

IMPORTANT

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National Life Story Collection

Artists' Lives

Frank Avray Wilson
interviewed by Cathy Courtney

F4221 Side A

[Interview with Frank Avray Wilson on December the 29th 1994, at his home in London.]

Did you have any breakfast this morning?

Yes.

What did you have?

Porridge.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Tell me, for starting, where and when you were born.

I was born in Mauritius, you know where that is now, it's quite a popular place for...and, that's where I was born.

When were you born?

5th of May 1914.

And were you the first child?

I was the third child.

And did they go on to have more?

No.

So you were the youngest.

Yes.

Did you have elder brothers, or sisters, or what?

Yes, an elder sister, she was the eldest, and another brother.

And what were their names?

Austin, my brother, and Patricia, my sister.

Right. And do you have any memories of your grandparents, did you know your grandparents?

Oh, yes, well, yes.

Tell me about the father's side, who were your grandparents on your father's side?

Now, no, I misinformed you. On my father's side, my grandparents were dead, but on my mother's side I do remember them very well.

Can you tell me about them, what were their names?

D'Avray, he was...well he was a very old man when I knew him, younger than I am now, but, he was very...he had a way with him, which was interesting, with young people, I adored him. And my grandmother was a more quiet person; I never really knew her.

What was her name?

Oh dear you've got me there.

Right. And did you know anything about their growing up, did you know anything about their lives before you knew them?

Yes, she was the daughter of an English couple, I don't know what they were doing, I think they were in the government of some kind, and so was he, so their parents were both civil servants, both sides.

And did they grow up in England?

Yes.

And, when you knew them, did they live in Mauritius or did they live in England?

Yes, in Mauritius.

So do you know how they got from England to Mauritius, do you know what the story was?

No, not at all. No, almost sailing days.

And what did he do in Mauritius?

He was a customs official of some kind.

And what are your memories of Mauritius then, what was it like as a place to be in 1914?

As a child, it was rather a silly place, because there were lots of children speaking different languages. Quite young I realised there was a rift in the place between the French and the English, and the French were rather, you know, like the French are, I mean they are very, what's the word, proud people, and they felt they had been taken over by the British, 1810 I think after the...and the memories were still, when I was young, were still fairly active, so they treated me as a, they treated me as English because, as rather something different from them.

And how would that show itself, how would you pick up on it?

Well you know how children have mischievous ways of showing it. In parties and things I would feel rather out of it if it was mostly French, which they were, most of the white people, the Europeans, were French; there were a few hundred, and there were tens of thousands of French families. Actually I found the Indians and the native children far more interesting than the French, which is another reason I think why they didn't like me very much.

And the French children spoke French presumably.

Yes, yes. No English.

And did you speak French?

I spoke a native dialect called Creole, which is broken French which the French can't understand, but which the natives speak. When I say the natives, I mean the white French and the Indians and the African, you know.

And can you still speak it?

Oh yes, yes.

And what was the relationship between the different communities among the natives? Were they a sort of coherent whole or were there rivalries among them?

I only knew that later of course, I mean to me, you know, they were just children, didn't really, I didn't... A person who was very close to me was my nanny, and of course she was African, African nanny, and she was more than a mother, I mean she was an absolutely marvellous person.

What was her name?

Cecille. When I was worried at night I would slip into her bed and sleep with her. Sorry, I lost your question. You asked me about...?

I was asking you about the relationships among the different native children.

Yes. Amongst the native children. Not good I wouldn't have thought. The Indians were apart, you know, and the Africans were apart too. They didn't mix very well.

And what would have been your parents' attitude to the Africans for example?

Well, like English people in general, slightly...aware of a difference but very sympathetic to them, far more than the French, who were tolerant and rather patronising to the natives.

And, as you were growing up, what were you taught about the role of the British there? Presumably you just took it for granted, because that was the world you knew.

