. That was Jean Ames, and she was very enthusiastic. And that summer, that was the first summer after the first year I taught, they had a big show at Scripps, at the Lang Gallery, of the work of that class.

And as I said before, I didn't just cull the best from a number of classes; that was just all thirty-some kids from a very low socioeconomic area. And so that was the first year I taught, and that's again when I was reading a lot.

Now, one of the interesting things I found, and I still find out, up until pop art . . . . And I've always taught in areas (I've never taught in Claremont for instance; I've taught in Chino, and before that Bloomington), where there was no art in the community, where the kids had no art, very little art in their background, and yet almost by some cultural osmosis, what the kids were doing was very current in the art world. And that stopped about the time of pop art. And since pop art, they have recapitulated what went on from, let's say, World War II up until pop art. We've got hard-edge guys; we've got abstract expressionism, all sorts of things. Now, you could say that they could pick up current styles from billboards, because it doesn't take long before what's hot in the fine-art world winds up as a design principle in advertising of billboards or magazines. But in those days I used to ask them. Nobody got any magazines; those kids didn't see Life magazine. There were kids there that had never gone to Los Angeles and seen billboards. You know, those were very culturally primitive areas. It's almost a mystic thing. And I can more than just talk about that; I can show that with examples of things that I've seen. So at

that time there was no hard-edge stuff. And years later, after I began painting, I was always very careful never to bring any of my own stuff to school, until three or four months into the year, when everybody was into it already. Then it didn't matter. Then they could look at what I did, and I'm sure that if I brought it at the beginning they would think, oh, this is what you're supposed to do. I don't know, where were we? We were talking about . . .

PALANKER: . . . how you came to paint.

BENJAMIN: Oh, okay. So then after that first year, then there was that show at Scripps, and I spent the next year doing more of the same. And then during spring vacation of that second year, I'd just had enough of reading and enough of looking, and I went and bought some paint, and I wanted to try it out. And I'd just seen a show of Miró at Frank Perls Gallery, and since I couldn't afford one, I decided I would paint one. I wasn't going to copy it, but just very simply thought I'd paint one like that. I painted all day; and lost, for the first time in my life, all track of time; and became really, in that week, so obsessed with painting that I quit teaching at the end of that year, which was just another--what? from spring, from Easter to June. And so I just quit teaching and just started to paint. And my wife began teaching to support the family, which now had a child.

PALANKER: How did that Miró painting come out?

BENJAMIN: I think it came out fine. I don't know where it is anymore; I probably threw it away. When I began painting, I began painting in our bedroom there--no, in the garage there--and I just began painting by myself. And what I tried to paint like at that time . . . . Because I would clip all the color reproductions out of Life magazine and save them, and I tried to paint like everybody under the sun, but mostly the New York abstract expressionists. And now, this is still in my second year of teaching, I hadn't gone to school or anything yet. And I can remember trying to paint like--well, right now, I can remember paintings that I did like Gottlieb, and like de Kooning, and later I tried to paint like, well, like everybody, every one of those guys. And then I tried to paint like Rouault, and then I tried to paint like Miró again, and then I got this desire to paint superrealistic things. I would have a still life set up, with apples and things, and be working on that, and then I would be like Cézanne, you know, do a Cézanne still life. At the same time, when I'd get tired of that, I'd start working on a Gorky. It wasn't copying. I was just so excited by all that stuff, and again I was twenty-four and I had never done any of it, and I'd think it was just . . . . I remember my sister once--I would just talk about nothing but art, and she said, "You're being awfully sophomoric." Well, that kind of took me aback. But I mean it was just like you've got a crush on something, and if

you get it in a relative old age it's worse.

So that's how I started to paint. And those rules that I had for my kids, really, as I look back, that's just what I had for myself, because I've never not finished a painting. I've always felt that it was absolutely--I'm sure that a lot of the paintings especially then were not realized, but I had this tremendous sense of importance that I never throw it away or quit in the middle, that I take it as far as I could until it really agonized me, until I just couldn't do any more. And I'm sure I overdid a lot of paintings; there's one spell where everything turned into a snowstorm. I can remember that I said, "My God, here's the snow again," because I'd keep working and working to try and get it in key, and I'd get lighter and lighter, and all of a sudden it was just all white. But that was the same rule that I still hold to with the kids, that you always had to finish the painting, because I think if you don't, I think there may be a couple of times I didn't, and I always wound up sooner or later getting stuck at the same place again. Which is true in real life, too. So that's how I started to paint. From being very excited with what kids under my jurisdiction had done, and being very interested in them--more than interested--any crummy reproduction in a magazine took on such great value. I've still got two huge cartons at school; I don't even put them up anymore, but I can't

throw them away because they meant so much to me. It was almost like a little kid getting autographs of the Dodgers when I cut out those things. And then I began collecting. And I bought stuff. I even bought a Gorky when I was in graduate school, when I was making, you know, no money, and I paid Paul Kantor $25 a month for this Gorky which was only 250 bucks, but I bought that before we had a TV. But then it was funny how after you get to really find your own self in painting, I wound up selling all that stuff. It didn't have that meaning to me anymore. All of a sudden I realized that all the things I bought were stored away someplace. I didn't want them around, so I just sold them. And now, though--I mean, I don't even go to art shows anymore. I think the more you get into what you're doing, it's not that you reject the other things--I mean, you hear about a good show, and you intend to get there, and you never get there. So obviously it wasn't that important to you to get there; it's more important to finish the red on that painting or make some new stretcher bars. And I'm almost sorry that I lost that, because that's a beautiful feeling, when you're so excited and so hero-worshipful. You know, that's a great, awesome feeling, which I get sometimes from my own paintings, but not that much. [tape recorder turned off] Say that back again because that really is educational.

PALANKER: Okay. [tape recorder turned off] Your first

feelings about art were like a love affair. How do you feel about painting now that the love affair, the initial love affair, is over? You sort of answered that just now yourself, but I wanted to ask again.

BENJAMIN: I answered it in a different way. That first love affair is for something outside of yourself, you know, your love of other painters and paintings. I'm having a love affair again, right now, with paintings, and I'm really trying to wonder what happened in the middle. I'm sure what sustains young painters, certainly me--what sustained me was not so much my work as the work of other painters. But yet I had a pretty good first show in about two or three years from the time I started, and I mean really started, because I hadn't done anything before that and I had that show at the Pasadena Museum in about three years. And again, I'm just trying to think; I think I know what happened. About the time that you start to do good paintings, or reasonably consistent paintings, or paintings that progress or grow in an organic way from your last painting, in my case that coincided with some external success--I mean, of course, like reviews and sales and shows and things. And I think that's at the point where your love affair gets screwed up, and you don't know what's happening, when it's happening; you only know it later when it's stopped. But that really obscures the love affair, because all of a sudden these irrelevant things are coming

in, irrelevant meaning shows, flattering reviews, or reproductions, or attention, sales. And that went on for a few years, from the middle fifties when you start; and you're thought of as a bright new talent, so this portends a future. So that's enough to go on, and then come the shows and sales and things. And all that time, what you really should be loving more is the fact that you're painting better and closer to yourself, and yet these other distracting things are happening. And then in the late sixties, for a number of reasons those things suddenly stopped, the external things.

PALANKER: The shows and the sales?

BENJAMIN: Yeah, and there were a lot of things. I remember right after [John F.] Kennedy was assassinated, everything kind of went down, and I pulled out of the gallery I was with because I was very fed up with that scene.

PALANKER: What gallery was that?

BENJAMIN: That was the Esther Robles Gallery. And I was very unsatisfied with that at that point. And then that was at the time that La Cienega started to drop off, and it was then that happened to come in at the same time that a lot of difficult things happened in my personal life. There were a lot of serious illnesses in the family, and our kids became teen-agers, and all these potentially great but very draining things. And I got to be into middle age, and all these--I can only sort them out now;

at the time, I couldn't sort them out at all. At the time, although I kept painting as much as ever, it was very difficult. And I had no more energy to stay in the art scene. I stopped going to galleries. I stopped looking for places to show, and that just seemed to be last in the priorities. And I was separated for a year, and my daughter almost was murdered, and that was a year of great concern. It's just all these things that I had to deal with besides teaching school every day and keeping the house up. And it's really only in the last . . . it was about during the worst of that time that I would be--I'm trying to get back to how I got back into the love affair again, when all that external stuff stopped happening. And when things were really bad, I would wind up in the middle of the night out there in the studio looking at an unfinished painting (it was never a finished painting, always an unfinished painting) and thinking of the next color, which I could do tomorrow. And I really can almost remember the night when that dawned on me, when I could really verbalize that. I really almost remember that night. I realized that that's what this is all about, you know; what it's about is the color you're going to do the next day. That's the reason you want to get up in the morning. And I thought, now, that's how I started all this: I wanted to put down the next color to see what was going to happen. So it wasn't overnight that I got back to the original love affair. That took about

four years and leaps and bounds and drops and plateaus and things. But certainly the last couple of years I think I'm back to where I started, except I can paint now, you know; in a way it's much better. And so I think that's what the love affair is about, I mean a relationship with two people that really doesn't have anything to do with anything else, and there's no reason for it at all. And the only benefit is the love affair, and there can't be any other reasons. And there can't be any other reasons for the paintings, either. Not that all those other things aren't nice, but I don't ever think I'll get caught in that again.

And I've seen that happen with so many friends of mine. I'm sure it's true in any business, but I think in art, in painting, it's even worse, because up until you're thirty, maybe in your twenties, if you've shown paintings and are considered to do interesting work, you're considered a promising talent. And after you're sixty, you're considered a great veteran. And then there's that sort of no-man's-land between thirty and sixty, where the dealers are busy and the museum people and all the writers are busy either unearthing new promising talent or writing definitive essays on grizzled veterans. And here the prime of your life for a painter should be in the forties and fifties and sixties, and it should be those middle years. And I've seen in many people that I know, many friends, how that's been a very tough routine. And you

never know it when it's happening. And to sit there like I did for a long time and wonder why I got all that attention when I wasn't painting nearly as well as I'm doing now . . . .

And now I'm in a place where I just paint and there's no good or bad. They just come out and they're past the point. There are no mistakes; it either comes off really well, or maybe not quite as well, but there's nothing tangible about why it didn't, you know. It's just whether you've got the essence of the painting or not. But I mean, I'd suppose you'd call me a mature painter, and all of a sudden, you know, you figure, well, I've got a good twenty, twenty-five years before anybody looks at my stuff again, and you hear rumors that you're dead, and you hear rumors that you've stopped painting. I think the worst year was about 1970, when I was going through all these things with the personal life and family and the art career people. I had been in Who's Who in America, and so that year I decided I would buy a copy, and I was going to give it to my parents because I thought they'd be very proud of that. So I wrote, and I sent for a copy, and I came home, and it was really a terrible day, and everything in my life was at absolute bottom. And here's this giant Who's Who in America, so I opened it up and I turn to my name to see that it's okay, I'm going to give it to my parents, and here's this Karl Benjamin and all my record and everything, and it gets

down to the bottom and it says, "Died, February 1969." And I thought, "Oh." I still have it. I never gave it to my parents. But even little things like that were happening. So anyhow, that was about the low period of painting.

TAPE NUMBER I, SIDE TWO

JULY 30, 1976

PALANKER: Okay, what do you think of talent?

BENJAMIN: That's what I wanted to get back to, was my feeling about talent that I think used to worry me before--not in art, but in other things--whether sufficient talent was a question or not. I found out with children--and I've taught twenty-five years now, and that's an average of thirty kids a year, so I think that's a sampling that's broad enough--my experience has led me to believe that talent is just simply not an issue. I'm talking about painting now, visual arts and painting, because the kids that I've mostly taught have been ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-olds, I've taught from eight-year-olds up to adults, but most of it has been ten-, eleven- and twelve-year-olds. And I have never seen a kid that couldn't do a complete, satisfying, beautiful painting. And that's both to him and to me. And I suppose I have to say I'm arbitrator in this, but I am. I was there, and I saw it all happen. And I, without any hint of conceit, can take any thirty kids from ten, eleven or twelve years old, and at the end of the school year I could put those kids' works up in a show that would excite greatly anybody that knew anything about art. And not in the sense of patronizing the art as beautiful children's things--I

mean good art, period. And there's some that are much better than others, and it doesn't mean they're all the same, but I think they all have the potential for realizing themselves in art. Now, some like to write better, some like to do other things better, and so, to me, it boils down to how much they need to do the pictures, how much they want to, how much it's necessary for them to do. And as I look around adult artists that I know, since I was in school, it's the same thing. It's almost decided by how much they need to paint, not by how much talent they have. I just really don't know what the word talent means. I've seen kids that are so good, I hate to use words when I'm talking about these things, because I could go, and I could haul out three dozen things and show you, and I can't do it with you personally, and I can't do it on the oral history thing, but I really know what I'm talking about. Jean Ames knows what I'm talking about because anytime I've brought an artist over to my school and they're prepared to see something sort of naive, and it's not naive, it's a very powerful visual thing. So I don't think art has anything to do with talent; I think it has to do with how close you can get to yourself and how much courage you've got and how much you need to do it, how important that is to your life. Which sort of relates to what I was talking about with the love affair--how important it is.

And it certainly has no relation to IQ or sex, you know. [There was] the old thing, when I was in school, the girls were always the good ones in art. And in my experience, and maybe it's because they're kids in my class, by and large the boys come out ahead. Now, how much that is my reinforcing the boys that are good, I don't know. [phone rings; tape recorder turned off]

PALANKER: You were talking about how the boys were the ones that succeed in art.

BENJAMIN: I'm talking about at the age of ten or eleven or twelve, chances are it's the girls that are succeeding at school. They probably have more approval from teachers and from parents, and the boys are more troublesome and they don't catch onto school things as quick. So as I was saying, if I were to say who did best in art in my room, it would perhaps be the boys. And it may be because I give them more reinforcement without realizing it, but it also may be because they need it more, and they need it more because they're not doing as well in other things. And I have found that by and large the Chicano boys might be best. Now if I were to pick out the best two or three of each year--and by best I mean those that worked with the most intensity, that liked to do it the most, that did the most pictures with the most intensity; that's what I mean by best--if I added them all up, it might be the Chicano boys. And if my theory is correct, you know,

that he who is best is he who needs it the most, there is a thing where it doesn't take a verbal facility that perhaps a Chicano boy doesn't have. Also boys tend to be less verbal than girls at that age, at that state, and . . . . [pause] I lost the . . . .

PALANKER: You were talking about why boys, given the freedom to really work, tend to be better.

BENJAMIN: Yeah, okay. So I was also talking about how girls when I was in school were always the good ones in art. And as I remember art as it was taught, those that could do a certain prescribed skill with a certain amount of conformity--almost like penmanship. Girls always have better penmanship at that age than boys, by and large, so it's almost analogous to drawing, or some art assignment that they get, because most art assignments in the public schools are a prescribed series of steps: do this, and then you do that, and you do that, and then your project is done. And those that have the most success in conforming to directions and have the most coordination with fingers, which at that age the girls tend to have, will be the best. Also there's a stigma. Now, maybe my being in class, and the kids knowing that I like art--and not by my words, but because they see me drawing all the time, because I do lots of studies and drawings in class; in fact, I do all of them . . . . (If my school superiors read this I'll be fired, but they don't read this sort

of thing, so I'm safe.) And I think that's true simply because since I began to paint, I've always taught. I mean, I was teaching before I was painting, and I have a very hard time getting new ideas in the quiet of my studio. I get them all. I can be teaching long division or something, and one hand is doing a drawing. And when I get home in peace and quiet, I have a very hard time getting any ideas. It's just like Dr. Strangelove: all of a sudden my hand is doing these things. It sounds weird, but it's true. But anyhow, that's my feeling about talent.

One of the big joys I get in life is when I come across somebody that's twenty, twenty-five, twenty-eight years old. The other day I was getting my car washed in the Chino car wash, and a guy pulls up in a pickup truck, and he said, "Hi, Mr. Benjamin." And I didn't remember him because they change, and he told me who he was, and he said, "I'm still doing pictures." And this happens all the time, and these are not people in West L.A., and these aren't people in an academic environment. In fact, just the reverse; these are people that are living in an environment that not only doesn't reinforce any art activity but would actually ridicule it. These are guys who would, I'm sure, get static from their friends, you know, "Why are you doing that kind of stuff?" I had a girl in my room two years ago who was very difficult. And it came time for parent conferences. And just before the parent conference, this

girl came to school with some oil pastels, really beautiful abstract things. And she said, "My dad told me to bring these to you. He does these." And I said, "Who is your dad?" And she told me who he was, and he was a guy I had in my first year at Chino. He'd gotten into a lot of trouble--this was her stepfather--gotten into a lot of trouble; eventually he wound up in jail a couple of times. But he was in my room the first year that we were in this house, because I used to bring him over here on weekends. He was a big kid, and he used to help me rake things and work around the house. He was so good in art. His father was a gravedigger. And I've got a lot of his stuff still. I mean, he wasn't good in school, he was a very good athlete, but he was a very intense artist. Now, all during this guy's environment--I mean, despite his environment--he's doing these pictures, and I know his buddies aren't saying, "Wow, that's great. Now what?" He's not selling them, he's getting no art reviews, he's having no art shows, his friends aren't giving him anything, and anybody that paints knows that it's pretty tough when you're getting absolutely nothing. It's taken me twenty-five years to get to where I'm at now, not in terms of being a good painter but in terms of being able to paint and not need somebody to give me some kind of a pat on the back or some kind of--not encouragement, that's not the word--communication of some kind maybe. Not that

I don't like that; I do like that. I like it very much to have somebody come that's really looking. But it just amazes me how these guys in that environment, they're working in a factory, in a car wash, they've been in jail, it's in surroundings where art is not only of zero value but it's a negative commodity, and they're still doing that. And every year I find those guys. And it really makes me feel good.

There was a teacher's aide at our school last year who said, "Did you ever have . . . ?" she mentioned the fellow's name. I said, "Oh, sure." She said, "Do you really remember him?" I said, "Sure." And he was very poor academically. He lived in the barrio, over there. And the next day I came and went back and got about a dozen things of his--he was in there twenty years ago--and I brought these things to her. And she couldn't believe that I knew exactly who she was talking about, and I'd saved these things. And he's a bricklayer or something. But he is a guy--it's a huge family in Chino, and he's the guy she said that they always call on when they need some help in interior decorating, whatever that is, for them; he's the artistic one in the family. And if you could have seen him then, he was not the artistic one; I mean, he was tremendously artistic, but not in the conventional terms. So that's something again about the teaching: I think those are things that eventually come

back, and you can apply that to yourself when you're feeling down, you know--gets your head straight. I think those are a lot more head-straightening things than any temporal successes in the art world, which is maybe why I stayed in there and didn't try harder to get into a college thing.

PALANKER: You get your ideas in the classroom, and that's where they're coming from then?

BENJAMIN: Well, I am in the classroom when I get the ideas, yeah.

PALANKER: Okay.

BENJAMIN: And again, it's kind of, I feel really nice and guilty. Like I'm ripping off the taxpayers, because I feel rather underpaid.

PALANKER: When these kids show you their work--I'm trying to think how to ask this--what kind of pride do they have in it? Do they feel because you support it that that's enough, that's how they can do it? Is that how it works for them?

BENJAMIN: Well, at first, at first. It's interesting in the beginning what your job is--and this isn't just about teaching; I mean, this is about art, and it just happens about teaching, too. And teaching really isn't the right word there; the ones that think they're good in art have been praised for the last five years for all the wrong reasons. It's because they draw the sun best as it's

coming over the mountain, and so what you're trying to get them to do is just build one form on another and one color on another and let whatever they've got down there so far lead to the next thing that they feel. And as we said earlier, the kids are conditioned in school for very concrete answers. What do you do next in this division problem? and which is the noun? And you can tell them which is the noun and what to do next in the division problem, so they come up with their picture and they say, "What color should I put in next?" And then you just say, "Well, you look at the colors that you've got there, and now you pick one that looks good with those." And they say, "Okay," as if you've given them an answer in a tone that they're used to, but you haven't told them anything. And all you've given them really is the confidence to let their impulses go again.

PALANKER: But you've also given them a little structure to keep working without supplying the definite answer.

BENJAMIN: Yeah, what you're telling them in a very down-to-earth way is to build organically, to continue what you're doing. And you're saying, in essence, "What you're doing is fine, and the way you're doing it is fine, and go on doing it." You're saying in modern parlance, "You've done your own thing. Keep doing it." But remember, they don't know anything about this, because always before, they've seen people praised because it looks like a truck,

or it does not look like a tree; and so since you're on such abstract grounds, you just have to give them a tone of voice that makes them feel like they're doing fine. And of course you can't fake that; I mean, it has to be there. And if you look hard enough you'll find something. You know, it's up to you. I'm sure that a lot of guys that I've pictures of, that I've failed to respond to because I didn't see it; I was unable to--but not too much, because they do develop.

PALANKER: What I wanted to ask you was, do you use the same rules for yourself? Do you work the same way?

BENJAMIN: I always finish the painting. And I make the colors as pretty as I can and always make the next color that looks good with the ones I've got before. They've gone through a big thing at my school--which as I say is a barrio school--to prevent excessive graffiti on the walls, and to push bicultural education, they've started to do things on the walls of the building, like pictures of Aztec warriors. And so I asked if I could have some panels for my kids to do, and now we've done four, two last year and two this year. And this again has to do with children, but has even more to do with art, and has even more to do with how people do art. These kids have done nothing bigger than 20 x 24, 12 x 18 inches, 20 x 24 inches. Now, the panels that I got face the street from the bus level; evidently they didn't want them to face

the playgrounds so everybody could see them. What had been done was Aztec figures that were projected by a teacher and traced, and the kids were supposed to make this part blue and that part green. And so I, being a painter, I know how hard it is to suddenly increase your scale a great deal; it's very scary. To go from 2 feet up to 4 feet is scary if you've never done 4 feet before. All right, these kids went from 10 to 24 inches, and these panels were 7 feet x 10 feet, and that's pretty fast. And so I couldn't have everybody do one, so I had to choose who seemed that year to be the most intense about it, and whose style seemed to be most applicable to 7 x 10 feet and to a heavy stucco wall. For instance, a hard-edge painter wouldn't be so good on a heavy stucco wall. So I sent them out, and they said, "Gee, it's big," so I gave them a bucket of water and a big brush. And I said, "Now, you go and paint with the water on the wall." On a piece of paper, it's all finger movement where there are oil pastels; you know it's a finger, kinesthetically, finger response. And on the wall you've got an arm response. And so they'd be out there, and they'd be painting with this water, and I let them be there for a couple of days. Kids would walk by, and they'd say, "What are you doing?" And the kid would say, "I'm painting." Because in that kid's mind, you know, they're painting. And I saw two or three double takes, like on Art Carney or something, because my kid is convinced he's

painting, and he's painting with this invisible water on the wall. Now, those things came out great, and that's a tremendous achievement to go from 20 inches to 10 feet, with nothing in between except a little water paint.

PALANKER: And they just took to it right away?

BENJAMIN: Sure. And again they'd come in, "What color do you think I ought to put here?" That isn't an everyday question, but every once in a while, you know, like you get stuck on the painting, and so they get stuck and they're conditioned to go ask the teacher something. It isn't a question that happens all that much.

But another interesting thing about that and children and art: they get to the point, let's say, two-thirds of the way through the year, and now they really understand what they're doing, in a sense that they're secure and they feel good about what they're doing, and they appreciate the guy next to him, what he's doing, even though it's quite different. And I'll put up something, and they'll say, "Ooh, boy," you know, just like he hit a home run on the baseball team. And I've kind of broken down all the prejudices that they had towards art, which they've picked up, I think. And then, up until a couple of years ago, our annual field trip was to the L.A. County Museum. So off we'd go to the museum. We'd go up into the contemporary painting part; until I caught onto it, I was thinking, "Now they're really going to get it." And they'd look

at the same sorts of things that they were doing, you know, the hard-edge things, the painterly things, all the different kinds of things, and they'd act like hicks again. "Oh, look at that dumb thing," you know. And after a few years of that, I caught on, and they couldn't make the connection. So before we'd go into the museum, I'd say, "Now, look, you're going to see things tomorrow that are just like Cindy does and just like Mark does and like this one here and like that one, and you look to see who there does paintings like who in this room." And all that stuff stopped.

PALANKER: That's really incredible.

BENJAMIN: And that's true.

PALANKER: How did they feel about the work once you'd gotten rid of their lack of connection? How did they respond? Were they proud of their own work?

BENJAMIN: I think less proud of their own than surprised to see that other people were doing things like them. I mean, they didn't make the connection completely, you know, as completely as I would like; but taking it from where they were when they started at the beginning of the year, I think it was pretty good.

PALANKER: When you started painting and you were sort of copying things to get started, how was your connection? You were coming from a total lack of an art background, really.

BENJAMIN: Yeah, but not like their total lack.

PALANKER: Yes.

BENJAMIN: I knew abstractly that art was good, you know. I knew abstractly that abstract art was good. Also, I was twenty-four and they're eleven. Twelve is the changeover thing, when they get roughly twelve--I taught junior high school--art at that point, it's much more difficult to teach. At that changeover stage they become adolescents and terribly self-conscious about what they do. And that's quite difficult, although I really still think that anybody under my aegis I could get to do good things. And I've had the experience with old ladies, young guys, college students, because the things I've been saying are . . . . What were you saying?

PALANKER: I'm wondering how you started out with no support and no help at first, just bought paint.

BENJAMIN: Because of all those great painters that I was admiring, whose paintings were giving off a tremendous amount of stuff to me. I think that's one thing. I mean, I didn't know them, but I saw the paintings. I was getting a tremendous amount from them, and I had a tremendous need.

PALANKER: I guess what I'm thinking is that the way you teach the kids seems to me you understand some real, intrinsic thing about being an artist. I'm trying to get you to connect that to yourself, how you started, because you use it so well with children. I guess your need to work is the thing. Your output is so large.

BENJAMIN: Well, when I started, I sure wasn't getting any appreciable reinforcement from the people around me. They either looked kind of mystified, or when I came down to Claremont from Redlands, all the guys that I was around were far more advanced, you know. Those graduate students, as I said before, in that postwar class, were quite advanced at that point. So I wasn't getting any plaudits from my peers, and they weren't my peers--I mean, I wasn't their peer yet. And so I think mostly what was coming from the outside was art, was other people's paintings. I wish I could be that excited again about paintings. I wish I could do that. But maybe that's something you give up with being a painter. It's a romantic feeling, and I don't have it anymore--I mean, about other people's work. So I think a lot came from others, but I don't know. All kinds of people have said it in different ways, but art impulses come from other art. And that doesn't mean in some doctrinaire conceptual sense; it's just looking at something that's so exciting and marvelous that . . . . But Picasso is the one that said that's how you get to be a painter: you're a collector first. Yeah, he was the one that said that it's basically a collector's urge, impulse. In other words, you like somebody's paintings very much, so you want to do some paintings like that person. That's why you do a painting: to put it up and look at it. And then you get more and more into it, and

the other person starts fading away. No, he was the one that said that. And in my case that was true. And I'm not sure it isn't in a lot of painters, because most young artists have certain heroes that they want to paint like. In fact, often you try to paint like somebody for the wrong reasons. You say, "I'm going to paint"--like I did--"like Feininger, like Cézanne, because I like the way he does this or that." So you do it. And some years later you find out that what you're interested in obviously was not that but something else in Cézanne or Feininger. You don't know it yet; it doesn't really matter. You know what I mean?

PALANKER: Yes. I just wanted to ask why it's the wrong thing.

BENJAMIN: Not the wrong thing--I don't mean wrong in the sense that . . . . Let's say, you say, "Oh, I love those. I'm going to paint like Feininger because I love those grey blues and those grey greens." So you do all these grey blues and grey greens. And then when you look at the painting later with some perspective, the color looks a bit awkward, but what really looks good is the way the forms facet into one another. So obviously that was what you were after, and maybe if you'd known . . . . In other words, you get attracted to some other painter because you sense a certain similarity of vision, and you haven't realized yours yet; you're, in a sense, trying to get him

to help you find your way, because you're both going in the same direction that he has taken and defined. There are a lot of aspects to it, so maybe the aspect that you were concentrating on freed you to let the aspect that was really meaningful to you come through. [tape recorder turned off]

Well, we're still talking about the kids and the art lessons and all. I just wonder how much of the success that they have is because they see me drawing and making color sketches. They love to do that. I mean, they love to see me doing that sort of thing. Because I also talk to the boys about last night's Dodger baseball game, and so they know that I know about the Rams and I know all about regular things as well. So I'm an image to those kids, you know; you're a big image for one year to an elementary school class. And to have those kids in there for a year, that's a long time for a kid. And people wonder why education is failing--and in conventional terms it's certainly failing. What kids have to see is some--not authority figure but someone they respect, somebody that they have confidence in, and also an authority figure, too. They have to have a model. And you can't preach at them. People wonder why reading scores are down in schools, and the people who are wondering most are the people that I think don't read at all at home and wonder why their kids don't have a great love of reading. The last two years I

had my kids keep a diary for a month, no matter what they did, from the time they got home until they went to bed. It wasn't supposed to be literary; they were just supposed to write down those things that they've done. Now half my kids, almost about a third of my kids, are from dairies, so they have work to do when they get home. They've got to put out the hay, and they have to water the calves and things. And about a third of them live in the barrio around the school, and about a third are kids in town. And with the exception of the dairy kids who have these specific jobs they have to do when they get home, very, very few do anything but watch television with their family or go visit somebody. Well, those very parents wonder why they don't like to read. And this is a pretty universal thing. It's not about television; it's because they don't see people that they respect and are models doing that activity. Well, art is a very natural activity, probably more natural, I'm sure, than reading. So when they see somebody that does it and doesn't just tell them it's a good thing and they ought to learn how to do this so they can get a job as a commercial artist when they grow up . . . . I mean, think of the success I would have teaching if I was limited to long lectures on how to draw a can of beans and "If you don't do this you're not going to get a good job when you grow up." But I'm drawing things. Put that together with the amount of honest reaction that they get

from me when they do something good, and I can see something good in almost everything that they do. And if those two factors were present in the rest of the school subjects, in reading and arithmetic and whatever, it would, I'm sure, have incredible results. But it's not there. A lot of times during reading, I just read a book. And I don't think anybody that's not teaching in the public schools--and a lot of those who are teaching--would understand either, understand this business of example, not by lecture. And I really think that the teacher sets up . . . . Of course the little tiny kids would have to be told certain assignments, but by ten, eleven, twelve . . . . A teacher immersed in a book while the other kids are reading a library book is a better reading lesson than a solid hour of phonics or definitions. And the artist, art is the same way. [tape recorder turned off]

PALANKER: Would you like to stop now?

BENJAMIN: Well, unless you've got something to put in there.

PALANKER: I've talked with you before taping about writing which you did prior to painting. Would you like to talk about that?

BENJAMIN: Just the fact that ever since I was little, I wanted to be a writer, and after fourth grade we moved from Chicago out to Evanston, near the lake, Lake Michigan. And we didn't live in one, but along the lake there were big

mansions. And I always loved--if we run out of time, I'll finish it up on the next tape--I used to always walk around the Sheridan Road, which was the lakefront, and I'd look at these big houses, and most of them had greenhouses. And I always loved to garden, and I always wanted to write. I read Lady Chatterly's Lover when I was pretty little, and what struck me--and I read it several times--what excited me about that was that this guy got to be the gardener for this big estate and got this greenhouse, which if you're brought up in Chicago is a really erotic number, a greenhouse, where you can grow gardenias and all kinds of flowers in the winter when it's cold out. And I was going to be this gardener for this estate, and I'd be writing my stuff, because all these gardeners had these real attractive little cottages there. So that was my fantasy when I would walk along there. And then later, when I was in college, and after I had flunked out of all the things I was supposed to be good at--like engineering--I wrote on the school paper in college, and then I wrote short stories. And I liked it very much, but I caught myself plotting too much, and mapping, and figuring out in advance--in other words, learning how to write stories. And I think that was one of the great things about that first day that I painted, as I look back at it: no plotting, and no figuring, and no setting things up to happen, with the proper background action. And I admit the things that I paint don't look like that.

PALANKER: Look unplotted?

BENJAMIN: Look unplotted. As far as I'm concerned they're unplotted. For my satisfaction of wanting the experience of doing something without plotting and predicting and that sort of idea. So the writing disappeared very fast, the first time. I still like to write, but I write letters and I write funny stuff to friends; I don't write stories or things like that anymore. I missed something you said about writing. I was going to say something beyond what I did with this. Say what you said so I can pick up that thread. Can you remember it?

PALANKER: About writing?

BENJAMIN: Yeah, you asked me "when you started . . . ."

PALANKER: Oh, just the fact that it was just prior to painting. [pause]

BENJAMIN: Well, I guess I really stopped writing when I started teaching.

PALANKER: You stopped?

BENJAMIN: I don't think I wrote anymore, because that was such an exhilarating experience when I got into that teaching. That just consumed me for about a year. That was the first time I ever did anything outside of gardening that really got me completely out of myself. And maybe that's just what I needed. I used the words "getting out of myself," and maybe that's what it did. Maybe it got me out of there and then I started to do what I wanted.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE

AUGUST 9, 1976

PALANKER: We're going to talk about the abstract classicist show that happened at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1959. Why don't we just start out with, what was the point of the show?

BENJAMIN: The point of the show from . . . ?

PALANKER: From your point of view.

BENJAMIN: From my point of view. Well, that would sound very cynical in a way, but at that time everything in all the art magazines was about abstract expressionism, and that was the only thing that was given any credibility as far as contemporary art criticism was concerned. And I'd had a couple of shows, and it seemed like anybody that painted in any other way was sort of dismissed as being some kind of a dead-end offshoot of Mondrian, or a temporary resurrection from the old American abstract--what were they? the Three A, American abstract? Well, even guys like the one who did the black on black?

PALANKER: [Ad] Reinhardt?

BENJAMIN: Reinhardt was in that. The guys who almost took--Stuart Davis was one of those--who almost took scenes and portrayed those scenes with geometric shapes, so it was either dismissed as an offshoot of that or as an offshoot of Mondrian. And I just kind of felt like I

was not getting across to people what I was doing--I didn't know what I was doing, but I felt that what I was doing was not what they were saying I was doing. And I began thinking about art in general and that there are always two poles to art. With the Greeks it was the Dionysian and the Apollonian; there was always the sort of romantic impulse in art and the classical impulse. From an historical viewpoint it always seemed to surface. David and Delacroix. At each place there seemed to be, in a given art period, at least after you had a certain perspective, both those impulses were there. So here was all this abstract expressionism, and that's when the idea came to me about this show, that if there was a strong impulse recognized in an era of abstract art, if there was abstract expressionism, there had to be its polarity. And I just tailed in on the word that was already used, abstract expressionism, so I said there must be an abstract classicism. It was a misleading word, and from twenty years later it sounds kind of pretentious.

PALANKER: So you're the one who made up the phrase?

BENJAMIN: I don't know who made it up. My wife says she made it up. And Peter Selz says he made it up. I know I never liked it, and I wasn't convinced, but it made a certain sense, and now from a long distance it's as legitimate as abstract expressionism. But then when that particular show went to London, Lawrence Alloway wrote in Art International that he much preferred the

term "hard-edge" painting. As I remember that whole article, that whole review of our show in London in Art International by Alloway was more of an argument about whether it should be called abstract classicism or hard-edge painting than the substance of the show. But anyhow, so . . . how did this start?

PALANKER: Started at the point.

BENJAMIN: The point of it, okay. And so in a way I was one of many, one of several at least, who had an idea for a show of this kind. And I talked to Peter Selz about it, and he agreed it was a good idea. And then, [as] it was written in the LAICA [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art] Journal, Selz agreed to put the show on at Pomona College, and then with one thing or another happening, it wound up opening at the Los Angeles [County] Museum. But the point of the show, to us as painters, it did help our careers along, and not so much in a sense of making money and that sort of thing but it gave us a lot more credibility. It seems like you have to be part of a movement or you get very little critical attention. And so that happened, to some extent. I mean, ah, here now we have something to do with these guys that paint like Mondrian, but it's not like Mondrian, and they paint like Stuart Davis, but it really isn't that. And so it made people pay more attention because we were part of a school, a movement. Now the art public, I think, wants that; the collectors want that.

It gives them a little more security. And museum directors like that because then they can write a catalog or they can write essays and discover a trend. So I mean, it fits into a lot of categories. So in that sense it helped us as painters. It helped us. The point of the show as far as, what was the other question you mentioned before? As far as . . . ?

PALANKER: As far as defining trends.

BENJAMIN: Defining trends--I'm very doubtful about that. Because here were the four of us--at that time I was about thirty-five, and Hammersley is about forty, and Lorser and John McLaughlin were twenty, thirty years older than that; and we'd all been painting that way for quite a while. I think, taking a bigger show with a bigger example, the show that opened up at the Museum of Modern Art, the op art show, "The Responsive Eye": now the point of that I just find is totally devoid of any real art meaning, because I remember when I got the catalog for that show, there were guys in there from their twenties to their eighties. There were young kids I'd never heard of, to Albers, who was an old man at that time. I was one of the relative younger ones. I had been painting that way for--when was that show? about 1965? I think, '64, -3, in there.

PALANKER: About '65, '66.

BENJAMIN: Okay, so I had been painting that way for about twelve years, and some of them whose names I recognized

from Art News who had been doing abstract expressionism until that started to wane, so all of a sudden these are newcomers to the new field. Some had been painting that way for forty years, like Albers and others that I can't recall right now. So here, all of a sudden in 1965, all of a sudden the most important museum in the world puts on a show and says in essence, "This is the new thing. This is what's being done now." And so they get all these painters, from their twenties to their eighties, and have this big show to establish an important trend. And there was absolutely no trend involved; as I say, some of these guys had been doing this for many, many years. It was just at one point in time somebody, without, I hope, being too cynical, somebody needed a new idea to keep up with his curator of modern art job, and so . . . . And it was going so fast then--I mean, abstract expressionism had lasted for what, ten years, and then the next thing lasted for five, and the next thing three, and then op art was one and pop art was one, and it got shorter and shorter until almost it was like the styles in clothing, which, you know, every year it has to change. But that didn't represent a trend; it represented a very arbitrary choosing of painters, some of whom had just started painting this way, some of whom had been painting that way for fifteen years, and some for twenty and some for forty. So it was a pretty artificial thing. So from the point of view,

shows like this from the point of view of establishing current trends, I don't think it means anything. I think it can mean something as it did to us when it said, "Here are some painters who are doing work of a certain kind that's of great value and it's been overlooked because all the emphasis has been on a certain other kind of painting." I'm not sure that it's that different--the abstract expressionists, say, and the abstract classicists. Because from a long distance in time you think of the abstract expressionists as being very, you know, romantic and painterly and expressionistic, and the hard-edge painters, the abstract classicists, as being very cool. And yet now, again, at this distance, you look at a show--well, there was a show a few years ago at the Pasadena Museum called "New York School Revisited." And there's a guy like Rothko comes on now not as somebody throwing paint on the canvas, very cool, very classical. And Pollock comes on, to me at least, not the heavy macho type that he was pictured as, but as a very lyrical kind of a painter, superlyrical kind of a painter. And this philosophical overlay that was put on those guys maybe again helped them in their career, but how illuminating it was I don't know. Originally it's illuminating to show a new kind of work going on, but if it gets too heavy on the philosophy and the generalizations of critics, then it's not very illuminating. So the points are both positive

and negative. Do we have another question which had to do in that area?

PALANKER: Yes, we were going to relate it to the Ferus Gallery. The Ferus is considered the beginning of Los Angeles art, and this show is considered overlooked by people that studied the art out here. Do you have anything to say on the Ferus at the time, and what eventually happened?

BENJAMIN: Well, at that time I don't know if the Ferus was in existence or not, but if it was, it was in a very small gallery off of La Cienega, and I don't think Irving Blum was involved in it yet. It certainly wasn't an important gallery at that time. You said before that coming from New York, that the first you'd heard of California art, of twentieth-century California art, was very funky kind of stuff. But actually before that came along there was a fetish--the finish fetish used to be talked about, which again, that label was hooked on to some of the people in the Ferus Gallery. But I think that was a characteristic of art out here long before that. I mean, no matter what your style of art, everybody was very conscious of the finish, the paint quality. A friend of mine who teaches at Scripps, Paul Darrow, used to have this theory--again, this is regardless of style. But the reason that California painters, whether they were expressionists or hard-edge painters or watercolorists or what,

the reason that they always had such beautiful paint quality was because most of the art that they saw was in reproductions, in magazines, which is true. There just wasn't that much out here in the forties and fifties; there weren't galleries. And so what you saw were color reproductions in the various books and magazines, which are always much prettier, or usually much prettier than the original painting, right? And I think there's a certain truth to that. I mean, I would look at those things, and I've always been very careful, very concerned with the paint. Whether I was in the early days when I was trying to paint still lifes like McFee, or trying to paint like de Kooning, or up till now, I'm very concerned with the paint, that it's beautiful and sensuous and has feel to it. And since 95 percent of my initial art influences were via reproduction, which makes always a very beautiful surface, I think that might be true about all of us. I know I was always terribly disappointed, or I used to be, when I'd see some New York painter who I had admired in reproductions, and I'd see some paintings out here and I'd say, "Jesus," this wretched-looking craftsmanship, and the canvases were all buckled, and the stretcher bars were warped, and the paint was horrid-looking, and it really bothered me. So I think that finish fetish, which seemed to me to be nailed on to some of the guys that came along and were doing, well, you know, metal or plastics,

or some of the painters, that that was a strong thing here already. That was very important--the paint quality, the surface quality. But as far as what, you asked about Ferus?

PALANKER: Ferus as opposed to the people involved in this show, in the abstract classicist show.

BENJAMIN: Well, I don't think it's as opposed; it's just that these guys had very little to do with not only the Ferus Gallery but that sort of aesthetic or that kind of approach. I mean, most of those guys were pretty good salesmen, although whether they were talented or not, they were much more clever in the sense of being able to promote themselves I think, than a lot of the rest of us. [pauses] I could say more about that, but I'm really not in the mood to get into the Ferus Gallery. What was the next thing you were thinking about?

PALANKER: Well, after the show, how did your career change?

BENJAMIN: Oh, yeah. Well, it changed that, at least in my case and Fred Hammersley's case--we hadn't shown much, and McLaughlin and Feitelson had a lot more, but all of a sudden lots of shows were available and there were a lot of reviews and a lot of sales and very flattering things coming from outside. And that was very nice. It caused difficulties later when those things stopped, and then the next thing was--what was next after op art? Well, pop art came next, wasn't it, very quickly?

PALANKER: Right, pretty much.

BENJAMIN: Okay, and then something else came even quicker after that, but then there were a few years there where it was very pleasant and gratifying to have all that external reinforcement. It caused a lot of problems later; I don't know about the others. I can't remember now. Again, did we talk much about that last time? You said just in a sentence.

PALANKER: You mentioned that you had difficulties, but very briefly.

BENJAMIN: Well, I don't want to repeat it, but just as an aftermath, you were asking about the aftermath of that show. Those were good things that happened because when nobody knows about you it's awfully nice to have suddenly people wanting shows and paintings. But then after some years of that--and living out here was not a good way to keep that going; you're too far off the beaten track--when that started to die off, which kind of coincided about the time the art market slumped, I think people started to get suspicious. Shortly after pop art--it seems to me in L.A., at least, that's when galleries started to not do so well and started to close. It was kind of hard to take when that stuff stopped because you didn't realize it at the time, but it was one of the things that helped get you away from what you were painting for, because you weren't painting for all these things--you were painting because you wanted to see the

ideas you had; you wanted to see what it was going to look like; you wanted to paint, and all this other stuff was very secondary. But when it comes on too sweet for a while, you can easily lose your balance. And when it stops you wonder why you're feeling bad, because even though you could intellectually explain that for the last fifteen years, you don't know it when it happens to you. So that is the bad part of "success," in quotes. All of a sudden you're, without knowing it, depending on it. [phone rings; tape recorder turned off] It's on now? Well, what you were saying was the point of the show in terms of how meaningful it was, the four of us to show together, what point was there to that. And again, outside of the point that I talked about earlier, that it served to bring some people's work to notice that was getting disregarded, the very thing that made us now merit some attention, a certain similarity of style, was really very misleading. Because outside of the fact that the four of us had a hard edge to the forms we used, I really don't see any more relationship than that. So in a sense the show wasn't all that educational. For instance, McLaughlin was a very fine painter, but he was not interested in color; I mean, that wasn't his concern. And he has said--he told me, you know--"I only use color to define the form. I make this yellow so it will separate from this green thing next to it." And his course in his more mature paintings was all black

and white. So he was not a colorist; he wasn't concerned with that. He had a whole different, other area of concern, and his concern was certainly not mine. He was very philosophical; his idea of an image had philosophical overtones that certainly mine didn't have. I suppose basically I was always interested in color. He would always kid me about my paintings. He'd say, "That color is awfully seductive." Now, that's pretty far apart, when you've got a guy that is not at all concerned with color and somebody that's totally concerned. So they can hardly be members of a school. They're only united because their forms happen to have a hard edge. And Hammersley was, his paintings--a key to his paintings were his titles. His paintings were kind of riddles; they were kind of poetic riddles, but visual ones. But again, that certainly wasn't McLaughlin's concern, and it certainly wasn't mine. And Feitelson came from a whole different area. So in a sense it was helpful, but it was helpful to us; it was helpful to people in general that looked at art because they said, "Now, here are some more things to look at. It's okay now to look at this." It widened the vista a little bit. But with the same qualities, it served to confuse people a little, because here's Hammersley and me and McLaughlin and Feitelson, and I think there were an awful lot of frowns, just like there were when people were looking at different abstract expressionists trying to figure out

how they were alike. Well, that wasn't important how they were alike; really I feel much closer aesthetically, in terms of feeling, to Rothko that I do to John McLaughlin, much closer. And it got at that time almost to a point where the degree of emotion expressed in a painting was equated with the thickness or the texture of the paint: more thick, more texture, more emotion, you know; and thinner and neater, more cool. And that's really ridiculous. I mean there are just different ways of . . . . So I would like to, if I was a museum curator--I don't know if it was possible, but if I was a curator--I would like to choose a show where I picked the paintings not because of some stylistic similarity or relationship, but from their emotional relationship--I mean, like a real lyrical show. I think you would get the most diverse kind of a show in terms of style, and yet get a very even level, I think, of emotional response. It would be hard, but I think it's possible; I've fantasized it a number of times.

PALANKER: Do you have examples in mind?