As I say, the British, the English, of course everyone was British as it was a British colony, but the English, or people of English descent, were mostly Army people; there was a garrison in the place of several hundreds of troops, and the administrators on the island were white, were English, the chief justice, the governor and that sort of thing, but they didn't amount to more than perhaps a few hundred, there were very few English people there, so, they were a minority.

But they were the élite minority presumably.

I wouldn't have said that, no, no. No, the French considered themselves, they were very proud, arrogant people, and they still are I think. They're charming, they have a lot of charm, but they have a...they are curiously insular. Things have changed of course, the war changed everything, and it forced...a lot of them went and served abroad and...

Was the architecture very French?

The architecture was colonial, Louisiana type of houses with verandas, front verandas, with columns. One floor only, a lot of windows so as to, on a hot day you would open everything.

And can you just describe the layout of your house? Did you, when you were growing up were you in one house only?

Yes.

Can you just tell me what that house was like?

There was a wide veranda, it was almost as wide as this room, that's eighteen feet, say, wide, and all the length of the house, with columns, and black and white marble tiles, I remember them well, and steps going down to the garden. And the rooms opened out.....[BREAK IN RECORDING] Yes, there was, the drawing room had two doors giving on to the veranda; on one side was my father's study, on the other side was my mother's bedroom, and...sorry.....[BREAK IN RECORDING] And then a dining room in the middle, pantry, and two other bedrooms, and the kitchen behind.

And the walls would be painted, or what would they be?

Painted, mm.

White?

White.

And what sort of furniture was there?

My mother was very fond of English furniture, and there were some English pieces she had got from England. But most of the furniture was colonial, made locally by...the Africans

were very skilled wood-workers and they made beautiful furniture, copied from French and... Of course the French people had old furniture which went back to the 17th century, some of them.

And what was on the walls, did you have pictures?

The walls were, yes there were paintings, there were paintings by my mother. She was a very keen watercolourist. So they would be up around. And portraits of my grandfathers and other members of the family. I don't remember...oh yes there were some French paintings which my parents had bought in various journeys to France, nothing particularly exciting.

None of them particularly lives on in your memory?

No, no.

What sort of scale were your mother's watercolours?

Sorry?

What sort of scale were your mother's watercolours? Were they small?

No, largeish.

And would they have been landscapes, or what?

Yes, landscapes and gardens, and trees. Very freely done for her time.

Have you still got any?

No I haven't.

And, sorry, where did the children sleep? Was there a sort of nursery area, or, how...?

Yes, there was a nursery area between the dining room and the outer room.

And the nanny slept within the household?

Yes, upstairs.

Oh there was an upstairs?

There was an upstairs, in the roof with windows sticking out. You see them in southern, in the United States, identical houses.

And were there other members of the staff, did you have other people?

Yes, they had their houses outside.

And who were they, who else made up the household?

There was a butler, an assistant, a cleaner, a cook, and gardeners of course, because there was a big garden, and there were something like four or five gardeners.

And how did they all get on with one another? Was there a little world that was theirs, or was it all fragmented?

I wasn't aware of it, no, I think, they went back home whenever they had the chance. I don't think they were particularly friendly. And of course we had a chauffeur. They were all different you see, there were Mohammedans and Hindus and blacks and half-blacks, and, it didn't really form a community, no.

And so apart from the nanny, were any of them important to you, were any of them allies?

No, no.

And how did your household differ, if at all, from your grandparents' household? Was their house very similar?

Yes they were small, they were poor. My father had managed to make quite a bit of money on sugar, and buying and selling land, and, he also had interests in South Africa, where we used to go fairly often. But my grandparents had a very small house.

And what was it like when you went to visit them? Was it formal, or relaxed, or what?

No, I would drift there in the morning on my own, they didn't live very far away, I would walk there.

And what sort of thing would you do with them? Were they very interested in you?

No, they would chat. They were rather lonely I suppose, and they would try and get a conversation going with me, and...I would say what I had done. They would ask me what I had been doing.

And you would have gone because you wanted to, or because you were asked to go?