BENJAMIN: I have had, at these times when I've thought about the show--and I'd really want to think about that and not just say it off the top of my head, because I suddenly blacked out. But I think it would be interesting. And I think that's what the art is about; I mean, that's what you respond to--not the style but what is in that

painting. I look at Mondrians, and I have very little emotional response to Mondrian; and yet in the beginning, when people would write about my work, always there would be something about Mondrian. I didn't come from there; I came from cubism. Against my will, I got to this. And I think you could see that from that abstract expressionist show that we talked about before, "Revisited," that was in Pasadena--I think that was in Pasadena, either Pasadena or Los Angeles--where from twenty years away you could see that it was not a school. They might have all lived in New York; they might have all been doing something quite different from what was academically accepted, but there wasn't all that much similarity in the emotional content of those paintings. And I certainly don't think there's much similarity and emotional content in the four of us. McLaughlin realized that long before I did. And I mean it was actually something he said got me to thinking that led to this whole train of thought. I mean it was convenient, but it was not lastingly meaningful.

PALANKER: The quote from John McLaughlin?

BENJAMIN: That last?

PALANKER: Yes.

BENJAMIN: Oh, no, I just made that up. No. What do we have next on there? [tape recorder turned off]

PALANKER: All right, back to after the show. How long did success last?

BENJAMIN: You're talking about in terms of sales and shows and stuff like that.

PALANKER: I guess. You were talking about external feedback.

BENJAMIN: Yeah, well, maybe five, six, seven years, that long.

PALANKER: And how did it start to change?

BENJAMIN: Well, it started to change as--there are a lot of things that changed. The Los Angeles art scene started to change. Somehow I have the night of President Kennedy's assassination down as--not that that was directly related, perhaps (maybe it was, maybe it was), but it seemed like from about that time on, the La Cienega boom began to taper off. And so that was a part of it. And then I had some shows in different places, but that was part of it. The Los Angeles-La Cienega boom lessened and also very big name painters from the East were coming out here more and more, so the scene shifted a little bit. The important galleries were fewer, and they had more big name people, and at the same time the old Los Angeles galleries seemed to kind of recede, and started closing, began doing other things. So that had an effect. And you're talking about me personally--well, before we get to that, I think the art scene changed in the sense of new movements, like pop art, and then in very quick order, all kinds of new things that began to dominate the scene, the magazines, the

collectors. And I think not long after that was when people stopped buying so many paintings. I mean the Stellas and the Nolands, and the people like that sold, but the sort of middle range, like I was in--like David Stuart told me once, he said, "I can sell a $40,000 painting, but I can't sell a $2,000 painting." I was talking about a show or something, and he was almost washing his hands of shows. And he said, "I can sell a $40,000 painting, but I can't sell a $2,000 one." So it was sort of like business in general. All during that time, the late sixties, it was really rough on small business, and the giants were getting bigger. You know, it kind of mirrored the economy. And then I was starting to get the middle-age syndrome, which whether you're an artist or not is something that has an effect on you. And then the middle-aged artist syndrome on top of that, which is sort of a double dose of poison. And again, I think this is what we said last time, but when you're very young and promising, everybody is very interested in what you're doing--collectors, dealers, for their various reasons. And when you're past sixty, and now you're a royal veteran, and that's okay. But that long middle point, when an artist ought to be at the absolute, doing the best work of his life, there's this kind of a no-man's-land. And then, again in my case, although I'm not sure this is an aftermath of the show--I'm not sure

that this syndrome isn't very common; I'm sure it must be. All the things like your oldest daughter gets married--all these things, none of these things now you've known about, you can verbalize since you were twenty-two years old, but when they happen, all of a sudden all that great intellectual knowledge disappears and you don't know what's happening to you. And you only start to know it again when you're starting to get through it. So all this knowledge does you no good when you need it. And then again, my wife and I were separated; having teen-age kids in the sixties has driven stronger men than me asunder, just all the attendant pressures of my life. And I don't think it affected my painting because my painting got better, and I think right now I'm doing I think better than I've ever done in the sense of the finished painting, in the sense of my involvement with the painting, my excitement with it. There's a sneaky feeling that I've had for the last five years that I'm past the point of good paintings or bad paintings; it's just those are the paintings, and there are no mistakes, and they're good or bad and there's nothing that can be done about it. I mean I am just a grown-up painter now. So anyhow, all those, and I was cognizant of that--I was aware of that--but it didn't help. And it took a long time to get through all that stuff and really get back to where I am now, which is back to when I was in my twenties, without, maybe, a lot of the hangups I had then. [bird

chirps] He's going to be on tape. [laughter] But I don't know if that's covered what you wanted it to.

PALANKER: Well, one thing I wanted to ask about is you were able to continue working even in the worst of times. That seems unusual.

BENJAMIN: Well, it really shouldn't be unusual, because that's really where I learned, that's really where I got myself back again, because things really, to me at least, were so difficult that I was almost forced to, out of desperation--or you grab for whatever is there that you can grab onto, and what was there was the painting again. And I realized that I wasn't thinking about the paintings for the next show I was going to have, not that I ever painted for a show or for any reason other than that I've had an idea and I wanted to see the painting, but those other things start to get mixed in your head. And I began to realize that it was the painting that was the important thing. And again maybe I'm repeating, but I can remember nights going out there and just staring at an unfinished painting, never a finished painting, and all of a sudden realizing that the only thing that looked good in the future was when that yellow dried, so then I could paint the orange; and very slowly and with a lot of difficulty it began to dawn on me what I was thinking when I went out there and looked at the paintings. Which I think is what <u>painting</u> is all about. And it's not at all different

from gardening, which is the other thing I'm very close to, because when you paint, what you're doing is you're sort of identifying with an organic, with something that's growing. Each new color, each new stage in this thing is growing, it's organically growing, and I don't think we can experience that we're growing, organically or any other way. And so it's almost like a painting is sort of a projection. That thing is very important to feel, this feeling of growth and creation. I mean, that's something that never was before, and this is a new thing, and with each stage of its development or growth, I mean, you're so closely involved with it that that becomes you. And you can do the same thing when you're really gardening, and you know where every leaf is, and how advanced every bud is; and you get so tuned into that, that you get very tuned into that, and you get to be that. Just like my studio really is in the back three walls in my head, and I can be teaching or doing all the shit I have to do all the time; and I've got all those paintings, and I know which is done and which is wet and which I can paint on in three days and which I can paint tonight and which I can paint Sunday. That is why if I go two or three days without painting anything I get very uneasy, and I just don't feel right, and I start to get lost. When I'm in my best mental health is when I've got six paintings going. Sometimes I've had even as many as seven going.

So anyhow, that's what painting is about, and that's what I got away from with all these outer things, and that's what got me through all that, and that's what made me realize it again.

We were just talking what painting is all about, and I was thinking the other night, as I have a number of times, I have this fantasy where somebody comes, some big collector, and they say, "Okay, I'll give you $20,000 a year for the rest of your life, and what you have to do is give me all the paintings you do that year." And immediately I say yes. And then I start to think about it, and I start to worry, would I feel now that I would have to paint? Because that's the only thing I reserve the right to--that I can quit. I mean, I can't quit my job and I can't quit a whole bunch of things, but nobody ever told me to paint, and nobody ever expected me to paint, and I don't have to do it. So I start thinking, and what I do then when I get these kind of doubts, then I say to this collector, I say, "Well, what about a cost-of-living increase?" But what I'm really thinking about is things like, "Well, if I knew that you were going to take everything that I did, and I was going to get this money at the end of the year for all this, how would that affect me? Maybe I'd have trouble painting." And then I'd start making a deal--well, I'd get to keep six, because that at least would make me feel like a certain amount of it would remain mine. It's never

to make more money with; it's always what I would be afraid of, if I was in a position where I was beholden to somebody to paint. Because even though that's my unique thing, it's the only thing I don't have to do. There are things that I cannot do--I mean, I can't stop cutting my lawn, and I can't stop paying bills, and I can't stop doing all these middle-class things. I guess that's an inverse way of saying a very positive thing. Well, anyhow, I had something else in mind but I can't remember.

TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO

AUGUST 9, 1976

PALANKER: Compared to most of the artists all around here and in general, your life has been a bit different. You're a grade school teacher, you don't teach art in college, and you have a very tiny art background as far as college goes. Well, how do you feel about that?

BENJAMIN: Well, there are a lot of things that are different from a typical artist, because Rousseau worked in a post office, and there are a lot of guys like that. But I don't think from my art point of view that teaching in a grade school is that far out--and also not teaching art, teaching just general elementary, plus art, which I like very much and which I do well, because that's after all where I got my original impetus into painting, from what those kids did.

PALANKER: Well, that in itself is, I think, completely unique.

BENJAMIN: All right, well, they really got me interested in art. And that's, when I think about it, if a local college offered me a job where I just had to come two days a week and that would be very nice, I'm sure I would jump at that--I probably would have jumped at it a long time ago. But the fact that I have gotten from doing what I'm doing is that every year, I have thirty new kids every

year, and every year it's banged home to me by my experience that painting is a very natural talent, and that everybody can do it to a point where it's aesthetically satisfying, to them and to others. And I think that's a very powerful--you know, all during the years I haven't thought of it that way (I'm thinking about it now because we're talking about it) but when I think about it, that's a powerful supportive thing for a painter. What's the fear of most painters? The fear of the blank canvas, you know. "What if I don't have any more ideas? what if I run dry? what if I don't have enough talent?" All that crap. But you're in a position where every year you get a bunch of kids thrown in there, and you're forced to see--of course, you're helping in the process, but you couldn't do it if what I said before wasn't true, that art is an integral part of everybody's sensitivity. I don't think many artists have the benefit of that; that's a very supportive thing. So how could you ever then--if you're in that situation--how could you ever have any negative thoughts about your own work? It would be a cop-out.

PALANKER: Well, even your attitude here . . . . Off the tape earlier you talked about June Harwood being afraid of you--well, not of you but of other people looking at her work, stealing ideas or learning something that she doesn't want to give away. That's an attitude, too, that wouldn't be delighted in knowing that all people could

paint that are capable of producing something.

BENJAMIN: Well, she's a very good high school art teacher. Now she's in a college, and I know she was a good art teacher. And I didn't mean to saddle her with that. I just used her as an example. But a lot of artists have; I've just never felt that. When I've been in class, for instance--and again, this is probably part of my art attitude--the way I get those guys started, as soon as somebody does something good (and of course it has to be by my definition, because I'm the guy that makes the choice), I pin it up on the board. And all of a sudden I've got the whole room ringed with things that the kids have done. And I hold it up and I say, "Now, here's a really good one." And some new kid comes into the class, and we're doing art. "What should I do?" so I say, "Look at these and find something that you think is really good and do something like it, only different." Now, you couldn't say this to an adult, but the kid can accept that perfectly. And that's how artists paint. You start out by admiring certain artists, and you try to do something like them because you don't know what your vision is yet. You haven't worked long enough for your vision to have surfaced. It hasn't become concrete yet. And I'm sure everybody starts off hero-worshiping certain other artists, and you say, "Oh, that's beautiful. I want to do one like that." Well, adults get hung up on that. They're afraid they're not

going to be original, or they get too academic. But you can do that with kids. So that concept of art as a private enterprise, you know, is out of my--I don't have that experience. But I know a lot of artists do. They think, "I've got this great, unique idea." So I think all those ideas that those kids do, or anybody does, if they really do their things, are unique. Although in realistic terms, in terms of the art market, I suppose there is a certain truth in all that. And I hear people talking about the things you can't do and the things you can do; and if they finally found the thing that was the next logical development in the history of Western painting, they'd be very jealous about anybody else finding it out, if they were sure that they figured. I just don't see it that way.

So anyhow, about the kids that I teach, that would be my answer. It is kind of unusual--it is unusual--but it's a very powerful factor in my outlook on things. And I've taught for twenty-five years, and each with kids from nine to fifteen, that age range. I've taught some high school classes. They get a little bit more inhibited, but if I had time . . . . See, in school, this is another thing: in school, I have those kids all day long, and it's not like an hour every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and so the relationship becomes personal. I think in classes you're forced into giving certain assignments, and you see how well somebody can do that assignment because you

don't have just everyday contact, and there's so many kids that I couldn't stand it until they did their first picture that I could relate to, and then I could make it with them. And often that was the first time a teacher had related, really related, to what they had done. So anyhow, it's that part that's different--the teaching in grammar school.

PALANKER: How about your own art education? You really had very little in school.

BENJAMIN: Well, I had none as an undergraduate, and I went right into graduate school when I was twenty-three, I guess--whenever it was, twenty-four, -five--and I had a very rather special kind of art education. Did we talk about before when I was at the graduate school with Jean Ames?

PALANKER: No, you mentioned Jean's name, but didn't . . . .

BENJAMIN: About the way she helped me?

PALANKER: Not very specifically.

BENJAMIN: Well, she really treated me, now that I look back on it, like I relate to my kids. And I'm not sure it was that easy for her. But Scripps at that time was a very well thought of art school, but it was also a pretty academic one. I mean, Millard Sheets was there, Henry Lee McFee's influence was still strong. And it was basically a conservative school, although considered very good out here. And I didn't know what I was doing; I didn't understand what was going on in the classes. And I kept taking

courses from Jean Ames, who taught design. And she somehow, when I wanted to quit because I just didn't want to do assignments, she was a big enough person to just let me go ahead and paint after several courses. I was painting a lot, and she would come and look at what I did every week and give me a criticism of what I had done. But it let me develop, and I wasn't developing in a vacuum, because I was looking at all those art magazines we were talking about before, and I was going to Los Angeles and looking at other people's work and trying to paint like my heroes. I was turning out a lot of paintings, and I was older than most students, and I was very fortunate to find somebody like that, that would just let me go ahead and work as long as I kept doing it--which was really what I do at school. I mean, I learn from kids, in the sense that if somebody's working really hard and they're very serious and I can't see much in what they're doing, I figure there's got to be something there or they wouldn't be working that hard; they wouldn't be that serious. So I look harder, and all of a sudden I'm starting to see things, and I'm broadening my area of perception. I would like to give that a try with older people and see how they would react to it. And I'm sure they would. It's rarely tried, though, because, especially now, it's always this art by historical imperative. Whether it's an academic or a real far-out place, there are always

things that can't be done that have to be done. And as long as somebody's frowning and really working hard, you've got to assume that they're doing something significant.

I must have always felt that about myself, because I wasn't getting any feedback from anybody else in those years, except for Jean. So it may be unusual, but it may be not at all that unexpected that that should be a successful way for somebody to learn how to paint. [pauses]

What else is different? Teach school? I live in a nice, middle-class neighborhood, and I keep the lawn mowed.

PALANKER: Now, that's a huge difference.

BENJAMIN: That's a huge difference. [laughter]

PALANKER: Why aren't you in Venice in a loft, a nice messy place and everything?

BENJAMIN: Because I was brought up in an apartment building in Chicago, and what looks like a little suburban yard looks like a meadow to me. And I love to grow things, and I get a chance to do that. And as we were talking about before, growing plants and flowers is, if you're really involved in it, you get the same experience back as you do when you're painting, that sort of identification with growth. That's a good feeling. And also my parents are very much like this. And it takes a while. You know, you usually either repeat what's in your childhood, because after I was seven or eight my parents moved out of the apartment building in Chicago, but still the important years were in that

environment. So that's what counts. And so we moved into Evanston, Illinois, which is a suburban area to Chicago and had the yard and the lawn and everything. So in a sense, you know, you repeat what your parents do. But then it gets to the point where you either repeat it or you reject it. And whether you repeat it or reject it, you have to get to the point where you say, "Now, am I repeating this or rejecting it because I like it or because I don't like it, or is it just sort of a reactive response?" And you know, those are called hangups, I guess. And so you finally get to a place where you say, "Yeah, this is what I like to do," you know. There used to be an element of cutting the lawn like I'm supposed to be doing it, but now I cut the lawn because I really like to cut the lawn. And all that gardening and keeping up the yard, that really fits in with painting, because as I said, it's the same process. And if you get stuck on a color, or if you get bored--or, not bored, but fatigued from this--you just go out, and you take a half-hour, and you cut the grass or you pull some weeds or water something, and then you're ready to go back and paint some more. So it's not incompatible, really; it's just the same activity in a different form. And then there's another thing about living like this, and again I don't remember if we talked about that, but it's very easy to feel like an artist--and I don't want to make this sound like this was a program (this is

again on hindsight), but it's very easy to feel like an artist if you go and live in an artist area, let's say, whether it's Venice or wherever, and you've got all your artists around you, and they're all reacting to you as an artist, and not a day goes by that you see a lot of people that don't see you and recognize you and build up your identity as an artist. Or if you're in a college art department where everybody knows that you're the official art guy. And you live in a place like this, and your neighbors couldn't care less about your paintings; in fact, it's an area that, despite the fact that your lawn is cut, they probably remain somewhat suspect. Even in a town like Claremont where artists are good, they're still not as good as, I'm sure, economics professors or major realtors or things like that. So I think in the life that I have led, if you want to be an artist, there's only one way you're going to be the artist, and that is to paint. You're not going to get it from people at work, where you are neither an artist by definition or an art professor. You're not going to get it from your neighbors, and that's probably good. That's probably good.

PALANKER: That was my question that I had forgotten, which is your relationship with other artists: do you still socialize with other artists? Do you go and look at their work?

BENJAMIN: Yeah. I would do it. Yeah, I would. Out here

in Claremont it's the college art people, because they work together, tend to socialize together, and so there is not a lot of intercourse between artists outside, I think, of their college departments. But I enjoy that. And I don't go into L.A. much anymore for the last seven, eight, well, ten years, because I just can't come home at two o'clock in the morning anymore and get up at seven like I used to. And so what energy I've got, more and more it's either teaching or my painting or the things I need to do at home--or my bowling league.

PALANKER: Would you mind if I asked you a question about the bowling league on tape? You mentioned off tape once that there was a bit of a paradox even in that. I don't really know much about your bowling, but, you had said that you felt, when you were bowling, that your painting was something that you couldn't possibly explain to the members of your league, that it was something that you had to keep remote. And also with other painters the fact that you bowled wasn't something that you could explain.

BENJAMIN: Well, it's not just for other painters and the bowling; it's just that the people we socialize with in Claremont think of bowling as some sort of a lower-class activity. And of course, the bowlers that I know don't have much experience with painters, and so I mean you just wind up--this is maybe compartmentalizing yourself--

but I mean there's no point in pushing painting at the bowling alley, and pushing bowling with a lot of people that aren't interested in it. And at school certainly--at least until I got my name in the papers; then they felt that I must be okay, because I get publicity. But I certainly don't get any points for my art activity. I think probably most people get pushed into a place where they're pretty limited in their acquaintances and their social life, and I don't know how I got into these various things. I mean, I really like to bowl. It's exasperating. Probably bowling is about the only time I forget all the other stuff, because there's . . . . Did you ever read Zen and the Art of Archery? I read that a long time ago. That was very important a long time ago when I read that. And it's that kind of an activity. It's all in your psychic state. And for a person who hasn't bowled too long, I got my average to almost 170--I've only bowled about four years--and it's a wonderful feeling. Again, it's not too far different a feeling from when you're doing a drawing; it all starts to fall into place for a painting. And everything is just falling in right, after muddling around. And bowling can be the same way. You can be muddling around, and all of a sudden you get in a kind of a groove and you're not thinking. Just like in the beginning of the drawing, you're thinking, "Should this be here or there? I should do this," and all those shoulds and shouldn'ts. And then

all of a sudden it all starts falling into place, and it's a physical feeling that you get. And I don't know; whether it's flowers or paintings or people that you become very involved with, or a bowling ball and tenpins, what it all boils down to when it's working is this identification with something outside of you. There must be some way to realize yourself directly, and not through a painting or another person or a flower or a bowling ball. But I haven't found that yet. I mean, I like the others well enough so I'm okay for now, but maybe that's possible. I've never taken any acid; maybe I should do that. Maybe that's . . . . So how else is the life different? Married for twenty-five years.

PALANKER: Happily?

BENJAMIN: Married, you know, with all the ups and downs. That, again, is to me something like painting. And the thing that strikes me most about that is, very early on I realized that if I quit a painting, if I didn't finish a painting--and this was in the first two or three years that I painted--that if I couldn't finish it, that within a few more canvases I'd get stuck at the same place again. I got that feeling a bunch of times. And I think that's the same way with marriage. I'm not talking about the sanctity of marriage or anything like that; I'm talking about if there gets to be a point where your relationship with this person breaks down, it's exposing some area,

some aspect of yourself, that's hit a stone wall. I mean, you're stuck, for one reason or another. Okay, so let's say you then leave that person at that difficult point. I really feel like with a painting, you're going to get there someplace else, with somebody else, probably even quicker than you did the last time. But this time you won't have all the continuity and the growth in that relationship that's been very meaningful. And you know, it's almost a cliché; people that get divorced often get married to somebody that's so much like the person they were married to before, and within a few years all of a sudden you notice . . . . And living in one place for a long time, like I have--we've lived twenty-five years here, so I've seen a lot of the same people over a long time, my peers. And I've seen that over and over again. Somebody will marry someone, remarry somebody that's just like their first spouse, and then all of a sudden they're in the same bag as they were before. So the idea of being married for, I guess, twenty-seven years can sound staid, but there have been lots of places, you know, that we could split as easily as the next guy. But again, on hindsight, I'm glad we didn't, because we got through those places and always got to a place that was looser and easier, and in the process a number of hangups disintegrated. You know a lot of patterns that you were doing blindly, we began to realize what they were and

what they weren't. I think a marriage like that is almost like a lifetime psychotherapy, I mean because all these things in your background that you haven't been able to assimilate or come to keep popping up. And there have been other women in my life that have been very important and maybe there was something in our relationship that those things couldn't happen--well, I don't think any one person can be totally sustaining to another person; I mean, that's pretty unrealistic, and at the same time I think it's a terrible waste for either one to have certain intervals that have great meaning to them that they couldn't experience with their spouse and then just blow the whole relationship just for one thing like that. So that's been also a very meaningful thing. All these things are so close together. And having children and seeing them get to be adults. Are we almost out of tape again?

PALANKER: No.

BENJAMIN: And having children and seeing them get to be adults. And you go through all the same kinds of things as I was describing in our marriage. I would have missed so much, for instance, if I had not had the continuity of all that; and I mean, for better or for worse, I had the opportunity to go through the whole process, and I still am, with them. I guess I'm a great one for continuity. It just seems like if that breaks, an awful lot of stuff is lost and I don't want to have to start all over again.

And I've got too much into it and out of it already. I don't want to repeat anything. I don't think you have to repeat stuff, and I don't. I have a very bad feeling about repeating things. And I think any of these things that you stopped, you'd have to almost--maybe not start over but you'd do a lot of repeating, and you'd wind up at the same place where you got stuck the last time, and so what's the point?

PALANKER: All that stuff that you've just talked about from the outside looks strange, but when you explain it it falls into place just nice. I guess you're not really very different. Just looking at it from the point of view of what an average artist's living experience in life or his environment, yours appears to be the unusual one, the odd one.

BENJAMIN: Yeah. But going back to the teaching, when I hear friends that teach art so often talk with great dismay about their students, and how they don't have any talent--"There're so few of them have real talent," or "I really got a guy this year that has a lot of talent," and I think that what they're missing, either they're expecting the wrong thing, or maybe people by that age are too cemented in. I still don't believe it, but maybe a kid of ten or eleven or twelve is so much closer to the surface, and they haven't had that much conditioning yet. I don't want to go into the "beautiful child" theory, because I

don't believe in that stuff, but it's sure easier at that age to get them loose and be able to do beautiful things. At thirteen or fourteen or fifteen--I taught there--they're more difficult already. They're embarrassed, and in high school they want you to tell them--because I've taught that age, too--they want you to tell them some things that if they follow those directions they'll make a good picture. With kids the age that I teach, it's marvelous. Somebody comes up with a picture, and they're a third of the way through the picture, and they say, "What color should I use next?" And then I say, "Well, go and look in your colors and find a color that looks good with the other colors that you've got there." And they say, "Oh, okay." And they go back, and they pick a color, and they go to work. And they think I've told them something--and I've told them the right thing, of course, but they think they've had an answer, and I don't think you could do that with an older one. "Should it be a cool color? Or should it be this or that?" And all they want is a little support and a little feeling of surety on your part that they can do it, and they do it.

PALANKER: What about younger than that age group?

BENJAMIN: I don't know much about younger than nine.

PALANKER: You haven't taught them?

BENJAMIN: Except my own kids, and they used to always do really good stuff around here, really good. But outside

of them, I haven't . . . . Real little ones, kindergarten--they can do good things; it's not as hard. But I don't know much about . . . . I don't think I could be much less verbal than I am with the kids I am teaching, but I imagine you would have to be with those littler ones. You take children that have no attention span in class--twenty seconds--ten minutes of concentrated work on a paper or something is really good. And they've got a record for the last five years in school of being unable to concentrate; you can see it on their cards: "can't concentrate"; "can't get his act together" in some way. And you can take kids like that, and in a very short time they can work an hour or an hour and a half on a very demanding kind of a painting. And that in itself is a wonderful thing. I've never really thought about that until tonight, but I'm sure all that over the years, without my thinking about it, that that gave me a lot of strength and left me almost no room for any self-doubt. Because how could I see that every year, and all these kids, and doubt that same thing in myself? I never thought about that until tonight, because I never worried about it--that I couldn't paint, or was not going to get ideas. Well, periodically, you know, but no more than . . . . What else did you have that you were thinking about before?

PALANKER: Well, one thing, and now it doesn't really fit the topic that well. Mainly off the tape you've mentioned

your dealings with other artists, and I was wondering, given your isolated existence out here, if you did go and look at other works, if you traded, if you did any of those things?

BENJAMIN: I used to, used to buy things, used to trade. What I'd really like to trade now would be to sculptors, but I'm not having much luck. I tried to get John Mason to trade with me about eight years ago, and he said, "Oh, if it happens it will happen." But it never happened. I used to. And now I don't with the paintings because I've just got so much space, and I want to hang my own paintings. But I would certainly like to trade with sculpture, except they have too much money in sculptures to want to trade for . . . .

No, I guess I started off really wanting to be around other painters, and I wasn't able to do it because at that time I was the beginner, and the big guys, you know, didn't want to . . . . And then I sort of made the scene in there for about five years, but I never really could. And I tried to, but I never could feel easy at riding a tricycle down Venice Boulevard--well, literally, you know--and doing things like that. I mean, there again, I'm always caught between--you know, I'm never square enough for one thing; I'm never far out enough for another thing. And maybe I'm not, you know; I guess I'm not. So that's where I'm at right now, by myself, you know. Except now I don't feel

like I wish I could be something else because that's the way I am. That's why I moved to Claremont, for contact with other artists. And as I said before, there were a lot of them here that were good then. I really feel good when I'm talking to other artists--I mean, if I respect them--and I would like much more of that. But it's just that, well, one friend of mine lives a block and a half that way, who I like and he likes me; and another one lives another two blocks that way; another lives a block that way; another is one block that way. And we very, very rarely see each other. There's no friction or anything, but you get lost like I am. And on Monday I paint, and then on Tuesday I got the bowling league, and Wednesday I'm painting, and maybe there's a social thing Thursday, and on Friday I want to paint, and maybe we've got a social thing Saturday, maybe go to L.A. for a concert or out to dinner or something, and Sunday I want to paint because I've got to go back to school Monday, and all of a sudden you don't . . . . That's why I'd like to be retired, you know. I could walk over and have lunch with a friend, or read, and be like a civilized person, and not just be jazzing along all the time.

How are we fixed for time?

PALANKER: Five more minutes or so.

BENJAMIN: Would you like to know the two technical developments that have made the most importance to me?

PALANKER: Okay, you've got three minutes.

BENJAMIN: Acrylic gesso and a guitar pick, for pushing the tape down. No, actually, those are the two things, the only two things, where I see any real progress since Dürer. [laughter]

PALANKER: Okay, why acrylic gesso?

BENJAMIN: Because you don't have to put rabbit skin glue on the canvas, and you don't have to prime it with lead that you have to let sit for months. You can just put it on, and it's flexible, and you can paint on it in two hours. And that was the only one until a couple of months ago when I got the guitar pick to put the tape down.

PALANKER: How do you use this guitar pick?

BENJAMIN: Just to press the tape down, just to press the tape down.

PALANKER: And it's worked better than anything you've come across?

BENJAMIN: And it lasts longer than my fingernails, by a hundred times--which I was making a joke of, but I always think of all these pronouncements about how you cannot do art today unless you take advantage of technological improvements and you got to use plastic forms and this and that. Which could be very good. It's not the plastics or the things that I object to, it's the pronouncements, which to me is the most important thing that art is about: no pronouncements, no imperatives, nobody telling

you what you can do or can't do. And in that sense, the so-called far-out guys are so much like the old academic guys, because on both extremes is where you get all these dos and don'ts. You know, I mean you don't . . . .

PALANKER: They both have a rigid structure that they work from.

BENJAMIN: Is there anything on there else that we were going to talk about?

PALANKER: No. [laughter]

BENJAMIN: Well, okay.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

AUGUST 19, 1976

PALANKER: Mr. Benjamin, why do you paint in oils and not acrylics like a lot of hard-edge painters do these days?
BENJAMIN: I think that's because I started to paint with oil and before acrylics really came in, and I got used to it, although I remember, when I was first starting, a Karl Zerbe ad in Art News about new materials. That was one of the first acrylics, and I sent for it, and I tried it. But in the first place I don't think you get the color, the depth of color, that oil has and acrylic doesn't seem to have. I think if you stained, then you could get intense color from acrylic. But I don't stain. I like opaque paint. I think also the reason I couldn't get involved in acrylic, even though I tried early, was my life just didn't permit it. I mean, I always painted at home, and there were always people dropping in and kids and painting at all kinds of hours, and oil gives you a lot of leeway. I mean, you can stop in the middle of something, and if you got acrylic and it's all drying, you can't have anything happening. You got to be clear to the end of it, and my life just hasn't been structured for that kind of time. But I think basically it's the quality of oil paint that I find more attractive, and it fits with my color vision or color field. But I also

think it was my life, really, that didn't permit with that kind of a stretch. Have you ever painted with acrylic?

PALANKER: Yes.

BENJAMIN: Well, you know you got to finish the whole thing, and it's drying. And if in the beginning like I had to change a baby's diapers or all these things, it would have been really very hard.

PALANKER: Just now I said, "hard edge." I don't know, how would you describe your paintings? "Hard edge" is just not the whole story.

BENJAMIN: It's a lousy word, and we talked about that last time, about defining a work by the type of edge it has or the amount of paint texture or the nature of the forms rather than by the emotional content of a work. And before you called it field painting, and these that are here now, I suppose to some extent, are field paintings. I mean, they all have one field. That's such a narrow consideration, to call a whole kind of painting by a field painting. I don't think they should fit under that category. So I don't know. I hate the words geometric forms, although I guess they are geometric forms, but that has kind of a mathematical intellectual connotation. I just think it's very hard not just to label this kind of painting, but any kind of painting. After a long time, the word impressionist becomes very acceptable and easy to use, but when you really think

about it that's not a very good term. I guess at best what those things are is just something to identify them in words, certain kind of painting, convenience. But then words are like that. I mean an apple is just a word for an apple. And I never experimented much with other media. I did a little wood sculpture which is more construction than starting from a solid piece. You know, it wasn't carving; it was construction. Maybe I did a dozen things like that; earlier I did watercolors, pastel sketches. But again, back to the way I've had to live--if you're always working and you have a full-time job plus a lot of family and home orientation, which takes a lot of time, and you want very badly to paint with oil, you just don't have any time left over to experiment or fool around. And I guess if I really wanted to, I would have done it, but I never really wanted to. That's probably the best reason why. I just made eight serigraphs and that was interesting, but it's nothing like the involvement--as soon as one is done, after twenty-five years of painting one painting at a time, all of a sudden, as soon as the first print is done, everything else is very anticlimactic, but then again I'm not a real print maker. A guy like [Leonard] Edmondson probably wouldn't have a feeling like that, and each one is a different experience.

PALANKER: Where did you print them?

BENJAMIN: At Cirrus Editions with Jean Milant. Those are

related to what I'm doing now. But I did have kind of a guilty feeling for running off thirty-five of these things, even though I like them very much. But when you get so oriented to one-of-a-kind paintings, you feel like you're cheating sort of, running all these things off.

PALANKER: You're answering all my questions. When you were looking at art, even when you were still looking at art--and you mentioned you haven't been doing that much lately--did you look at other media, like film or sculpture?

BENJAMIN: I've never--[I look at] film in the sense of movies, like that, but not film in the sense of . . . . I think the sense you're talking about is the medium itself for personal artistic . . . . I don't know enough about it or had enough experience to have that mean much. Sculpture, I always had a hard time with, except a very few things. I have tremendous response to African carvings, or a lot of real powerful response to a lot of pre-Columbian things and what you call ethnic things, earlier things, but not much contemporary stuff. I look at a figure, whether it's Maillot or Lipchitz, I just don't know what to do with it. I know it must be good, but I'm at kind of a loss to respond to it. I always liked David Smith. A few guys I like, but especially figure stuff. I just see no reason to paint figures of people. Maybe that's my deep varied Jewish background, where it was verboten . . . . No, I guess that it isn't true. No, that's not true.

El Greco was very exciting to me to look at, and those are figures, and Cézanne figures, and all of postimpressionist figures, Soutine and people like that.

PALANKER: In other words you're not interested in just a rendering; you like it taken a little farther.

BENJAMIN: Yes. I just actually get a physically bad reaction when I look at a very good old-fashioned figure painting or a portrait or something. What is that? What's that for? There was one down at the beach, at this beach house; the first time I walked in there I looked so pained that Krissy, my daughter, just picked it up and took it off to the bedroom. I must have had a terrible look on my face, that I just don't like to see a craven image.

PALANKER: Well, okay. Let's move on to the art community thing.

BENJAMIN: Okay.

PALANKER: Do you feel you're part of any art community?

BENJAMIN: Well, if you'd define art community as a lot of artists who live in some kind of proximity and had a lot of social intercourse; then I don't belong to one. I'm not sure there is one of that nature in Southern California. There might have been in Chicago or New York, where it's a big city and maybe there would be a drift to a certain place, because if you're a painter in a big city (and I've lived in Chicago), it could be

a pretty dismal thing. I mean, here I can be all alone, and it's nice, and it's pretty, and it's like a private little world you made; and it isn't there, so maybe you would be almost forced to go together. I imagine you would be. But out here where everything is so spread out and people have such different lifestyles, I don't think there's that kind of an art community. But if you wanted to define an art community as the artists in an area being aware of one another and aware of art, and to be aware that there is something--I'm not going to say important, but there's something happening in this area. It's much more tenuous and vague, but it's a kind of art community. You know you don't have to be influenced by the guy down the block because he's influenced by you. But it's very nice to know there's a guy down there and he's doing some kind of art work, whether it exists really for no reason other than itself, and that's the knowledge that there's somebody else doing that. I'm sure you wouldn't get it in Wyoming or someplace like that. So I think there's an art community in Southern California; it's just they all don't belong to the same bar. Where was the famous street in art during the forties and fifties? Cedar Street Bar [Cedar Bar, New York], or there's some famous places where all the guys would come. I'm sure that was sort of a publicized thing. I'm sure there was a much broader art community in New York. I think

you have that same feeling even if you didn't go down to the favorite hangout if you lived in New York; there's history of art there, of people that do art. I think that's what it is more than anything stylistic. As a matter of fact, other guys who are around here that do this kind of really goofy thing, there's actually no point to it except itself. And I think that sense is needed to know that there are other people around doing the same thing even if you never see them. So I think there's an art community. I don't think anybody's defined it. They've always put in sort of self-interested terms and chosen certain people and said, "This is the community." It's a very diaphanous kind of a structure. I think it's there.

PALANKER: The obvious thing to ask is, how does this diaphanous community affect you? Would you like to have people right around you? Or having just the knowledge of someone nearby to you--is that what you'd want?

BENJAMIN: Well, that's what I came to settle for. Because in the beginning I wanted desperately to associate with painters and be around painters, and it's probably even more necessary when you're a beginner because you don't have anything of your own that's solid to go on--I mean, you've got to have something to show you. It's like teen-agers that don't know what they're doing at that point, and they all get together and look at each other's mirrored

eyes, and it gives them some kind of sustenance even if it's very illusory. But I never found it. I came to Claremont to find it, which sounds funny now, but it wasn't that funny then, as we talked about earlier. It did really seem to exist. Any art community here was mostly college-oriented.

Well, going back to what I said a few minutes ago, I feel like I'm a part of an art community just in that there are a lot of people in Southern California that do this activity, and I'm one of them. Really, that's as far as it goes. That's really a lot, even though I don't have much to do with them anymore. I don't get to see them much anymore. The community that I live in is compartmentalized in a way, although not as much as it used to be. Again, like I said in that last interview, when you go through a place like I go to every day to teach, in Chino, which is a community totally unlike this--it's part rural and a large barrio and farm people--that's one environment, and it's extremely different from Claremont, even though it's only fifteen minutes away. There's a college town, and I live in the old area, which is a lot of college people and professional people and then [there are] the people in my art that are related to me through my art life, and those are three quite distinct things. And I'm the same person. And I think I've got it kind of together now, but I used to compart-

mentalize things terribly and I'd just want to leave Chino, you know, and I'd just be like slamming the gate almost with hostility. And I'd come over here now, and I don't feel that so much anymore. So my community's really three: the kinds of people I relate with that are public school teachers, which tend to be a certain type of soul, and the parents that I know in Chino, and I don't have to do all kinds of outlandish things. (Maybe I do outlandish things, but I think I have outlandish attitudes to sort of keep my identity in that.) I'm sure it came out pretty hostile, and I also had a snotty look on my face. So I've got together with that, and here at Claremont I can make it with those people now, easily, and I like them. And here in Claremont our friends are other teachers and business people and doctors, and that's a totally different element than in Chino. So most of our social life here is with the people like that. And then again, when I'm in Los Angeles or when I'm seeing people like you in an art way, well, that's a whole different kind of person. And rather than compartmentalize psychologically like I used to, [there is] the same kind of compartmentalization, but it doesn't sever me anymore, like I know it used to. And I don't think that was very healthy; I mean, you have to keep things all bottled up. So I think that that's my own personal community. And I kind of like the variation

in it, and you don't feel stuck in any one thing. You don't have to role-play as much as I think you do if you're only in one surrounding all the time. You frown. You think you have to do it more?

PALANKER: That's my first impression.

BENJAMIN: Well, that would be a possibility. You could react that way, and I guess I did at the beginning, so I guess that's what I was saying. But if you can get to the point where it's still the same to you, you're just in a different situation. Obviously, you react different to different situations because that's called survival. You know, I don't go over to school and say all kinds of bad words like I do with my art friends, and, you know, you just do certain things where they're appropriate. You can do that without getting paralyzed. Or maybe I said it wrong. Maybe it gives you a chance to play several roles instead of just getting stuck in one. Maybe that's a better way to put it.

PALANKER: At all times do you feel like yourself? That's the important thing.

BENJAMIN: I do pretty much now. Probably I shouldn't say that in front of someone, really. I'll have some terrible personality crisis soon. Every time I say that I really feel good, the house catches on fire. No, I feel I can enjoy all those things.

PALANKER: Earlier in the tape you talked about how your

job eventually made you become a painter, and affects your painting. I'd like to reverse the question and ask how the painting affects your job.

BENJAMIN: Okay. I'm not quite sure that's accurate, that--how did you put that? The job started the painting or . . . ?

PALANKER: Yes.

BENJAMIN: I'm not sure that it was exactly that, because I was already doing something analagous, in that I was writing. I'd wanted to do that for a long time; it was no recent thing. Ever since I was a kid, that's one of the things I wanted to do. I was into something that we call creative, and I don't know if it was the job or the teaching that got me into the art part as much as one thing I saw in the kids: the way they were able to do things that were so beautiful and broad, and that all of them could do these things. So I don't know if it was as much the teaching job as being able to find out through my experience with those children--and we got into this last time--that things like talent are just human qualities; they're not things for only a few people. And I suppose at that time, anybody, you know--when you're twenty-one or -two, you don't have a sense of yourself at that age. You're just kind of insecure. You're doubting yourself because you haven't done enough yet to have confidence in, and I think what that did was

convince me of--I didn't put it in words then; I'm just looking back now--but I think what it must have done was show me without a shadow of a doubt that the one thing I didn't have to worry about was any innate ability on my part to do these things, because I saw that they all had this. And again, I didn't think like that at the time, but I applied it to the children; I didn't apply it to myself. I am now. But I think really that's what got me into this more than the job of teaching.

PALANKER: So that the job was like a catalyst. It wasn't the cause; it was a catalyst for something that was going to happen anyway.

BENJAMIN: Yeah.

PALANKER: Okay, can I ask you another question . . . ?

BENJAMIN: Sure. I just wanted to get that in.

PALANKER: Yeah, I'm glad you clarified that. How do you relate painting all evening and teaching all day from the painting point of view as opposed to the teaching side? How do the paintings affect how you teach?

BENJAMIN: I'd like to make it go further and say, how does the experience of painting affect all the rest of my life? How about that? That sounds . . . .

PALANKER: Okay. I was going to try and go into that from here, but I wanted to ask the specific thing first.

BENJAMIN: 'Cause I don't know how I could answer that one. I really don't, except on a broader context. I

guess the first way I started to answer that would be with relation to what we were just talking about, that compartmentalization, because when I started to paint--am I talking loud enough?--when I started to paint I was so excited about it. I think the word is overused now, but I found my thing, which was to me pretty important because everybody in the family was saying, "What's the matter with you? Why haven't you found your thing?" And I don't know what the word was then, when I was all of twenty-two or something, but at that time in my family you're supposed to work; in that time in history, people were supposed to know what they were going to do. You weren't supposed to flounder around like they do now. But anyhow, here was my hope for salvation. I could be a good painter; I could really paint. And I've said this a million times, again, looking back. I don't want to sound like I knew all this stuff then, 'cause that throws a whole different meaning on it. But I think what I did, I really compartmentalized myself like crazy. It didn't matter. I can almost remember saying this to myself word for word, you know, "It doesn't matter what a schmuck I am in some other areas, that I'm not very competent here or good there. I'll be a really good painter and nobody can touch me. I mean I'll be totally secure, I'll be totally impregnable." And I think that attitude with other things has almost made it possible for me to be so intense about painting

like I was for the first ten years, where I'd really come home from parties early because I didn't want to be hung over or tired the next morning. You know, I'd be up at eight o'clock on Sunday morning, and if a day went by when I didn't paint, you know, I'd really get uptight, and, "My God," I'd think, "I'll never paint again." And it was like this: I put all my chips in one basket--I mean, all of them. And I suppose something like that is necessary to really get it on, you know, with something like painting, and I did that. And it gets so complicated now, but it was just after ten years of that when things started to break down and make me very frightened in certain other areas in my personal life. And also I remember another thing that's a little disjointed but it fits in: I was a perfect example of the kind of middle-class American that was brought up to always consider, "What should I do? What is the right thing to do? What should I do?" And about after that ten years, among many other things such as personal shake-ups, and they always literally shake you up, I read [John] Dewey's Art as Experience. Did you ever read that?

PALANKER: No, I haven't.

BENJAMIN: Just like a lot of books that you read that are good and you like them, every once in a while you read a book that's not only good, but it hits you at exactly the right time, and it puts together things

that you're just not quite able to say yet but it does. That really hit me like that. The thing I remembered most, and it was so important to me, was I began thinking, "By all rights, things are going great with art now, but I'm feeling very shaky about some other things." And the thing I remember most in that Dewey was his definition of the word impulse. Again, anybody of my generation and background, the word impulse is a bad word; it has a negative connotation. "Don't be impulsive," which means something like thoughtless and crazy and irresponsible. And Dewey was talking about the difference between compulsion and impulsion. Instead of using impulse as an unsatisfactory kind of emotion, he said that that's all you've got to go on, and what you should ruminate on is not what you should do but listen and find out what your impulses are and act accordingly. I began to realize--and this is not afterthought--I began thinking then, that's how I paint. I didn't have an academic background; it was always from impulse. I'd wait and almost listen for a color or listen for where the line ought to go. And I've done it in painting, and yet why in my personal life am I in all these "shoulds" and have fears of my impulses. And this guy I mentioned last time--the old bookseller who was sort of a rabbi-type who wasn't, but I'll say it anyhow--he said, "There's no connection between art and life, and don't be a romantic." And I thought there is a connection

because what I said, it's an analagous life situation--the painting. You're doing this thing, if you're the person that's--I got off the thread. Cut that a minute. My head . . . . [tape recorder turned off]

PALANKER: You were talking about your bookseller friend Brier.

BENJAMIN: Brier, yeah. I don't know why that came into my mind all of a sudden. Except that he used to always say to me that art and life are totally separate. When I began to wonder about that, when I was on the subject before, I understand the value of impulse as Dewey defined it, and I was conscious of it. I became conscious, if that's what I was doing, in painting. I was listening, instead of wondering, and I got the feeling that--and it was conscious at the time, this is not afterthought--that an individual can get into sort of a culture lag experience. Like you're talking about a culture lag in the society. And a thing can happen like that sort of like a microcosm in an individual. There's a certain part of the body that's way ahead of another part. And when the distance gets too great, the whole thing gets screwed up. So I began to say, "Well, I've been operating like this with painting. Why not do this in the rest of my life?" And I can't be too much more explicit about it--explicit in teaching, for instance. A lot of things, I always felt guilty; then I began to realize why I shouldn't feel so

guilty, because I think I felt guilty because I usually wasn't doing the prescribed thing, but my kids always did well. And the things that I did that I felt were really good, I also felt slightly guilty about because they weren't really things I was supposed to be doing. I found most of the people that I was working with didn't understand those good things, and I probably didn't either, but I did them. And I was always very negative, and so the guilt never stopped me from doing anything. Then again, in my own relationships with people, I become involved with people in very intimate relationships which I wasn't able to before, which I thought was very--it just didn't occur to me. I can see that for ten years relationships with people were just totally unimportant. And I was married; I had kids. I think mostly what I was doing--I'm sure it's not as bad as I'm painting it--but I think most of what I was doing was doing things that I thought a father ought to be doing or a husband ought to be doing. That's no different from most people. I mean, you only have one model, and it's a totally unconscious one; you just start doing the same thing. But these insights I got, and that came from painting, so therefore it did affect the rest of my life, I would say pretty cataclysmically, because I've changed. I've changed, and I think there's one thing about me that I'm glad about is that I've changed a whole lot in my life, not just once but several times. And I

think the painting led the way to that. I think it was almost like a--not a moral lesson but a moral example. Now, if you lived your life right, I mean really right, perfectly right, you would do it like you paint. The only concern would be what feels right. Whatever feels right--you can't be flippant about that. You got to really hear the inner voice--you got to really--which is not a conscience; it's the impulse. You got to really feel it. Like if you're mixing a color and you're not sure--you don't do anything if you're not sure. You go and sit, or you do something else, and you wait. And then maybe, even if--all people get to a point where you say, "Ah, that's right now." Sometimes you do; other times you say, "This is weird. This can't be right." But you just get enough of the tickle of that feeling, and you do it. And it turns out to be right. I don't think I'm being idealistic, but I do think you could live that way. I do think you could live that way and at the same time be totally responsive and responsible. That was another word that got to me at that time, the word responsible, which was always like a tremendous lead blanket, until I realized what responsible really meant. It meant if a person's responsible, he can respond. That meaning has been so twisted, just like impulse, so twisted--I don't want to say in an American middle-class society because I'm sure it's in Europe, but most certainly it's here.