Oh yes, no I liked to go, yes.

And what did you like about it, why did you like it there?

Well my father I always thought was a very old man, and I didn't...he was, I suppose, a wonderful man but I just didn't really connect up with him. He was really an Edwardian figure, you know, all his morality and his ideas were really, to me, later anyhow, quite out of time. And my mother was typically colonial; she was cheerful, rather superficial, a very attractive woman. And there you are, that's... So my grandparents I felt were more, what's the word, more solid I suppose.

Can you remember anything they said to you? I mean did they give you a different context to life in any way, or any advice, or tell you stories, or anything in particular?

No, but they were both of them very interested in my painting and drawing. I was always drawing, and I was always running out of paper, so, I must have drawn a lot and painted a lot. I painted my...of course it was all scenes from my dreams and imagination, and... Space travel hadn't come quite in then, but I did go into other worlds. And they encouraged me to do that. My father, the whole time, 'Why aren't you drawing today?' sort of thing, or... So I had a lot of encouragement in that respect.

And, if we can just go back again a bit. I know you didn't know your father's parents, but do you know anything about them as personalities, or about his growing up?

No, except that my grandmother on my father's side was quite an awesome figure, quite severe I think, from what I heard. And my grandfather was a bit of an Irish lay-around, he would drink too much and...

And, did those grandparents go to Mauritius as well, or not?

No, it was my great-grandfather who came from Northern Ireland, and their family had come from Scotland, Oban, three generations before that. They were millers. And he came, yes he came out, sorry, he came out to Mauritius, my grandfather.

Your grandfather?

Yes, yes, my grandfather came out.

And did he establish the sugar cane business then? What was that?

Yes, he got the sugar business, but, I think my grandmother ran it, she was the boss.

And then, did your own father go into that business, his family business?

My father?

Yes.

Yes. He took that over, and developed it. He was really a...there were two kinds of planters in Mauritius, two kinds of sugar farmers; there were the people who lived up-country where the weather and the climate was very attractive, no mosquitos, no malaria, and there were the sugar estates on the warmer part of the island mostly, and living there was far less healthy, and malaria was endemic. And I remember as a young boy seeing people lying around with temperatures of 40 and 41, or 104, 105, all day long; it was very unhealthy in that sense. But my father was, he was hard-working; he went and lived on the plantations.

And where physically did you live, what was the name of your...?

We were up-country in, what's the name of the place? Vacoas, VACOAS.

And did your father have an English education, or was he educated there?

No, no he was a colonial.

And had he been to England?

Oh yes, yes. Yes, quite young.

Do you know what experiences he had there, what influenced that was, or not?

No, no, not really.

Do you think probably none.

No.

And, we talked about what you had on your walls in childhood; what books were there that you had when you were quite young?

My father was a great reader, he would have all, hundreds of books, of Dickens, Macaulay and all these people, that period. He read a lot.

And what did you have as a very young child?

As reading material?

Mm.

Rather silly books I think. I can't remember. I used to like poetry, ah yes, that's true. My sister and my brother used to read poetry to each other, and read...that's of course, there was no entertainment at all you see in a place like that, so in the evenings my father would organise reading sessions for the family, sometimes one or two friends from, neighbours and things, would meet, and we would be made to read out things to the audience, which I found very annoying.

Did you have, was it Lamb's...no it was 'The Golden Treasury' that a lot of children had at that stage; did you have it?

Oh yes, yes that's right, yes, yes.

Can you remember any particular poems that you liked?

No, no I can't, I'm sorry, no.

And did you have any illustrated books as a small child?

Yes, oh, one that I particular liked, it's a French name but it was an English publication. They were done in 1860s, '70s, 80s. Beautiful line drawings of fairies and people. The name will come back in a minute. Why I think of Delacroix, it's not that, it's something rather like that. Oh I can see the book there in front on me.

And were they fairy stories, or were they...

Yes.

Right.

Yes, yes.