And that word responsible, well, the way it's used in my school district now--before a new teacher is hired there, they ascertain if she's responsible, which usually means that they're looking at the tops of their shoes, and they're not going to get anybody in trouble and totally docile and accepting of authority. Well, that's responsible in my school situation. But what it really means is responding, and what responding is to other people, in a social sense, we're talking about that, or responding to that feeling with the color you're mixing or the impulse. Impulse always seems like an idea, impulse and idea in an art sense, an idea for a new painting. It's almost synonomous; I was going to say analagous. I would say it's almost synonomous with those two terms, because you don't have an idea, you have sort of a big impulse. So, okay.

So how did the art affect my life? In teaching I think that it opened me up a lot to more things, and it made me trust those, again, impulses, gave me a lot more confidence to act upon them more. All the good things I ever did in teaching came. And again, I'm not talking about the everyday stuff where you have your class in order and you're doing the proper assignments--I'm not putting that down--but the things that were exceptional, and the kids have come back and remembered, were things you've said in front of a class and was time for a certain

subject (I was on a schedule) and you just felt bored and you'd had enough, and yet you had thirty, thirty-five kids there and you'd better either do something or you got footprints all over your back. And so all of a sudden something would come right into my head, and it would really be a good activity or a good direction or a good thing that we would do. So it increased my confidence in those. Before, I felt "Jeez, I don't know what to do. I ought to be doing this, but well, maybe I can get through the hour with this." And it would turn out to be a great thing, but I wouldn't have the confidence in it that I had later. And my social life--I think relationships with other people took on a whole lot more meaning. I really had very little time for that before, and I had very meaningful experiences then that I wouldn't have had otherwise if I just saved all of my emotional part and just, again, compartmentalized it and just tried to save it all for the painting, and screw everything else. So it opened me up a lot more to people and, I think, to myself. It made me not a better teacher--because I never taught better than I taught my first year, so it didn't make me a better teacher--but it made me a happier one and a more confident one and probably better more of the time. Maybe.

And when you talk about politically, I was also a cynical liberal. That was sort of a political attitude, and I read about things, but I never had any time to want

to get involved in any, 'cause I didn't want to give any time away from my painting, which was it after I got home or on days when I wasn't working, which again is half the days of the year. I also hate to have myself portrayed as somebody who paints after school, because school is only one-half of the year, and those are all full-time painting days. I wound up into, again, an impulse, and all of a sudden I'd do it. I was the Pomona Valley chairman for the Peace and Freedom party, and I got the biggest registration out here, more than anyplace else in Southern California except in the Venice-West L.A. area. I got involved in a local zoning fight and Beverly [Mrs. Benjamin] and I were cochairmen of the referendum that recalled the city council. Before, I just wouldn't have done that. I would like to have, but I just simply don't have time. But I really get into that stuff. The teachers union [California Federation of Teachers] was another thing. But after about six months of those things, I would keep painting all right, but all of a sudden my head would get so full of stuff and I'd be calling on a registration drive and painting at the same time. All of a sudden, I didn't know what I was doing anymore. So about then I said, "Okay, when this day is reached, I'm through now." [It was] after about the first year in the teacher's union, I'm sure they felt let down. I get to a certain point, and I've exhausted that first impulse, and I realize, all right,

really, where my place is is here. But it's different than before, so much different, and I don't get involved in anything because--I don't put it down, but I just know where I belong now, and there's just so much of you. It probably sounds like the way I started, but I think that where everybody gets back to is where they started, except without the hangups. 'Cause I mean what are you, you know? You really haven't changed. You just got to know more about yourself, and you're still the same person. And I think that all those things had even further-reaching effects that I'm so happy about, now that my own kids, who began to be teenagers in the mid-sixties, which in California was a really rough time to have teen-age kids . . . . That was the wildest time, really, with Vietnam, so many things that were happening then. So my oldest kid hit the mid-teens, and by this time I thought I was a pretty open type, like I could go along with things. So the things that they started to do, what the oldest one started to do, shook me up. But I had a very close attachment. Again, now, this is sort of half-hindsight and half what I knew at the time. This is mid-sixties. Now, if those earlier things hadn't happened . . . . There, again, was a big change time for me, 'cause I think all of us that have kids that age--unless you're buried in some little town in Utah where those things don't affect you--you get to a point with your kids where you don't know what they're

doing, and it really upsets you, throws you off base. And if you get to a point, it doesn't matter where you are when you start, no matter where you are they have to get that much further. Whether you're starting from a superreactionary place or a superliberal place, they still are going to have to make that much distance, so you still got that big a gulf. And I think you get to a point where you either do one of two things: you reject the child--you say, "Get out of here" physically or psychologically--or with great pain, which after it happens isn't nearly as painful, you let them change you to some extent. I mean, they have an effect on you, and if they change deeply held attitudes and--I guess it would be a question of how much do you love them? I mean, are you pissed off enough so that you're willing to say beat it? Or do you care enough that you just can't countenance an ending to that relationship? Though that first time, with my oldest, my relationship was very meaningful, which probably drove me to try to figure out what was happening, and it still is. I mean, I'm not only her daddy and she's my daughter, but we're very good friends. And with the other kids, it's been the same. But I'm talking about the first one because it's the first one that does it because they get there first. So I think all of us get to that point if we've got kids, and I think it's difficult to get past that point where it changes you. I don't mean you lay around

and wear beads and smoke hash, but where you comprehend and really get you into this new kind of thing, 'cause it introduces you into a whole new outlook. It separates you from your kid, but you stay together. You make a necessary separation but one which permits you to stay together. It's a very hard point to get to, and I think I got over that, and I'll go back to the earlier things we started to talk about. If I hadn't had those experiences, let's say, after ten years of painting, where I started to listen and be responsive rather than responsible, I couldn't have done that. So I think indirectly painting helped me bridge a very important gap. So it had a big effect on me with my own kids and those late sixties, middle and late sixties, were pretty difficult for what was always, I'm sure, a very difficult point in people's lives. So in my teaching and in my relations with other people and my wife (which I didn't go into but is very much there) and my kids, I think that painting really did point a way to get me out of all the junk that was loaded on me when I was a kid, like everybody gets. It just helped me get out of it. It helped me get liberated. Oh God, that's terrible, I wish that word . . . that's the right word. That's really the right word, to get free of all the drek.

TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO

AUGUST 19, 1976

PALANKER: You were talking about your relationship with your kids.

BENJAMIN: Yeah, and I want to go back to that because it seems like every once in a while in your life you get a chance to change. I don't know if change is the right word. You get a chance to break down some more of the blind things that clog you up or inhibit you or chain you or some word like that, and it's hardly an original observation that change is painful. It's terribly painful--why, I don't know, because after you go through that, it wasn't the change (again, there's got to be a better word than change) that was painful; it was the fear of it. So to get beyond that fear, to push yourself beyond that point where you're afraid, it takes a pretty powerful stimulus. It can't be some little thing. Your position has to be so untenable that you just can't, you know--anyplace else is better, so you change. Or in the sense of children, if you care enough about them, anything would be better than estrangement. Or if you love somebody enough, your wife or your husband or whatever, you get to a point where, again, anything, anything would be better than this awful feeling you're having now. So I mean you're forced at the point of a gun, your own gun, to change. And every once

in a while, an opportunity comes up--which is usually viewed as a terrible frightening crisis, but on afterthought it's an opportunity, and I'm sure everybody faces these things, unless you went in a cave and never came out. And again, going back to the original question, I really feel that my painting and the experience that I have with painting helped me get to some of those places. And using the analogy of painting saying it's--I said those words. I mean, I've done it. I did it in the painting; I can do it here. But I'm going to listen, and even though it scares me or I think it's wrong or whatever, I'm going to do it or whatever. Well, in that way, painting became much more important for me than I ever realized in the beginning that it could be. What I'm saying sounds pretty grandiose but I really think I know what I'm saying.

PALANKER: On an earlier tape you said whenever you got to a point where you got stuck, you forced yourself to continue or you just wound up at that point again.

BENJAMIN: Yeah. I think it was true in painting. I was just talking about painting then. I'm sure that's true in life, whatever that is. I'm sure that's true, and I thought about that at the time. "I'm not going to get stuck here"--or if I say I'm going to get stuck, and I consciously thought of that. I don't know why I'm so concerned when I'm saying these things about explaining whether it was the kind of information you only know

afterwards or with hindsight, or if I really was able to know it verbally, intellectually, at the time. I guess that's not important, when it gets down to the wire, to differentiate between those two things.

PALANKER: When you get stuck with a painting, I'm curious as to what changes in the appearance of the paintings take place. Do they go through a metamorphosis at that point? Is that where the new series come from? The point where you get stuck--is that where something new happens?

BENJAMIN: No, no. That's when I'm doing the painting, the kind I'm working on now. There seems to be a place in every painting, just about--I won't say every painting, but it's very common the way you get stuck. Usually there will be one color that you get to and you'd thought was orange or was some kind of a blue, and all of a sudden you mix with what you thought it was supposed to be and it doesn't feel right. And so you sit back, and wait a while, and cut the dead roses off or read the paper for a half-hour or something, and then mix some more, and sometimes you take the whole day. Sometimes, well, it's more than that because sometimes there's a painting that is ready to be painted on, which means it's dry; and I can't paint on that one, so I'll paint on another one. And maybe it'll be dry for four or five days and I haven't painted on it. And I'm sure it's 'cause I'm not conscious of being stuck on the color at that point, because I'm not mixing anything

or holding anything up, but I'd paint on it if I had a real strong feeling for what the color is. Remember now, the color is going to be a red or some yellow or some blue. It's not a question of which color. So then you start to mix, and in so many paintings comes a point where you finally say, "Well, this seems weird, but it just feels right." It doesn't even exactly feel right, but something in you says that's the color, and so you paint it. That happens, I would say, in most paintings--not every painting, most paintings.

PALANKER: There's a point where . . . .

BENJAMIN: There's a point that's stuck, for lack of a better word. And then there's that much mixing for the color. Now, I keep saying "color" and I'm not saying "form" ever, so maybe I'm primarily a color person. The form I can generally work out with some semblance of rationality and sureness. I would really like to explain that feeling, but I can't much better than I just did. But you never say, "Ah, that's it," at these points. It's always, you know, letting go of the pine branch when you're--wasn't that in the Art of Archery? You know that one? Where you fall over the cliff, and you grab the pine branch, and you're hanging there, and you can't hang on any longer so you let go. That's an old Zen thing. Well, there's that in that painting. The bells don't ring, but there's just something way down in there under all these

layers of unsureness. It just can't be right, and this can't be right, but it seems to be. Then you take into, what did [Jean-Paul] Sartre call it? that existential leap into faith? I mean, that's what that is. And there again that impulse gets so far away or probably is so far away, or maybe you have so many things you've got between you and it that you've got to really listen. I don't know why I keep saying "listen," because I'm a visual worker, but it's more listening than seeing 'cause you're holding it up; you're looking and it looks weird. It doesn't look right. And then you get back here in the chair and it still doesn't look right, and it's just either sound or a physical kind of reaction that says, "Well, that's it."

PALANKER: I keep thinking of the comment that Mallory Freeman made when I talked to him about how some person out of some college, maybe UCLA, wanted to interview you to discuss your color theory, and I think you just explained your color theory. I don't think you're giving him what he wants. Apparently some people feel that your work is methodically thought out, almost mathematically thought out, colorwise.

BENJAMIN: Nothing could be farther from the truth.

PALANKER: Apparently.

BENJAMIN: I still think I could teach a class in color, but I would teach it the same way I would teach the children that I work with. I mean, I think I have enough sensitivity

and appreciation that when somebody was doing something that was good, I would be able to respond to it and sincerely encourage them and give them strength to go on, which is what I think teaching is about, anyhow. I don't think it's about telling you to put this much orange or that much blue, and this happens. I just couldn't teach it in a systematic way. Maybe I could. If I sat down and really thought about it, I'm sure I could probably work out something, but I wouldn't consider it an activity that would be very meaningful. It would be a waste of time, and I don't think you could really do it either, because it's infinite in possibilities, and how could you handle an infinite thing with some kind of finite terms?

PALANKER: When these huge changes are happening in your life outside of painting, what happens to the paintings then? Do they have a life of their own?

BENJAMIN: I really don't know. I would kind of say yes off the top of my head. But there have been times, and whether I'm just putting it together . . . . You know, you can make a case for anything, but there have been times where, as I look back, a strange parallel . . . . Would you clip that off a second while I turn the sprinkler off? [tape recorder turned off] Strange parallels. I had one of those, to me--maybe from the outside it didn't look like much, but to me it was kind of cataclysmic times

about seven years ago. It lasted about four years. But anyhow, it was always before, in painting, I was against much current activity. I can see now that I wanted my fingers on everything in a painting. I didn't want to lose any control, and I didn't want to lose any control of myself, too. Or of my environment. There's another one of those analogies that I think goes together, because if something is important to you, you've got to have enough association with it, enough identification with it, that the problems are going to run parallel. I think it was about '67 or '8, and I started to do some paintings that really lasted about five years. Again, before that, the structure of a painting was something that I always had done by hand. I made this shape here and that shape there, and I put this thing here and that thing there.

And about that time I started some paintings, and I did a lot of them. I did about forty or fifty or more. The only structural device was a mirroring, a mirror-image kind of a thing; the paintings before, really, were all mirror images, except I put them there. I mean, they didn't automatically mirror. These paintings were all made out of triangles; all the forms were triangles, and the one structural device--they were very complicated. They started off with broad shapes--I have to go into this because this is part of it--they started off with some broad shapes and were progressively broken down and

fractured by pasting triangles of colored paper on these color paper studies. And then from that I did the oil painting from the finished result. And again the only structural consideration was that everything I put on mirrored. If I put a green triangle on the lower left-hand corner, I put a green one on the upper right-hand corner. But they were basically tonal, with lots of colors and very tonal relationships, and they were very old-fashioned beautiful kind of paintings.

From that I went into another kind of triangle painting, which were based on quadrants, which--again, I arranged the quadrants. I arranged these triangles in a certain sensible, logical order, you know, with a certain design quality in mind. And then from that study of one quadrant, the paintings consisted of four of those quadrants, but on one painting. I could do four or five paintings from each of these basic quadrants by juxta-posing them in different ways: clockwise, counterclock-wise, some way. There again, I was giving up a little more control.

Then the next batch were still triangles. Those I did another large number in, fifty, sixty of those. Then came another bunch of triangle paintings which I didn't even do in color--I mean, the drawings, the working studies--but they were numbers. Yellow was one, and deep yellow was two, and orange was three. They were

sort of mathematical; there were some consistent mathematical patterns. There again I made the patterns, but when I did the paintings, I mean, I didn't even have a color study to go from. Did I make that clear? So in other words, I'm going from those first triangle paintings from a structure that was only mirroring, that was the only structural consideration, to ones where I made a quadrant, a basic quadrant, and then built the paintings on four or nine of those, which I think gave up some control. I mean, I didn't know how the quadrants were going to relate once they were on a canvas in four of them. The interrelationships between would be totally surprising and unplanned. Then came the ones where they were really number patterns, but number patterns that I had decided on. And then came a bunch where instead of a number pattern, I started pulling numbers at random, and they were also triangle paintings; they were all twelve color paintings, and each color had a number--they were colors of the rainbow, just spectral colors. So I'd pull a random pattern of twelve, and then I'd stagger it. If the first color was two, then four, then three, then six, then next I would just move it up one.

PALANKER: Is this one a large rectangle and then a bar underneath?

BENJAMIN: All triangle paintings. So again I had no idea of what's going to happen with those. And then I

did one, a 6 foot x 6 foot painting, where every single triangle was pulled at random--every single one was pulled, and that was total chaos--and I realized that random was a very relative word. And all this, I think, was going on at a time where my life was really--my daughter just got married, which is always traumatic for daddies, I think, even if they don't know it--and my wife and I were having lots of problems. I was feeling middle-aged, and I wasn't getting any ink any more in the art world, and all kinds of middle-age syndromes. And it was almost as if, looking back again, that I was realizing the futility of trying to clutch any of these things, and the paintings I was doing were getting further and further out of my hands, by choice. I was hoping myself to a whole bunch more, mainly to the vagaries of life in general, and so I began to realize that random was a relative thing. If you had a canvas as big as 100 miles x 10 miles, you could pull triangles at random, and your eye, because the painting was so big, would be able to pull together something and make something out of it. But we're talking about finite things like 6-foot canvases, so I only did one of those total random things. And it also made me feel kind of buggy. And there was another triangle series that went along, where the design was randomly conceived with enough restrictions, with enough options, so that it was random only relatively to 6 x 6 feet of space.

PALANKER: What were some of the options?

BENJAMIN: Well, just that I would not let two triangles come together of the same color, because I didn't want a square suddenly to clunk in the middle of these things. So I wouldn't let the same color triangles touch corners because they butterflied and did a different spatial thing. It's hard to talk about these things without showing the paintings. If I showed them, it would be very simple. I'm just trying to draw this parallel they were talking about where there are things in your life that maybe didn't echo in your painting, but maybe you tried to compensate or get through them by doing something in your safe studio. And it isn't all that safe if you're a painter to whom that's everything. It isn't safe. I mean it's just as risky as somebody, something in real life. And then at that show at Tortue [Gallery], those were random scales again, with certain consideration.

PALANKER: Which show at Tortue was that?

BENJAMIN: The last one I had.

PALANKER: Which was?

BENJAMIN: Those small rectangles. And so it just seemed that at a time when things were really coming apart in my art career, my psyche, my marriage, the financial, all kinds of things, here in my painting I'm going in this direction where I've never been before, where I'm really letting go of all the controls. You know, I'm just

throwing it up for grabs, and I can't help but feel that that was a symbolic effort, considering my belief that there is a strong connection between the two, to try to get myself into a new frame of mind or into a new way of accepting experience or meeting experience or dealing with it.

PALANKER: Does the painting help outside problems? Or does resolving outside problems help painting? Or does it work both ways?

BENJAMIN: Yeah. I see. I see what you mean.

PALANKER: So far I have the impression that it's working out the paintings that gives you ideas of how to work out all the other problems. I'm just wondering if that's the right impression.

BENJAMIN: Let me talk about culture lag in the body politic, and also in the individual body. I have this--this might be too categorical, but I have this feeling, just for the purpose of this discussion, if we want to say that there's certain things such as were collected, for lack of a better word, classical kind of painters (I'm not quite sure what that means, but that's sort of me, although really I think I'm a very lyrical painter; I think that's what I am) . . . . But in general for our terminology, there's the old Apollonian and Dionysian, the romantic and the classic, and there's always been that, all since Greeks that I know of. So from reading

about other artists, it seems like the guys that are romantics--the Modiglianis--it seems like their culture lag is quite opposite from the more controlled classical types. It seems like they need to get way out; they all seemed to be kind of screwed up in a personal way. And it seems like they have to clear up--they make their initial headway in their personal lives, and that's where the culture lag develops. And then they need that to bring their paintings up to where they are. And it seems with people like me, you get further out of field with your painting; and then to get it together again, you've got to bring your personal life up to where your paintings have led you. Is that what . . . ?

PALANKER: That answers the question. You feel there's two very separate ways of going about it, and you have this one way.

BENJAMIN: I don't know if I'd choose the word varied, but it does seem that the people I've known and the people I've read about--I'm not sure if underneath, we're not all the same. And I just read somebody who said, "Never compare your insides. Never hold your insides up to somebody else's front." And I think that's a great statement, because we're always doing that, and it leads to nothing but trouble. You compare fronts to fronts and insides to insides, but compare your insides to somebody's front, and you're in trouble every time. So maybe they're all

the same underneath. But it does seem what I've read about the romantic type of painter, the expressionist type of painter, they're always having all these personal agonies. And then they go, and they get through this or that crisis, and then they paint. It seems like they need that, all that stuff happening in their life, and it's necessary for their creative development. That may be a terrible, almost a Hollywood stereotype of the romantic painter, but I think it's more than that. And I think it's just the opposite with the other kind who tends to be more methodical, and paints away, and appears to be not so affected by personal problems and angst and all the things that go with it. It's just a culture lag in different directions.

PALANKER: One thing that this brings to mind is, before I ever came here, Mallory Freeman mentioned how orderly your house was, physically. I mean, everything is neat and beautiful and well kept, and the plants are beautiful, and it seems like another visual proof of what you just said, which I think we can get on video tape. Keeping your life in order, even in this physical sense, so that it's out of the way when you go to paint.

BENJAMIN: Yeah, and visually I like to have things around me that, of course--I don't like messes. I get nervous in a big mess, so that's part of it. And the more expressionist painters in other studios were always incredibly

messy. The hard-edge painters I know, they're not messy. Again, on the other hand, it can be that if you're so sensitive and underneath afraid of chaos, you know, afraid of irregularity, that you've got to keep everything just so, you know, you can go overboard in that direction. It used to bother me if the chair was in another direction. It doesn't anymore, but I still like it neat. And it's like more expressionist types are able to live in a--I'm thinking of guys around here, I mean, just local ones that I've been to their studios, Jim Strombotne and Jack Zajac, guys that you would say are expressionists. And they always have paint heaped on the palette and were perfectly happy working with paint tubes lying around. It would have driven me nuts. And I'm not saying that's good. I think the more you can tolerate, probably, the healthier you are underneath; you don't have to have all these things. Like I can remember when I was a little kid, like elementary school, and I had to have everything in my room just so--the pillow here and all these things. You know, that's kind of screwy. And my parents were very, very neat people. My father was a pathologist, and my mother was a biology teacher, and they were very concerned that everything was just in the right place and very clean and very neat. And I've backed off a lot from that. And I think they really think, when they come here, they think I'm kind of messy. But they think that's the way artists are. And I tell

them, you know, you ought to be in a real artist's studio. But to them this--my studio here--would be messy.

PALANKER: I don't want to describe it because we're going to have it on the video tape, but this is not a stereotype of an artist's studio--to me, anyway.

BENJAMIN: No. Well, my friend who used to live across the alley, James Grant, who used to teach at Pomona College, whose house is kind of like mine and whose studio is oriented like mine, facing the house with this kind of open window to the yard and the house, I mean, he built the house--he made it; he didn't buy it--and he wound up stapling gauze over all the windows because it distracted him. And he loved to garden; he loved his house. He was just as housebound as I am. But he put gauze all over the windows, like right in here, because he just couldn't paint with that kind of--to him it was a distraction. I mean, it's just how those things . . . . To me, I would feel like it was a deprivation if I had gauze over those windows. How did we start on that one? I forget what we started out with.

PALANKER: You were relating your personal life to how it affects the painting, way back, and then different ways people handle that.

BENJAMIN: Well, except for that one case I just said, I don't know that my personal life has ever affected my paintings, except at times I felt it was so lousy that

I'd better make damn sure that I painted. It affected it that way, just in a sort of compensatory way, although I would hate to say that that's why I paint. But I think that's the only--another thing about life that I think affects a person's paintings is that it's so ugly. I mean, in my case being a painter, a visual person, it is so ugly. And I come home from work every day, and I come down a whole avenue through Pomona and Montclair, or up Indian Hill until you get to Claremont and the elm trees, until you get north of the freeway, and it's smoggy and it's ugly and everything. And that's got to have an effect on one's--and make it necessary to do something beautiful. I mean, you can't see ugly all the time. And I come in here, and this isn't ugly. But when I'm up at my daughter's place in the mountains, in the Santa Cruz mountains, and it's in this big meadow inside of a redwood forest, and this beautiful garden that they have that I cannot just admire from without, from afar, you know, but I work in it and I can relate to that personally--if I lived there, I really don't think I'd paint. It's almost the way Freud--I think Freud said that art in the twentieth century is almost a result of an urban malaise where art is basically a compensatory activity. And if life was really good and noninhibiting and fulfilling and beautiful, there would be enough beauty in this world that you wouldn't have to create your own. But there is none, and I've created my

own. I've created it here--this is as much mine as a painting--because I didn't build the basic house, but I've done everything else but. I planted everything, and I've made a lot of it, and I painted everything, the studio and the paintings. And I don't have any urge to paint up there. And I was telling Beth once, when I was up there by myself and I had been working on the garden for a couple of days--and they have a pretty good loose kind of a commune, loose in the sense that there's no doctrinaire set of bylaws; as long as the vibrations stay good, any way of living is okay--but the rhythm there was no different from my own rhythm here, not when I'm teaching but the days when I'm here. I just get up and I just felt it was the same thing. Except there I was working outside all the time, that particular trip, and here I'm only--oh, I'm almost outside; I mean, even if I'm in here, I can see outside. And I bet if I was really involved in a scene like that, with what I know I get from growing things, certainly in the beginning I would never have become a painter. But to know what I'm talking about, you have to know what that really feels like to grow things and have that relationship to it. Because what am I doing here with that next color? I'm waiting for one more color in that alizarin orange painting, which is almost like having the bud of a flower about to open. It's almost exactly the same feeling of anticipation you get when there's . . . . When I planted those roses a couple

of years ago, I didn't even know what they looked like, and they got to a bud and were just about to open, and I didn't really know the color yet. And it's a very close experience, if both the paintings and the flowers are as meaningful to you as they are to me. It's not all that different. And digging a lot of manure and stuff into the ground is certainly analogous to making stretcher bars and priming canvases. It's--I think we talked about that earlier--it's identification with some kind of organic growth and development which you obviously must not be able to feel directly in yourself, so you've got to experience it through something else. And that, I think, might be a stage you get to. Maybe Duchamp got to that stage; maybe that's why he quit doing things. Did you want to look at any of those things, or did you have something else in your notes? [tape recorder turned off]

PALANKER: When you were talking about waiting for your flowers to bloom, I had a thought that because you use oils, you're constantly waiting to be able to finish the painting. Is that a conscious decision over and above using oils because you're used to them and you like the color quality, or do you like being able to wait?

BENJAMIN: No, I don't think that's so. I mean, I kind of like it now. At first I was impatient, and I'd use stuff like quick-drying white, because I was always afraid I would lose the original idea, which you lose

fast--it's easy to lose fast when you're beginning. You can't sustain an idea as long. If I didn't get it down now, it would be gone. But now that you talk about it like that, although I didn't do it for that reason, there is a lot of similarity in that waiting factor. And what you're waiting for: you're not even waiting for the paint to dry, but you're waiting for what's there to sort of marinate, because, you know, in that particular painting you're talking about, first you've got the alizarin field, and that looks just beautiful, even though nothing else is painted. And it seems to look a little less beautiful all the time--not less beautiful, but less exciting. By the time it dries, it's not exciting anymore, it's just nice. And now you want to put the next color on, and then that's enough for a while. So all kinds of things are happening: the paint's drying, you're living with it at that stage, and there's a certain completion of effort, certain completion level at every stage. And with the flowers it's a lot like that. There's that waiting period, the difference--planting a bare-root rose, when you do a lot of digging first, which really . . . . The stretcher bar thing is great--I don't mind digging, I don't mind making stretcher bars, but it gets to be a drag, but you do it because you want what's going to come from it. And when I was planting the bare-root roses, it's like the drawing part. Then the leaves come out, and when I come out in

the morning, I look around to see where all the plants are, where they're at and what's happened. Then I always come out here every morning before I go to school, and I look at everything--not a long time, but I just take one look around and then lock it up, and it all stays in my mind all day. A good gardener, when that's what's mainly on your mind, you know where everything is at; you know what's in bud and what's looking kind of wilted and what needs pruning. You have it in your mind, and that's the same thing with all these unfinished paintings and unsized canvases. You've got to have it there. You've got to be able to keep it there and keep it intense. Especially you have to do that when you've got to leave for eight hours during the day; you've got to have that with you all the time. So when you come in after work, then it doesn't take literally any time at all to come right out and start doing it. Maybe have a drink of water or go to the bathroom or something, but it doesn't take any time anymore--it used to, to change directions or turn yourself inside out to get into a new situation. It used to that one year when I was teaching art. That was terrible. Did we talk about that? I don't know if there's any time left, but it wouldn't take long; it doesn't matter.

PALANKER: You haven't mentioned it.

BENJAMIN: Well, if we run out of time that doesn't matter, but that was the one time that was really difficult, because

I think earlier when I was painting and I came home and I was stuck, I would blame it on the fact that I couldn't jerk myself out of this scene into another and paint; and mostly, I think, I wasn't able to paint then as well because, you know, I hadn't done it as much.

PALANKER: When was this?

BENJAMIN: Well, you know, the first few years, or maybe eight years. And then anytime when it got kind of sticky, you start blaming everybody for why you can't be expected to paint, even though I would do it. But I remember that one time when it was so hard was when I was just out of graduate school, or I was in graduate school, and I got a job at the high school that Jean Ames got for me, just the one class a day at Claremont High School. And I had so little sense of what I was doing at that time, and no direction yet. And so I'd go there and I'd teach art, and I don't like to teach art like that, with an hour a day; I have to know them. But I did my best, and I would come on so strong, you know, and try to convince the kids that what they were doing was good, and "Yes, that's great," and meaning it all--I mean, not putting it on--and then coming here and literally have to turn myself inside out because I didn't know what I was doing and I had to be totally tentative. That was really hard. And that's what made me wonder with so many people, that they get their master's degree or their MFA and go right into a

teaching job; and still, if they have any kind of a finished style, it's pretty derivative; and if they don't, they're probably where they ought to be. Who's a mature artist at that point? I mean, who knows what they're doing? And I wonder what effect that has on the education of other artists, to be exposed--and they, the young guys, have the biggest classes and the most classes--to be exposed to somebody that has to be insecure, has to be dogmatic, or if they were really honest with their feelings they would be able to give so little leadership there probably wouldn't be enough to sustain a student. I sure didn't want to teach art then--I mean, in that formal kind of way. But anyhow, that's enough. That's the way it is August the nineteenth, 1976.

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AUGUST 25, 1976

PALANKER: Mr. Benjamin, where do you fit in in the history of art?

BENJAMIN: Well, I have no idea, except that I fit in, because I feel like I'm a painter. It's almost like that question you asked about the Southern California art community, and if there was one, and to define it, and what my part was in it. That was last time, and I remember saying I couldn't be specific about it, but I felt there was some kind of art community because there were a lot of people here doing serious work, and that I was one of them, so I was a part of it. And as far as my role in art history, I really don't think like that. I'm very uncomfortable everytime somebody makes reference or introduces me as a participant in the first hard-edge show; I mean, that just seems totally ridiculous to me. I think there's a huge continuum, and maybe when I paint on canvas stretched on wood stretcher bars, I don't think about where my place is, but that I have a place, you know. I think of all the guys that painted on canvas stretched on wooden stretcher bars, and I have a much more conscious and aware of a feeling that I'm a part of all of that than . . . .

Okay, the original question was my place in art history, right? So what's more important to me than what my place

is, is that I have a place in the long tradition of painting--I feel that--but not as any innovator of a style or an inventor of something new, because I don't think anybody really is. There is such a strong--again the word--continuum that anybody that suddenly makes claims like that, I think if you felt that way you'd have to start to feel very pompous. It's so unreal, and I know a lot of painters who have carried on like that. I know them, and I've read things by painters who carry on like that. And it's always seemed very presumptuous. Being first is just totally unimportant. I don't think there is any. First is the cave man; he did the deers on the wall.

PALANKER: Do you feel any historical imperatives have been imposed on you, then?

BENJAMIN: I think they tried to be, when I was in school. And I resisted them much less out of a feeling of disagreement with those imperatives as just not understanding what it was all about. And now, afterwards, I became aware that there were certain critical opinions, and also painter's writings and speeches and so forth that would very strongly lead you to feel that there are supposed to be certain things that you can do and can't do at a given time. But again, getting back to the first question, I just don't see art as a sequential series of fits and starts and peaks and valleys. It's basically a very

traditional thing, which of course puts me totally at odds in trying to really comprehend it emotionally. I can do it intellectually, but to comprehend, emotionally, process art or much conceptual art . . . . So I guess I'm talking about oil or some kind of painting basically related to the traditional rectangular format. I know, of late, I resent very much when I read those things, that there are certain things you can and can't do now. And it makes me very angry when I read that, because it's so ridiculous. When we talked about that "Responsive Eye" show, remember we said that here was supposed to be a trend, and this is what is now? And yet there are men in there from their early twenties to their late eighties, some of whom had been doing it for decades, and all of a sudden it was artifically drawn together and a very artificial "now" was created which was gone within eighteen months, practically. And then there was a new "now," although those guys kept on, I assume, doing what they had been doing.

PALANKER: If you feel there shouldn't be imperatives imposed on artists, why do you tell the children you teach that they can't draw figures?

BENJAMIN: Well, I would certainly have to admit that that sounds inconsistent, and I can only remember why I did it in the first place, when I knew absolutely nothing about art. And I continue to do it when I do know something; maybe it's because by the time I get them--maybe because

it works, in the first place. In the second place, it works in the sense that very quickly they're doing really good things. They're able to put their talents into play. Because by the time I get them, at eleven or twelve years old, they've been praised for all the wrong things in art and put down for all the wrong things. They'll always know who the two or three guys in class are that are the good ones in art. And sometimes those guys actually are good, but I mean it's totally a coincidence if they are. And all the others are not good, because they weren't able to do whatever gimmicky assignment the teacher had them do. I mean they didn't have that facility of hand, or the facility it would take to do that kind of assignment, or they didn't have the psyche that would, unconsciously, not resent it, or the psyche that would be able to accept it and operate on such a limited sort of assignment. So what they're trying to do by that age, they're trying to copy those two or three good ones in class who have gotten the praise so far, because they've made the sun look most like the sun or the tree look most like the tree. So it's like their fingers are all broken, and they can't do anything. It's all stiff and awkward and totally lacking in any expressiveness. And so by just telling them that the rule is, "You can't do any of these trees or trucks or whatever," the purple mountain and the orange sun, but they just have to put the color on nice and thick, and

they have to finish the paper before they get any more paper. Within an hour I can get a third of a class--let's say ten out of thirty kids, I can get them going within an hour. And within three weeks, I can get all but maybe three or four going. And in six weeks I can get them all going. And I'm saying this with all humility, but I'm saying it with experience of that many kids per year times twenty-five years, so I know that's true. And by getting them going, I just simply meant that they're able to do pictures which are a very beautiful color, and a beautiful sensuous kind of texture, and a real feel for design--I mean, all the things that are considered the real art attributes. And it's not a question of teaching it to them; it's just a question of unlocking it. And so many teachers have been so misled, I think, by statements like that, because they get these things in education classes before they start to teach--about unlocking talent, and all that's important is to free them. And so they don't understand what the big thing is that they don't understand and that hasn't been made clear--and you can't make it clear to somebody that doesn't know anything about it, that has no experience--is the discipline involved. So I have my art class, and the atmosphere is no different than if it's a math class in the sense that concentration is the important thing. We're getting far afield now of what you asked me to begin with, which was, why do I lay that on them? And

I suppose what I'm saying is that they're already so laid upon that I do it to release them, and it does work. It's an interesting thing how people can take--this isn't what we were going through but--where you can take kids, and after a couple of months, or three months, four months, being able to do abstract things of all kinds. And once in a while if I just get kind of a feel, you can make certain assignments that have to do with naturalistic subjects, and it's just unbelievable what those guys do with that. I have things to show you that would--maybe it's intuitive; maybe I just picked up on them so I asked the right thing at the right time. I know one time, oh, there have been several times when we've done figures. Once they were going to do their family, and other times different--somebody in the room. And there's one, a big one that I had several years ago--it looks like a Cézanne, I mean, the same kind of floor model as a Cézanne portrait. I mean, probably, that kid just a couple of months before, if I'd said draw a figure, would have drawn a kind of a rough circle and put some--it looked like a jack-o'-lantern. You know, it would be terribly awkward and unreal. I taught him nothing about figures, I taught him nothing about modeling form, and he was able to do that. The kids were able to do that. They've done still lifes, landscapes, lots of things. And what would have been very awkward, again, in the beginning--a couple of

months before, three months before--suddenly was a very beautiful thing. And all I would tell them was--oh, I know, I'd do rudimentary things, like I'd say, "Look at my head. Do you see it? What do you see? Look at the outside of my head. Do you see any lines there?" I would just say something like that for an explanation of why I told them not to draw any lines; they were just supposed to do it like they did their designs. That's what I would say, you know. So then they say, "Oh," and then they do it like that. Now, it wouldn't be as consistently high level of realization as the other things, but it was amazing, amazingly high.

My second year I taught--I taught at Bloomington then--and I took my kids down to Scripps, because as I said earlier the Ameses had come down there because they had heard that my children had done some good things. And Jean was teaching art education. So I got acquainted with Scripps, and I came up, and there was a show, a retrospective show by Henry Lee McFee, who was a kind of a prepostimpressionist. And some of his things just took on a certain Cézannesque form, took on a certain tinge here and there of cubism in certain of his things, and I have slides of this. And what they really picked up on was one still life. It was of a broken glass or a broken vase, which was sort of a device he had to do a little cubist, modern stuff. It was basically very

academic stuff. And that whole class came back to school--that was the one painting they took off on. And they came out with tremendous cubist still lifes. I've got one in that drawer there. So they picked up stuff so fast. Once you have them convinced that all they have to do is concentrate and use their choice, tell them if they're stuck on a color to pick one that looks good with one already there, and what should they do now, and make some more things that go with what they've already got; so all you're doing is building on what they're doing, which is I suppose the way I paint and the way I choose colors. It's always what you do, what you've done so far. And they say, "What goes with that?" You already know it's going to be a red or a blue or something, and you don't know which one, so I guess my method is very much the same as the way I teach it.

PALANKER: That's your color theory.

BENJAMIN: That's my color theory. You put down what color looks good with the other colors.

PALANKER: I wanted to ask you how the school feels about the way you teach art to the kids, the school system or the specific school you're teaching at.

BENJAMIN: Well, I'm sure they think it's all right now because they know that the kids' pictures have appeared in the newspaper, and they know that the kids have had shows at the local college galleries and at the L.A.

County Museum some years ago. And my friends over there, the people that are sympathetic to me, I'm sure positively feel like it's good. But I suppose by and large the majority opinion would be, "Well, I guess it's all right--it's sort of modern--but he's really not doing any real art." I know for years this woman that taught at the junior high school would get my kids, and they'd always be in my room in sixth grade, and the first thing they'd want to take would be art. And they'd always come back to me, and I'd say, "How's it going?" And they'd say, "Oh, I took art, but it was no good, so I quit." All, every time, just about every time. And then I heard that this teacher would say that I never taught fundamentals, and she was, I think, somewhat out of joint because they had got a lot of attention for what they had done. And she felt that she was Chino's art person, so I think she unconsciously took it out on the kids. And they would tell me, you know, teaching color wheel things. They need the color wheels as much as they need the man in the moon. But that's very confusing to try to teach somebody; probably it's the most confusing thing in the world to a child, to try to teach him something that they know already but they don't know they know. That, I think, is totally devastating, just totally devastating, besides being immoral, practically. And just think of that experience, you know--you have a natural gift or knowledge of

something, but you don't know that; in fact, you don't even believe that that's true. It's more than don't know it, you don't believe it. So then somebody tries to teach you what is very natural, let's say a color sense, and so they get out a color wheel and start. Well, the more sensitive they are, the more they're going to get screwed up by that kind of an approach. I'm sure my kids have a harder time with that than some kids that haven't had any good art experiences. But then again, and I think we talked about this, not a year goes by that I don't come across some kid that's in his late teens or twenties or early thirties that will say, "You know, I'm doing paintings again," or, "I'm doing designs again. I didn't do it for a long time." They'd be the ones that got turned off in high school. And I'm very gratified always to hear that, because in the environment where they are, there's hardly anything to encourage that.

PALANKER: That answered my question. I was going to ask you what becomes of the kids, and also how you felt about the art instruction later on, but I think you've answered that. Do you spend more of the school day on art than other teachers do?

BENJAMIN: Yeah, I do, a lot more. I'm not supposed to, but I do, because I like it, you know. It keeps me from going nuts, and I think most teachers, or a lot of the teachers, if somebody is very good in singing, they do

more than the prescribed minutes of singing. And I don't do any singing, so maybe the last lady gave them a good year in singing, and so if they have a good year in art, it probably evens out. And if it doesn't even out, they've at least had a good year with art.

PALANKER: Are you ever frustrated when you have some exceptional rapport with some of your students, and then you only have them for a year? Is it a problem for you, with thirty new kids every year?

BENJAMIN: You mean, is it frustrating when I lose touch with them after that year?

PALANKER: Yes.

BENJAMIN: No, I think probably it was a little bit at first. And you have that sort of longing, because they're all not equal, some are better than others. And I think "better" not in a sense of painting, but they have more interest, they have more intensity, about doing the pictures. I think there's a lot of reasons for that. Very often it will be somebody that is very poor in their school work, maybe it's a compensation. But at the same time there are a lot of them that are very good in the school work, and they're also very good. But anyhow, there are a few, you know, that get turned on more than others, and you start to wonder. And at first I used to fantasize a little bit about keeping contact and . . . . But when you get so used to that year thing, you begin

to go, "It's this year, and that's what I'm responsible for. And what happens after that . . . ." But I've seen enough, I've run into enough people many years later, to know that that doesn't just evaporate, even if they don't paint anymore. I don't think they're going to be the guys that try to lynch the local artist. I think it's going to stick in their head, something of this. [tape recorder turned off]

PALANKER: Getting back to your painting, is there anything special you feel about the colors you use?

BENJAMIN: You mean the color? I use the color effects that happen?

PALANKER: Yes.

BENJAMIN: I think the thing that impresses me most about my color is the range of it. And this is sort of what I said I didn't like before, but one thing I think that I'm better at is not only the intensity of the color, but the range of it. In other words, you usually associate--at least I do--if you're talking about artists, you name an artist, and you can sort of get a typical color feeling about his work. Now, if I say Albers, I think a certain--not the squares; I'm talking about the color--I don't know if gestalt would be the word, but a kind of an overall color key and color picture in your mind, when I say Albers. Or when I say--of course, Kline would be quite simple because it was very limited in color, but de Kooning, Paul Klee,

who had a tremendous range of color, and from the local people, John McLaughlin, although he again was not interested in color. I'm just trying to think of--and I think of Stella, think of anybody, and a certain kind of a color thing pops in your head. And I've seen my things, and as I said before I usually paint in a series of thirty or forty or fifty paintings. And there will be a certain overall color characteristic about those paintings. And one group may be basically quite dark, and one might be quite intense in color--very bright--but at the same time they'll go almost in every one of these series, and from series to series. I think the range--I'll go from black paintings to white ones, and very greyed things to very full chroma paintings. And I don't know of any painter, at least that I've seen, that has that wide a range. And I think that's what I feel best about, about my paintings, if I'm thinking about my paintings in terms of how they compare to other people, in terms of the intensity and the range of the color. And it goes farther than just the different colors--you know, light, dark, bright, pastel. In terms of the overall aura of the painting, for instance, some series will have a very atmospheric quality to them which must have some natural reference. I mean you can feel a city nighttime color key or a fall sunset color key, things like that. Or they'll be done in purely abstract, if I can use the word, sorts of color

relationships, where there is none of that which I feel is a naturalistically related color. So anyhow, that's my feeling about that. [tape recorder turned off]

PALANKER: I'm really glad you talked about the color because in all likelihood your work, as far as this oral history is concerned, will be videotaped in black and white. Sitting in your studio right now and looking at the paintings, the color is of a very key importance. And at least you've talked about that on tape.

BENJAMIN: Well, I meant what I said, but I still feel funny about saying that, because it kind of wipes out what I said before about painting not being a competition. I got into that almost saying I am the best colorist, and it makes me very uneasy. But to be very honest, I feel that, and that's the only area where that crops up. I mean, I don't go around thinking about it all the time; I just think about it in terms that it gives me great personal satisfaction that I've--not explored, because I hate that word, but that I've been able to . . . . Well, color is the expressive thing in painting, I have to assume. And so it would follow that the wider the color range, the more you've been able to say. And so that's why it makes me feel good, because I feel like I've said about as much as can be said. [pauses] That surprised me to hear me say that.

There's another thing, because all the things that

I said I got out of painting were pretty personal--I mean, the personal feelings I got, the sense of being a part of something that's growing, helping to create that. And that was something we didn't talk about. And again, it sounds kind of mystical, but I've felt it so often, and I'd like to describe that experience. You were talking before about how do you decide on a color? And I said, "The one that looks good"--and that was a little bit flippant when I said, "The one that looks good with the other ones." But so often--and I suppose not just with color, but with the whole business of drawing and making forms--I get this feeling, and I've had it for so long, that I'm kind of a medium, which is a good thing, a good way to keep from getting a fat head. Because if I finish a painting and I think it's really good, and I feel just great about it, I don't feel great in the sense that, wow, look what I did. I feel like--well, again, like a medium--I'm looking; I'm trying to feel the right color. And we talked about listening the last time, how you're trying to be quiet, you're trying to listen, as if there is some--it's very absolutist--but like there is some right color or some right angle or some right dimension or form. But I'm not trying to figure out how to do it or which one is right; I'm waiting for some kind of a--and I won't say "divine guidance" because I'm totally a non-God believer in that sense--I'm talking about (I know this is true what I'm

saying), I am trying to get some message, trying to pick up some message so I know what to do. And when I get that message and it's clear, the next step in the work, whatever that step is. But it's not a question of figuring out; it's a question of tuning in. And so, you know, if I was just a real simpleminded Christian type--and you know it's so easy to believe that you're speaking in tongues; it's a very complicated thing to apprehend this feeling that I'm trying to explain. And so I can see how it would be a relief to some people to get a simplistic explanation, so their mind could rest. But it's part of something much bigger than me, and I think probably it goes back to what I felt my place was in art history, which I felt was as one of the painters. Because there's an awful lot of people that have done an awful lot of things and raised sensitivities and created new things. And even if I don't know about that consciously, even if I haven't studied that intellectually, it's in there. You know, it's part of my genes; it's part of my aesthetic genes, maybe my real ones. And a little bit, getting back to that same phenomenon--how do the kids I first taught in Bloomington in the late forties, how come they were able, under an art teacher who knew nothing about it, to do things which two years later I realized were very much like de Kooning and very much like Kline and very much like things that were being done, and the most avant-garde things in the art world being

done? How did they manage to do that? I didn't teach it to them. They came from homes where they didn't even get Life magazine. There were certainly no galleries around. How did they get there? By some kind of cultural osmosis. If it would have been a few years later, you could have said, well, okay, that art seeped into the billboards and advertisements which are very visually powerful, and so it came through. But it was too fast for that. Again, we talked about it before, but that's happened over the years. They'll come up with stuff that's quite current, and I haven't put up reproductions of new things. Where do they get that? Now, it hits the billboards very fast nowadays; within six months it seeps into advertising art, what's been done. But still, that's on a very finite basis. What I'm talking about is over a much longer period of time. So maybe what I'm listening for, maybe what I'm feeling myself the medium rather than the--I was going to say not the progenitor, maybe that's not the word--is because I key into that, and that's all I ever had to go on in art. More than most people, because I never learned anything much. Even when I tried, I never really understood stuff, and I just kept trying to fill the canvas up with the thing that felt right. And I probably have--if what I'm saying is accurate, and I'm quite sure it is--maybe I'm better at it because that's all I've ever done. I didn't have an academic background and a standard master's

degree and then had to reject what I had learned to do something important. I never had--the background I had, I really didn't fathom, and I appreciated the moral support from a couple of teachers. But I mean, as far as anyone showing me how to do things, what to do . . . . So all I ever had to go on was this. And I think I began to be able to verbalize this, within ten years after I started to paint, at least, less than ten years.

PALANKER: Do you feel that the children's success might be partly because they have a similar background in art as you have? They don't have models to follow. They're just working with the same kind of--they're in direct touch with the colors.

BENJAMIN: Maybe. What they're also in direct touch with is each other. And that's where they get a lot of it. Because when they do their things and I put them up on the wall, and the whole room is usually full of their things. I put them up on the wall and say, "Wow, that's good." I'm influential. I'm sure I couldn't say that's good if it was lousy; it wouldn't have any effect at all. I mean, it has to be both good and I have to say it's good, reinforce it. Remember, that's a joke in their experience, "That's crazy modern art." I mean, until they come into my room, that's all nonsense.

PALANKER: Is there another sixth-grade class in the same school?

BENJAMIN: Yes.

PALANKER: What do the other sixth-graders think of your class?

BENJAMIN: Oh, they'll come on the playground and say--well, the fifth-graders will say, "I want to be in your room next year because you do a lot of art." You know, they pick it up from older brothers and sisters and stuff. And it isn't just that I do art, because the others do art, too. I mean, you go into one, there will be a bulletin board up, and there will be real scrawny, squeaky-looking dinosaurs, and the art lesson--this is the big thing in education; you're interdisciplinary, so if you can combine a science lesson and an art lesson, that's really hot stuff. So you've got these terrible, awful dinosaurs with squeaky drawings and then colored with the watercolor boxes, you know. And they don't know anything about art, but they know that's not all that much fun. Because there, again, only two guys will get a good grade on that one, the ones that can draw the dinosaurs the best. And it probably gets out in a very simple way that "It's good in there, and he teaches you how to do it good, and everybody can do it." Well, that's how they would probably put it: "He teaches everybody how to do art real well so that everybody can do art." But it isn't that I teach it; it's what I said before.

PALANKER: How does the fifth-grader going into your class

as a sixth-grader, who was the best in the class, feel about that situation?

BENJAMIN: He'll be good.

PALANKER: He doesn't feel like he's lost his . . . ?

BENJAMIN: No. See, now I've got such a--I've been around there a long time. At first, there was some resistance, you know, a long time ago: "Oh, why can't I draw a bicycle?" And I said, "Because if you want any paper . . . ." And I don't mess around too much, because you can't start little hassles. But now, you know, they've seen all this stuff, and they come into look at it, and their older brothers and sisters tell them, so there's nothing like that anymore. They're eager when they get there, which makes it very easy for me. And they have some idea that I'm an artist, although they don't know what that means. But it helps as far as breaking down some of those early things.

PALANKER: You have good PR.

BENJAMIN: Yeah, you know, the prison-yard grapevine.

TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE TWO

AUGUST 25, 1976

PALANKER: What do you get out of art?

BENJAMIN: Besides all the things that we've talked about? Well, this is something that I've just been thinking about lately, and not just thinking about lately but that have sort of come together lately. And one of the things you get out of an activity like painting is not being corrupted, because I think most of the things we do in life are--if not inevitably, they're ultimately corrupting. In most jobs people have, most people's things, if you just use that general term, soon you get to a place--sooner or later, sometimes immediately; sometimes that's what it's all about--where your thing necessitates exploiting people or manipulating people or subjugating people, and of course when you do that to people you're doing it to yourself. And in an activity like painting that's totally <u>not</u> a part of it, you never have to rationalize anything; you never do anything for some pragmatic reason that you need to justify. You only do the right thing. You only do what feels right. And when I talk about people manipulating or exploiting or subjugating, I mean, you don't have to just think about the Hitlers and the oil executives and the salesmen and the bureaucrats and politicians; almost every role we've got is a role that's fraught with the

danger, the corrupting danger of ultimately getting to a power situation over somebody else in order to achieve certain ends. It starts right off with parents and their children. And power is corrupting; it breeds irresponsibility, the worst kind of irresponsibility. You can rationalize, you can justify so easily; I mean, that is probably man's major sin. And you can't do that in painting. You can in the sense of a hack who wants to make a lot of money, and so he does certain paintings because he knows they'll sell. That's just another kind of a manufacturer or salesman. I'm not talking about those guys, but a sincere painter, or a sincere writer or whatever, areas like that, activities like that just leave absolutely no room for any act that--if you'll forgive the expression--isn't pure. I mean, you don't have to do anything in order to achieve some end; you don't have to do anything unsavory, because the end result is so important. And I really wonder how many people have that experience. Now, as a schoolteacher, I'm in a position of power over those kids, and I'm sure I abuse it. I'm sure anybody in a situation of power abuses it, and therefore abuses themselves, abuses themselves in the sense of forcing yourself into situations where you have to justify yourself and have to defend yourself, which is the opposite from what's it all about. What it's all about is about self-realization. And so any of those other things that enter into it are just the opposite

of knowing, realizing yourself. You're covering up. You're saying, "I'm not really doing this. I'm doing it because of that." And I see so much of this, whether I'm in school--I can see it mostly in hindsight as a parent, but I was somewhat conscious on occasion of it then and felt guilty about it. And none of that happens with painting. Pure has come to be a weird word, but there is such a thing as pure, and I think painting is a pure experience of action. If you could live like you painted--and we got into that once before--it would be marvelous. But I think you can live a little bit better, or a lot better if you learn some of these things through something like painting, which most activities in life don't permit.

PALANKER: You said before we started taping that your wife and you had been talking about power. You just mentioned power as being something that you're not in a position to be corrupted by because of what you do.

BENJAMIN: In painting?

PALANKER: In painting. What aspect of power had you been talking about?

BENJAMIN: Well, specifically that conversation came from the educational bureaucracy, because my wife is a teacher at Chaffey College and wants to be in administration, has that kind of a personality. I never did, because the minute school was out, I was not interested in meetings,

and I really didn't believe that you could have any effect, any serious effect, any policy-making effect. I know it now. My wife doesn't know that. Besides, I wanted to get home and paint, and I didn't want to get into those extra things. I often have people say to me, "How come you're still teaching? How come you're not in administration?" Well, that's just a whole different occupation. That's in bureaucracy; that's not in education. That's something totally different. But that's how that came about. And I've seen--we're talking about power--well, a classroom teacher at any level has considerable power. And at a higher level, college level, it would be sort of an intellectual power, but it would be more, too. I've seen an awful lot of students get really crumpled psychologically from teachers who were either sadistic or insensitive or just didn't handle it right. I'm fumbling with this because it's not all that old a thing with me, to think about these things. I'll tell you the simplest example. You're a mother or father, and your little kid says, "I'd like to go to the park. Will you take me out to the park?" You have the power now to say yes or no. You say, "No, because I'm tired," "No, because I have to do this," "We'll see later." All right, what you've done there, you have irresponsibly exercised power over somebody. Not only that, but you have failed to be conscious of what you've done. And that's another part: you should know what

you've done. Even if it's a bad thing, you say, "I did this bad thing," but you're not saying it. I mean, it may be true. You might be right in the middle of a cake, or you might be right in the middle of doing something you can't stop now. So I mean, you might have a good reason. But it's so easy to say, "No, I have to do this now." So you've also lied to yourself, it was a corrupting act. You haven't said, "No, I don't want to take you to the park now because I don't want to take you to the park now," and just settled that. You know, if you can handle it, fine, but at least you know what you did and why you did it. And what I meant mostly by corrupting is being dishonest with why you did things. Because what are you? You're what you do. And if you can't clearly see what you're doing or admit to what you're doing, it's a corruption of yourself. So I was talking about a parent and a child. What about a principal and a teacher in a school? He has a power position there. And the teacher says, "I've got some old broken desks in here, and the kids are falling out of them. We need some more desks." And the principal says, "Well, I'll see what they say." And you never hear anything more about it. That man's corrupted himself. The real story was, he doesn't want to trouble the upper administrators for new desks. He knows there's nothing you can do about it, so what he's really doing is saying, "Okay, my own path is a little easier if I stall this guy

off." Now, if he'd say that, okay, but he doesn't say that. He tells this big lie to himself that he's going to see about it later and immediately forgets, but he's not aware of that. So those things build up 5, 10, 15 times a day x 365 times a year. And most people are quite corrupt as a result. And there's some times when you don't say a true thing all along. Nothing is said because it's so; it's for some other purpose. And again, getting back to the art part, it's just the opposite of that. Nothing is done except, what's more definitive than those yellow lines there? [points to painting] There's no way. I mean that's all they are, and they're looking back at me, and there's no way nor need for me to defend it. Just it felt right, so that's what it is. And my wife will come in and say, "That was so nice until you put that last color on, and now you've wrecked it." And so, you know, you laugh, and I mean it just doesn't . . . . Or the neighbor says, "Why did you use that purple?" And I suppose if you're a beginner, you get all upset about that, but it just gets so totally unimportant; it may even look bad to you, but you did it. So therefore, that's you, because you did it; so you can't argue with it, you can't regret it. It's all clean and done, and there are very few analogous life experiences.

I suppose things like medicine could be, possibly, could be like that, but my father for instance started

off as a general practitioner, physician and surgeon. Within a few years he was so fed up with that because he said that most people really were coming in and really wanted more of a psychiatry service, or were perfectly satisfied with a placebo. And he would say, "There's nothing wrong with you." And there was a certain part of him maybe that didn't understand certain people needed some of that. So he quit and became a pathologist, where he didn't have to worry about that. But in the practice of medicine, probably, it would be so easy to get from that point to say, "Well, this person is all screwed up, and they don't feel good, and they're really okay. But if they go out of here, they'll continue to feel bad. They'll just go to another doctor. So I'll give them some sugar tablets, and if I give it free they won't think it matters much, so I'll charge them fifteen bucks." And after a bit you're not going through quite that much rationalization anymore, and you've got all the doctors around now doing all kinds of unnecessary things to make two hundred grand a year. So that's become pretty corrupting.

Well, you've started a couple of times when I was saying those things. Has something I said bothered you?

PALANKER: Well, nothing bothered me. [tape recorder turned off]

BENJAMIN: Well, I was going to say it takes quite a

while in something like painting to get to the point where you can feel those things. Because the first few years I painted, you know, it was "Gee, was that right?" or "That doesn't look right," after you've done the painting, and "I should have made this that," and what-ifs. And I think it takes quite a while to get enough competence, maybe get to the point where you just realize, "What I did there, that's all I can do. I listened as hard as I could. I put the paint on the best I could, and I'm either a genius or I'm a total fool." But that thought comes up a lot: either it's really great, you know, or I'm an absolute idiot, when you look at something you did. And after a while you realize that you're not an idiot. I think an idiot, if you repeat your act long enough, would be an accepted attitude after a while; there is something to that. [pause]

PALANKER: How did the pressures of selling and showing affect the work?

BENJAMIN: My work?

PALANKER: Yes.

BENJAMIN: I don't think they affect it at all. I think they affect my frame of mind.

PALANKER: Pressure?

BENJAMIN: My frame of mind about--you know, if I'm pissed off at the world or feeling sorry for myself or glad that I just got a couple of thousand dollars, you know, that

kind of frame of mind. But I don't think it affects the paintings at all. The paintings that I'll do, I almost know in advance if they're going to sell or not, because certain series of paintings I've done, I've almost sold all of them, and others very few of them. And there doesn't seem to be any difference in quality, but it's just certain things about them. And I've never had a really big dealer who could really put stuff across. And maybe they could sell them all, but that's another dimension. You know they're not buying it because they responded to it, as much as because, you know, "You better buy a so-and-so now."

I remember one series I did of very curvy paintings, and they sold right away, and after I did about twenty-five of them, I didn't do any more because something else had come up, and it didn't happen to be, as I think about it, a group of paintings that sold. But I can't paint it unless I'm excited about it. I've often thought of these series. I use the word series; there must be a better word than that, but it's like finding a vein of gold, and you mine that vein until it runs out. And some veins are longer than other veins. I mean, what I've done is, I've stayed in the same mine, you know, and I've found a lot of different veins in the same mine. I think that's one kind of painter, the so-called vertical painter, and I'd plane it down--in other words, as against a horizontal.

I would think of Picasso as a horizontal type--I mean, somebody who went into many styles, went into many quite different modes of painting, stylistic modes. And then you think of someone like Braque, who you always think about with Picasso, as his opposite who stayed in a certain--not format--but a certain way of painting, and almost just exhausted every possibility that that painting could go. I think those two guys are pretty good examples for that. And I would consider myself that kind of a painter.

PALANKER: A Braque.

BENJAMIN: Uh-huh. Again, not stylistically, but in an approach.

PALANKER: What do you predict for this series you're working on now?

BENJAMIN: I think they'll sell pretty well.

PALANKER: And what are your reasons?

BENJAMIN: Because they're--well, we're not talking about the quality of the painting now. We're talking about the reasons it will sell, right?

PALANKER: Right.

BENJAMIN: Because all my paintings are roughly the same quality. But these are bright, and they're complicated, and they're flashy, flashy in the sense of visually exciting.

PALANKER: Colorwise and with the structures?

BENJAMIN: Yeah. What doesn't sell of mine is extremely simple things. They don't sell--the small ones all do, but the bigger ones don't sell. And again, so many of my sales, probably more than a lot of artists, so many of my sales are not to what you call art collectors but people in town and people I know. So it's somewhat temporary. You know, if you try to relate this to the art buying public, it's a little inaccurate, because I have sold to more people than most artists, people who are not in that segment of the population. It's almost as if I . . . . And often it seems to go that way. I'll go from--one series will be very complicated, and the next one will be very simple. One will be very basic, be very bright; the next one will be very dark or very light. That seems to go back and forth. Those series seem to be like a spiral--I was going to say "staircase." And maybe it does go up. It gets better, but things keep popping up that happened two series ago in terms of certain colors, only they're different now. But they're the same colors, only they're different. You're saying something else, only it's different, for something that appears quite new, but it relates to something four years ago. I wish I could show you; you know I could attempt to look through the slide book, but it wouldn't go on the tape.

PALANKER: Of the paintings that are up here right now, are these the ones that are going to be shown in the fall

at the Los Angeles County Museum? ["Los Angeles Hard Edge, the Fifties and Seventies"]

BENJAMIN: Yeah. They wanted some of the new ones, and then some current work, and then some work that was done at the time of the original hard-edge show there in '59, or whenever it was.

PALANKER: When is this show going to be?

BENJAMIN: I don't know, I'm just waiting. [Maurice] Tuchman said he was going to call me, and I'm just waiting to hear from him. He just said in the fall, at the time when some college art educators convention is in Los Angeles, something like that.

PALANKER: We're talking about the four abstract classicists show ["Los Angeles Hard Edge, the Fifties and Seventies"], since we're being taped.

BENJAMIN: Oh, I see, yeah.

PALANKER: You have a lot of work here, and I wanted to ask you about it. Why are certain things here?

BENJAMIN: Just because they fit in those racks. Because my racks in the old studio--I have some great big new ones, but mostly real old ones, and that space isn't as . . . . So it isn't as if they're old out there, but the six-footers don't fit in those racks. Just sort of a bunch, and a lot of them are there because those are the ones that didn't sell. [laughs]

PALANKER: Do you ever not want to show a certain painting

just because you like it?

BENJAMIN: No. No, those would be the ones I'd want to show the most. I have had that feeling about selling them. I've felt kind of funny about selling.

PALANKER: That was really my question: you wanted to show them but you didn't really want to part with them.

BENJAMIN: Yeah, there's a little bit of that feeling almost in most paintings, but in a few more than others. And I think you rationalize it by saying, "I didn't like to sell this because I didn't get enough money for it." But I think the real reason is you identified so closely with the painting you didn't want to let it go. I mean, you didn't want to let the enemy get your fingernails or your hair. It goes back to that, I think.

Did I leave much dangling when we were talking about the great art bonus, which is: not being corrupted? Is there any more of that?

PALANKER: I don't think that anything is dangling; I think it's a matter if you want to add to it or not. Do you feel an artist can be corrupted by things like too much success, that kind of thing?

BENJAMIN: I suppose, but I'm not sure. Let's say a guy comes on--I mean, if you've been in an area a certain time, everybody's seen it; suddenly a guy will come along, and he seems to be very good, talented, and his things sell very well, and he goes on painting that way. And

he doesn't really develop any more, but how much of that is due to the success and how much of it is due to his lack of . . . ? Maybe that's all he could do. You know, there's certain authors that only wrote one novel, and they're very good; and they either didn't write any more novels or they kept rehashing the first one. In a sense, every writer is only writing one novel, and I know that, but I mean, there are people that fit those other two categories. But that really doesn't fit my definition either of art and talent, because I really believe that everybody has sufficient talent. Now, maybe what that guy didn't have who was, let's say, corrupted--maybe he just didn't have enough intensity, maybe he just wasn't into it enough. Maybe he wouldn't have painted much more; maybe he would have stopped altogether if he hadn't sold all those paintings. And that's pretty hard to say.

I think maybe people have undergone more misery by the pressures of success, not the people who have been obviously corrupted and kept doing imitations of what they'd been doing. Jackson Pollock seemed to be in such agony, or maybe I just got it from romanticized reviewers, but, "What am I going to do next?" I can't understand that. I can understand the feeling, but by his age he ought to . . . . I mean, that's an important feeling--that's where you get reborn again all the time--but by his age he should have known that it was going to happen

again. And if he didn't, it was because some of these extra things about art that I've been talking about he just never really came to understand, or he didn't avail himself of the knowledge that was within his grasp if he really looked and thought back to it, for every couple of years this terrible panicky feeling, "What if I can't paint anymore?" I'm not sure it's not a destructive feeling basically; it's a real adrenaline flow-er. And I found after quite a while that at the worst part of that feeling, the most intense time when you get that feeling, something started to happen again. And I never had any long stretches between, no stretches between. It's just that there were some times when I was painting and kind of fishing. But I never dried up, and all of a sudden you're off again. But I mean a guy that painted as long as Pollock, I should think, would have had the wherewithal to withstand periods like that. And the younger painters don't seem to let themselves get to--not younger painters . . . . The younger painters who have subscribed to the certain current ideas rob themselves of the creative impulse that comes from getting into those desperate situations. Because if they sit, as so often I hear them or read, I hear them say that before they start a series of paintings, they so thoroughly think it out and evaluate it in terms of "Now where has this been done before?" "Now where does this fit?" and

"Is this the next logical thing?" And I consider much of that stuff dull. But it seems to be successful from a critical point of view, but it would I think keep you--it's really academic. It's an academic approach; it's basically an academic approach, even though it's now done under the theory of avant-garde terms. But anyhow, that academic approach is one of rules and imperatives, and you spare yourself, and at the same time you rob yourself, of those frightening times when you're sort of forced into making a leap.

TAPE NUMBER: V [video session]

DECEMBER 16, 1976

PALANKER: You've got that painting all masking-taped and ready for you to work on?

BENJAMIN: Well, not completely. Usually I have to tape in the whole area, but on one like this, which is very much the same image as that one, I just do the corners. And it's just less monotonous if you can break it up a little bit, especially when there's no football games.

PALANKER: How many more colors are going to be applied to this?

BENJAMIN: Well, there's one field color, and then one line. The field color's blue, and then there's one line that goes all the way through. Every other line is magenta. And the one I'm painting now will be purple. And I think the inside of the diamond, like the one on the wall there, will be yellow.

PALANKER: Now, which line is going to alternate?

BENJAMIN: The one I'm doing now. It's sort of the outer part of this diamond. And then the inner part will be yellow.

PALANKER: And there's no field color at all in the actual diamond? That remains blue?

BENJAMIN: Yeah, that stays the same. And then what seems to happen with these--I've only done three or

four with this sort of a diamond shape in the middle, but they seem to come out totally different; the field color in the middle looks totally different than the field color on the outside. And it looks different again out on the edges, you know, where it's sort of unimpeded.

PALANKER: When you add the yellow on the bottom part of the diagonal here and go over the purple, are there any problems with the colors? Does the yellow remain true?

BENJAMIN: Oh, yeah. I mean, you go over as slightly as possible. I suppose if you lopped over a quarter of an inch, or even an eighth of an inch, well, in a couple of months it would probably show through; so you try to overlap as little as possible. There's more reasons actually for using tape than just to get a straight line. To me the most important part is that's the only way you can control the brush marks, because if the brush marks all go up and down, you can control the reflection, and therefore the light, and therefore the color.

PALANKER: Have you always used masking tape?

BENJAMIN: No, I used to do it freehand, which impressed people more. I lost a lot of prestige from my non-art friends when I began using tape. But the problem with not using tape is that you have a choice of two evils: one is, you have to dilute the paint down so thin that it actually loses strength; and if you try to put it on thick enough, with enough body, you get this disturbance--

you know, the brush mark along the line, which is a nuisance.

PALANKER: Would you like to talk about what you've been pressing down the tape with?

BENJAMIN: Well, it's a guitar pick or autoharp pick, which I just used at the suggestion of my wife, because a few months ago I began using a different ground, and for some reason it was much harder. My fingernail wore out in about, well, in about an hour. And so I had to do something, so she suggested this pick. And it just saves all kinds of time, and it's better. And I don't have a hooked index finger. And as far as the kind of operation I'm doing now, it's just simply getting my thumbnail in those corners so the paint doesn't leak through. You can get a much better edge and a much better field if you use two coats. But these are so complicated that I'm only using one coat. Okay, that ought to do it.

I have never painted under the gun like this. I don't know what it's going to do for the surface.

PALANKER: Well, you mentioned once that your daughter used to paint for you. She used to do part of it.

BENJAMIN: At that particular time, I was doing paintings with much bigger areas, and those were two-coat paintings in that the first coat was just tube consistency, and then after the whole painting was done, then I started

off and put on a second coat with a little stand oil. And you get a very consistent field and a very good edge. But often on that first coat, my daughter Krissy used to put it in. And actually it's a much more complicated operation than it looks, and she was only nine. And it's complicated in that each color has different physical characteristics. Some colors are much thinner physically, and some are much thicker. And so you're trying to get enough paint on, but at the same time not so much that you can't fairly well control the brush marks afterwards. And she was really very sensitive. I would smooth it out, but she was very good. Then later on, when I was doing the first triangle paintings--I can show you some of those later--I would make sort of a mock-up with cut paper. It was a laborious pasting job. So by this time she's in her mid-teens, right? So she's more practical. So we made this deal. She was going to get 1 percent of the gross, [laughter] or the net, I forget, if any of those sold.

PALANKER: How did it work out?

BENJAMIN: I lost track of which were the ones that she did. But I did pay her some; I didn't gyp her intentionally, but I did kind of lose track because most of these paintings sold.

PALANKER: How did you discover that she could do it?

BENJAMIN: Who?

PALANKER: Your daughter.

BENJAMIN: Well, she was always hanging around the studio. My kids always did because this is where I was when I wasn't at school. And they would just always be out here.

PALANKER: So you just let her try it once?

BENJAMIN: Yeah. And they'd hold the wood, you know, when I was making frames, or do all kinds of little things. And I suppose that would be hard for most painters to have kids in the studio, but I didn't start to paint until we had our first child, and I was painting in the bedroom with a baby in the crib there, and I just got used to that. In fact, I was home taking care of her; my wife was teaching at that point. And it was just a question--we didn't do a lot of things that a lot of families did, like picnics and trips and things, because I always had to come out and paint. But they look back on it as pleasant and don't seem to feel deprived. But I think the reason why was because they always came out here where they'd paint; they had their own easel and they'd paint.

The reason I have to go four ways, right, left, and then down, and the last one is up. And that just sort of . . . . [pause]

PALANKER: Are all your surfaces covered this way, with four directions?

BENJAMIN: Yeah. And if I've got a big area, I use a bigger brush.

PALANKER: When you finish, do you wait until the paint dries to remove the tape, or do you remove it immediately?

BENJAMIN: Immediately. There's a book written--I forget how I got into it--one of those how-to books by Walter Foster, and I got one. And there were a couple of reproductions of my paintings, and it said, "After you finish painting the area, you leave the tape on until it's thoroughly dry." And I just wonder how many people are cursing me, because if you do that you'll tear the paint off, and also the tape leaves a residue. So you just take it right off. [tears tape]

I'm the only painter I know that has to wash his hands before he paints.

Now, I don't know if this is going to register at all in black and white, because these are pretty close values. And really what these paintings are about are the color changes that happen when another stripe goes on, and the effect it has on the existing colors.

PALANKER: Could you describe what colors they are, and how you mix them?

BENJAMIN: These right now? Well, the field is a light-to-medium thallo blue, just a thallo blue and white. And this alternating line that goes all the way through is just alizarin crimson and white. And what I'm doing right now is purple and white, transparent purple. (I think I'm taped to the wire.) I just would be curious to see what

this looks like. [removes tape]

PALANKER: Is this painting going to be in any of the shows that are coming up for you?

BENJAMIN: It might be in the show at the Tortue Gallery in Santa Monica, which will be the end of January or the first part of February [1977]. This depends. I've got about fifty-five of these done, of these new ones, and four go to the Corcoran Biennial [in Washington, D.C.] next month, and several are in that County Museum show in January, which is "Los Angeles Hard Edge, the Fifties and the Seventies," so it just depends on how many I'll need.

Now, that will look the same when I get the other three corners painted, and then the part that now shows white in the middle will be yellow. And I would just sort of guess that it might turn the middle green, but I haven't used it yet, so I don't know.

PALANKER: You name your paintings by number, right? You just number them. What number is this one?

BENJAMIN: Well, it will be about No. 43, 1976--43 or 44.

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PALANKER: This is the mural done by your students at the elementary school? [Gird Elementary School in Chino, California]

BENJAMIN: Yes, that one is about 6 x 7 feet. And the

size is to me the most impressive part of these. I wish we could see these in color, because these children that did these murals, and there are three that you can see in this clip, had never worked on anything bigger than a 12 x 18 [inch] piece of paper. And they didn't really get a chance to get used to a larger scale. And I can remember myself when I increased my canvas size a foot (there's another one in the background there). It seemed huge. And they went from 18 inches to between 6 and 10 feet! And the way I had them do that, the only way I could prepare them, was I gave them a bucket of water and a brush, and they went out and drew their design on the wall--or not their design, but they drew. The pictures they were doing in class were basically finger movements, with crayons and pastels. And now all of a sudden that changed to a totally different kinesthetic kind of a response to this huge wall where they had to use their whole arms. And so they took a bucket of water and a brush and went out for a day or two. And they could see the design, and they knew what was happening, and they knew why they were doing this. And other kids would walk by and say, "What are you doing?" And they'd say, "I'm painting a mural." And of course the other kid couldn't see anything. And there were rumors that there were strange mental breakdowns in Mr. Benjamin's room. But it worked because they had

a . . . . They (the murals) have been marred of late. The Chino Sinners struck again.

* * *

BENJAMIN: Okay, can we talk about these over here, the line drawings? Is this the mike here? Now, the things that are up are not just from these kids, but there's some from these kids--some from last year, a year before--and mostly the reason they're up there is because I wanted to get as many different kinds of things up to show this sort of breakdown of the naive image of children's art as just being primitive. Now, those drawings over there are a very interesting point as far as how to teach art, because it really isn't taught at all. Now, all you kids here, we talked about those the other day. One day there was a boy in my class--and this was twenty years ago that those were done, those are twenty years old. And those kinds of drawings are very popular now--they're on the covers of math books and you see them all the time--but at that time they weren't. So there was a kid, and he was doodling on a piece of paper, and he made a very crude drawing of two lines at right angle, with dots, and he hooked up the dots and had a very crude curve. And so I was impressed, and I held it up, and the other kids thought that was pretty flashy. And so the guy next to him made one that was a little better, and then somebody

else did one that was still better, and then they started to put together various elements. And all of a sudden--they worked on those for several months, and one kid learned from another, and then some finally got tired of the circle, so they went in with straight lines and value contrasts and the lines getting close together. But I think it's a very good example of how a classroom is a microcosm, just like the artists' community, where most of the stimulation comes from fellow artists rather than something they're taught. Now, this kind of approach is not at all favored today in the schools, because you're supposed to have a concrete objective in mind before you present any material, and you're supposed to know how it comes out, and you're supposed to know how to manipulate the kids to have it come out right. But this is actually the way it ought to work. Another interesting thing about children's art--now, those were sixth-graders, either fifth- or sixth-graders, and that takes a tremendous amount of control and care with a ruler. But if you were to ask an average sixth-grader to make an answer column for his math paper and make one-half-inch spaces for the answers, most of them would look like a broken stepladder. But because they were very involved in what they were doing, that's a hundred times more efficient than the average sixth-grader is going to do using a ruler and a measure. Now, some of these kids today are doing these--they got

interested in it after I put them up last week--and so it will be interesting to see what they do with them. Probably not as good as these kids, but not because these guys here aren't just as talented, but because they're looking at finished things already and there's not quite as much room for their own development. Can we look at some of the other things? Are we getting a pretty good register on the other pictures?

One thing about the children's art in the twenty-five years I've taught is the wide variety. And so often it goes parallel with what's happening in the adult art world. Twenty years ago actually you got many more things like--let's see, let's look over here--like this, or like this, or this, [points to children's work] all of which (there are more on the back wall) are more closely related to abstract expressionism. And recent years have had--the last five, six, seven years--a lot of hard-edge stuff, and very formalistic. And these kids don't go to any art galleries or see museums. So it's just sort of something that they picked up by osmosis. And I don't show them examples of art, either, when the year starts. What they see is what their classmates do. It gets put up on the wall, and that's what stimulates them, not prints or reproductions from the outer world, until later in the year--if at all.

What did you have in mind when you started that?

What made you start that picture?

MICHELLE: Hills.

BENJAMIN: Hills? Where are the hills? Up in there?

MICHELLE: Yeah.

BENJAMIN: Okay, and how about the colors?

MICHELLE: I thought that they looked good together.

BENJAMIN: Were you thinking of the time of the year?

MICHELLE: Fall.

BENJAMIN: Fall. Okay, how come you've got the hills at the bottom pointed down? What made you do that?

MICHELLE: Those are supposed to be hills going up.

BENJAMIN: These are going up, or those are going up?

MICHELLE: They all are.

BENJAMIN: They all are, okay. Why don't you hold up the picture you're doing now, hold it towards the camera. What was your idea in that one, to start that one?

MICHELLE: Putting two colors together, making them look like they were melting.

BENJAMIN: Melting, like melting crayons? Rosie, why don't you hold your picture up to the camera. That will read in black and white. Okay, let me hold it up so you can get your mouth clear. What was your idea in doing that one?

ROSIE: Tiled roofs, the kind that go like that. [gestures]

BENJAMIN: Like the red tile roofs.

ROSIE: The houses that go like . . . . And then I

colored them in a pattern.

BENJAMIN: Okay, those are ideas that came from somewhere out there in nature, and that's fine, but most of these children and most artists will have a different impulse.

Stevie over there, hold your picture up to the camera. Stevie just combed his hair, but that's all right. Okay, now on that one, Steve, what got you started on that? You told me a minute ago. You said . . . .

STEVE: Grey.

BENJAMIN: Right, started out with just grey, okay. Kathy, how about you. Hold yours up. What gave you your start on that picture? What was your first thing? The color, the shapes or what?

KATHY: I was thinking of wall plaques. You know, the wall plaques?

BENJAMIN: Jon, what about you? Why don't you hold yours up toward the camera? Now, what got you off on that one?

JON: I don't know, I just thought of something in my head, so I just put it down on paper.

BENJAMIN: You thought of something? You mean you thought of certain colors or certain shapes?

JON: Uh-huh.

BENJAMIN: Well, does anybody else have something that they'd like to say? How, what got them started? Was it . . . ? Connie, what about you?

CONRAD: I didn't know what it was going to be. I just

kind of draw a little bit, then it kind of gets in place, kind of.

BENJAMIN: Did the camera pick that up? Say that louder.

CONRAD: I didn't know what it was going to be. I just kind of draw a little bit, and then if it looks good I do it a little more darkly.

BENJAMIN: All right, what he said really sums it up as well as anybody. Most kids will start that way. They'll draw a little bit, and they'll see if it looks good, and then they'll draw something light that really means in artistic terms that they're always working toward a kind of formally unified whole.

* * *

PALANKER: We're back from Gird Elementary School in Chino, California, back in the studio, and in a moment Mr. Benjamin will be wrapping up his purple paint.

BENJAMIN: Well, we should have done this before, when I finished the color, before we went to school, but it won't stay out here all night, so . . . . [wraps up paint in Saran Wrap]

PALANKER: I guess it's obvious why you do it, but why do you save the paint?

BENJAMIN: Well, sometimes the tape will tear off the existing paint layer, I need to patch it; or bugs fly into the wet paint, and then I have to scrape the bugs

out, and that leaves a hole, and I have to patch that. So it just saves a lot of time. And some of it I can use over again; all the pure cadmiums I can use again. And this would keep forever, and then when I get a great big box of it, I just give it to some student to use.

* * *

Okay, the paintings that we've seen so far in the studio are the things I've been doing the last year or so. And the ones I did before that were much simpler. And they really were built on a box sort of a motif. I remember the first one was almost a cubist-looking three-dimensional box. And then they slowly seemed to reduce.

PALANKER: When did you do this one?

BENJAMIN: This one [No. 20, 1974] was toward the end of those. No, it was right in the middle, because after that first painting that I just talked about, the one that was like almost a three-dimensional box with overlaps and transparencies, they seemed to reduce, and they got down to this almost a windowlike shape. And I think in these paintings, like has happened off and on throughout my painting life, paintings come out; they get a certain surreal kind of a feeling. And I think a lot of these paintings had it, certain illusions of windows and space, and as soon as you get those feelings you associate them--at least I do--with sort of an abstract surrealism.

Now there's a--let me show another one, if I can get over there. Why don't you go on that side, Robin? Now I've got it the wrong way. What I need is some studio like [John] Mason, then I could really . . . .

PALANKER: Yes, and a few forklifts.

BENJAMIN: You want to hold that? I want to get this out so I . . . . Now this [No. 20, 1975] was one--by this time the windows had come out, I mean, the corners of the windows, and I was down to . . . . Let me . . . . Be sure that clears. Maybe I'd better--why don't you just hold it. I'll get it in a second. [moves paintings] The windows had come out, and they got much flatter, and then there were--this is an odd series, and I did about fifty-five of those. And always before when I did a group of paintings, it stayed somewhat in the same format, and they were never reductive before. And the very last paintings of this group, I was down to one rectangle in the middle of one color, then a field color. It got that simple, and then these started; these new ones started to pop up.

PALANKER: So this is a series immediately before the ones you're working on now.

BENJAMIN: Before this one. And it seems like a sudden jolt from this to that, but in several ways it isn't, because if I had the time and a lot of space--the different strains that run through my paintings are almost

cyclical. Something pops up, and then four years later it comes up again, and in another three or four years it comes up again. And there are three or four spiral threads that are intertwining. And also another thing that seems to happen is, I go from something very complex to something very simple, or very bright to very low-key. And it almost--I remember that statement of Picasso, where you have a desire to paint green and so you paint green until you can't stand it anymore, and then you paint another color. And that's sort of the same principle, I think: that after doing something more and more simple, more and more reduced, then something very complicated becomes exciting again. And then the very complicated works become exhausting and you crave a difference.

Now, let me show you one more of these before I . . . . I think it's this one. And this is the third aspect of this group [No. 19, 1975], if I can get this wire out. [lavalier drops] There were also some of the paintings in that group that had a great deal of third-dimensional illusion, and this is the most pronounced of those. So they started off as boxes, and then they flattened out, and then they got very filled with spatial illusion again, although I didn't intend that when I did them, because I always see things flat, and as flat shapes. And whatever happens in the way of illusion just happens.

PALANKER: Would you like to comment on the color at all,

because this is black and white.

BENJAMIN: Well, yeah, the color in that is a full spectrum of color; I mean, these run from bright yellows through oranges and scarlet, and these are reds and pinks and magentas. And that quadrant is purple to blue, and here are blue-greens and greens. So it sort of does a circle in color. Now, if I can--this is the problem in getting these out of the way of the wires. [laughs] I had that other one in wrong, and it was getting scraped. Okay, I really think at this point I'd like to show some considerably earlier ones. [lavalier drops] This show at the L.A. County [Museum] in January is going to be called "Los Angeles Hard Edge, the Fifties and the Seventies." They're going to have several works from that first hard-edge show that was at the County Museum in '59 ["Four Abstract Classicists"], that went to San Francisco and then London, and this is one of those paintings [I.F. Big Magenta, Yellow and Green]. That's from '59; these are all from '59, '58, '59 or '60. That goes back--that's a sudden jump of about fifteen years, but that was what I was doing at that time, although that actually was quite atypical, because most of those paintings were full of these zigzag shapes, and just a few of them had a big sheet like that in front. Now, again, since it's not in color, all these colors on the outsides and the top are yellows and greens, and that's a very intense magenta, which is probably reading black,

but it's nasty in color.

PALANKER: Do you have any of the zigzag ones?

BENJAMIN: Not handy. Almost all of those were sold, and I've only got about five or six left. This is one I just cleaned up for that show. And then again, to show that switch back and forth from complicated to simple, now, this was a painting [Vs XVI, 1960] that is representative of a group I did after those--at the museum show--the hard-edge show. These are all vertical divisions, and they were stripes, in a way--three times in my life that stripes popped up, and this was the first time. Then there was a time in the middle when they were almost randomly or atonally composed, and then the ones I'm doing now. So when you say stripes with paintings, it's a rather meaningless term. I remember I had a show in Washington, D.C., in about '68, and when I was back there I went to the--maybe we mentioned this on our tape--but I went to a show at the Corcoran or the Smithsonian, and Gene Davis was having a one-man show. And he was talking about the derivation of his own paintings, which were, of course, stripes. And I was very taken with his statement because he said that his stripe paintings had evolved from a very happy misunderstanding from paintings of--not [Kenneth] Noland, but who's the . . . ? Barnett Newman. And I was very amused by that because that was exactly where I got the impetus for these. It was a very happy

misunderstanding of what Barnett Newman was doing. And then before either of these paintings--and again I want to stress that all of these represent forty to seventy paintings, so it's hard to show them one by one--this one here [Gothic Symmetry, 1958], which . . . . This series came before those. And again a very interesting--I like those paintings very much, but it's another classic example of how artists never do what they set out to do. Because when I was doing those, all I was thinking about was the symmetry. I was still not that far from school, where you're never supposed to use symmetry, and I was just kind of obsessed by the idea of symmetrical painting. And of course the symmetry isn't what strikes, you know; it's almost a very third-dimensional illusionism, which I was totally unaware of at the time. Unaware of. I was just trying to do these symmetrical things which were sort of tabooed at that point. But I did a number of those.

PALANKER: Which series were in the Museum of Modern Art show? Have we gotten to those yet? "The Responsive Eye" show.

BENJAMIN: "The Responsive Eye" show? Those were the two I was showing you a minute ago, which were smaller ones from that point.* And I think there's one here that would

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*No. 27, 1964 was in "The Responsive Eye." The two shown earlier were in "Four Abstract Classicists."

be . . . . There was one here. [shows No. 26, 1964] Now, that's a whole 'nother group, and those were all based on just relationships between circles and squares. And that sounds very cold, and that's what we were talking about before, to say that whole series of paintings were based on the relationship between circles and squares, because it means far more to me than that. I mean, I was just very hot about the relationship between circles and squares, and when I would work with those, all sorts of old symbols came out, the old Navaho swastika and the cross and the Maltese cross. And there's always been that feeling that hard-edge painting meant sort of a hard-edged mind and was super cool, and it could be. But, as we said earlier in those taped interviews, styles and edges really have very little to do with the emotional content.

PALANKER: Well, I think also the color is so warm in a lot of these, and it's not coming across in the black-and-white video tape. I think that softens that hard edge a bit.

BENJAMIN: Well, that's where the emotional content comes through; it's in the color. Does this read? Well, dark and light, I wonder . . . . But I'll show you another one that just might, as long as we're doing these. One that sort of--it was right here. [rummaging about] I got it. Now, I just brought that out [No. 18, 1964] because that would read, I think, a lot better in black and white.

PALANKER: What year was this one done?

BENJAMIN: Sixty-four, middle sixties. And after that came a group that were really based on letters, but turned into big blocky forms, and then came triangle paintings of various kinds that I spent five or six years on, various manifestations of those.

PALANKER: Do you have any examples of the boxes that made up the letters and numbers?

BENJAMIN: The boxes? Yeah, those would be--why don't you put that sideways and lean it against those, if we can get that far apart, which I doubt.

PALANKER: I don't think so.

BENJAMIN: At one time in my life I thought that this was the biggest studio I had ever seen. That's when I moved out of a 10 x 20 [foot]. Do you want to hold that, Robin, while I . . . . [lavalier drops] This thing needs to be welded. Okay, here's one of those [No. 45, 1964].

PALANKER: Is this the letter I?

BENJAMIN: Well, by this time they were not letters anymore. I did the alphabet of each letter, but I never made paintings of those, I just made colored studies of those. And so then like things do get incorporated, and you just start using the forms. So I suppose that could have been an I over an O, or maybe an H, maybe an H with an O on top. But I did a lot of those. And I've shown you everything almost, except those triangle paintings.

And there's so many manifestations of those that I don't know where we'd have the room to stack them right now. Maybe I could pull out one.

PALANKER: Do you want one from the point where they were becoming more organized, or from when you did them more at random?

BENJAMIN: Whatever I can reach. [laughter] Let's see if we can--no, we can't do that one. [camera is in the way] We can do that one? Okay, here's a smaller one of those [No. 10, 1967]. Most of these are considerably bigger.

This is one group of them which were built on modules, and I would figure out one module which really made up one-fourth of the painting, and the same module was repeated and juxtaposed in different ways. But these went through about five different reincarnations, and through these I got into random design. This was very considered design, but then there was some [in which] I was using very random methods of establishing relationships.

PALANKER: Do you have any here that the pattern doesn't completely cover? There's a background that the triangles are placed on, and the background shows through.

BENJAMIN: Oh, yeah. But they're in a bad place. They're right behind the--they're here. I don't think I can get them out. They can't be . . . . The one I'll use is the one that I can slide out. [lavalier drops]

PALANKER: Have a lavalier. The reason I asked is because there's one similar one at the L.A. County Museum right now, upstairs.

BENJAMIN: The big one [No. 27, 1968]?

PALANKER: Yeah, and it's from this group.

BENJAMIN: Not from this group. From this, unless it's a big one, about seven or eight feet.

PALANKER: Yeah, it's very big.

BENJAMIN: No, it's one like that. I'll bet you a painting.

PALANKER: Oh!

BENJAMIN: Unless somebody . . . .

PALANKER: I just don't remember an all-over pattern, but you're probably right.

BENJAMIN: It's probably because it holds together better from a long distance; you know, from a big museum gallery-sized distance, it probably has more cohesion than it would in here when you're up close to so many other paintings and visual distractions. But those again came from the ones behind it, and those aren't quadrants, but they were half-quadrants, which I then cut in half and had friends assemble. And I had to pass final judgment, but that was as far . . . . And at that point it just seemed like I was--after so many years of controlling every single aspect, I can see in afterthought that I was just doing things that sort of . . . not exactly letting things happen, but certainly my losing some control. Or maybe again it was, if you have a strong

enough basic structure, you can afford to let go a little bit. But that can go pretty far, letting your friends put them together, or pulling tickets out of a jar, you know. But I think the basic concept--again, I wasn't thinking these things when I was doing them--but I think the basic concept was strong enough that it could handle that degree of freedom.

PALANKER: Now, what happened after these? This was when the boxes start?

BENJAMIN: Well, no, then those large paintings of the small rectangles, like the last show I had at Tortue, and I just don't think there's any way right now . . . . Well, we'll try it. We'll try to get one more because that's not in the way of the [camera]. I'm going to have to get behind. If you'll lean that one over, let's see, I'll fish out this one, and then that should be it. [fishes out No. 14, 1971] And those again came in two ways: some had a completely filled surface with small rectangles, and then the other half, half the canvas was the field color. And those placements were randomly arrived at, with certain qualifications. I would just choose numbered colors and tickets after first selecting the color. The color wasn't selected randomly, but the placement was. And the only few rules were that had this color appeared on this scale [points], I would have had to pull it back and pull out another color, because

I didn't want two coming together or two coming together this way. So outside of that, it was a random selection, except for the color.

PALANKER: In other words, you selected the colors that were going to be used at random?

BENJAMIN: Yeah. And the colors only appeared once in each row. And then I started over with the same colors on the next row, same colors on the next row, and so each color had to be . . . . It's a little like--I thought later, a musician friend mentioned that--it's a little like atonal composing in music, but I wasn't getting into it from that direction. And a lot of those are very atmospheric, especially the ones with the field. When I saw that show, one was very definitely a night painting, and one was a sunset painting. They have very definite atmospheric allusions, which kind of runs counter to what you'd think you'd get in a random selection, except that the color is what was making those things, not the randomness.

PALANKER: And from these you went to a very ordered structure.

BENJAMIN: And from these were those boxes that I showed you at the beginning. And then from those, yes, very ordered boxes, then these striped ones with very intense color that are on the studio walls now. I wish I had more space, but I don't know how I can get any more

paintings out without shredding something. [pauses] Let me take this one.

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