And were you a keen reader? Did you learn to read quite early?

Yes, I've always read a lot, mm.

And was the household, were the children very much looked after by the nanny and living a rather separate life, or were you all living a life with your parents during the day for example, when you were...?

Not very much with the parents, in fact a sort of colonial life, the parents had their own life and the children were left with the nannies.

And were you sort of presented to the parents in clean white socks and smart clothes?

Yes, yes.

So it was quite formal.

Yes.

Did your parents give you hugs?

My mother did, yes. My father was a rather distant person.

And what was it like in terms of discipline, was it quite tough discipline?

My father was a strong disciplinarian, my mother was more... No I was brought up quite strictly.

And did that mean there would be very clear demarcation lines between things you could and couldn't do?

What I could do and what I couldn't do, yes.

What sort of things couldn't you do?

I couldn't make a mess for one thing, you know, I had to keep my room fairly tidy. And, oh yes we had dogs and things, and there was a very strict discipline about where dogs were allowed and where they weren't allowed, and I used to like having a dog with me in the room, and I used to after hours let him in, and I would get into trouble if I was found out, and that sort of thing.

And did you call your father Father, or Daddy, or Sir, or...?

Daddy, Daddy.

Daddy, right, so that was reasonably intimate. And, did anybody tell you stories as a small child?

Yes, the old, my old nanny used to tell them, and she used to tell me rather strange stories which were not in any book at all, they were, I think, I suppose, part of their Negro background, slave. They were chiefly stories of, rather, almost magical stories, you know, things that... I think they must have had such a terrible existence, the slaves, that they invented an imaginary world, which wasn't done to amuse children, but they lived in it and they thought it. And when that was over, I think the slaves were...I'm sorry, I'm an awful fiddler, I'm always fiddling. The slaves were liberated in 1840, so it wasn't all that far, you know, 70, 80 years, that's no time at all. And this old nanny of mine, she was born as a slave.

And did she talk about it, or it came only through the stories?

No it came through these stories. It was something they had cut out of their life.

Can you remember any of the stories?

Yes, one I remember particularly scared me was, they walked out into the water, and they walked out and out and out, and they slowly drowned, and then they entered another world where there were lots of strange things. And, you know, I think they made them up as they went along. But this walk into the water was odd, and drowning voluntarily, it haunted me as a child.

Did you have nightmares?

No. I've always had marvellous dreams. I am very grateful for my dreaming.

And, was...did your nanny sing to you, was that culture, did that...?

No.

No, what a shame.

No, no. They had a thing called the Sega, which was an African dance obviously. They would meet in the evenings with rum and they would start shaking around, they would all...

And how would you react to that? Would it be something you...?

Well, it seemed to me rather...no, I didn't like it.

And this thing about, if you woke in the night you would creep into your nanny's bedroom, would your parents have known about that, would they have been all right about it?

Oh I don't think they...or I would creep into my mother's bed sometimes.

So you weren't meant to be terribly stiff upper lip and...?

No, no.

Right. And did you have particular toys you were passionate about?

Now, toys. I was always a...pick, I always called them...what would have been native...à main clou, à main clou, which means 'pick up nails', and 'pick up nails' wherever I could see them. And that led on to picking up bits of rock and things, which later became a manic

preoccupation with minerals. I used to travel to go on mineral sites in Africa and Madagascar and Europe later. And my son took up mineral collecting, you see everywhere, I've got a room full of stuff there. Fascinated by them. Whenever I feel depressed I go up and pick one up and look at it. They are marvellous things.

Why do you think you are so attracted to them?

Why? Well originally I think it was because I picked them up, you know, I saw something shining, and it was something that I could pack that no one else was doing. And I had my hoards of diamonds as I called them, little bits of quartz. And later, when I started wondering about things around me, I think they made me realise that this was part of the magic of nature.

Did you know as a small child that they were very old and that they had a history?

No, no, it came later.

So it was probably the appearance and the strangeness of them.

Yes, it was just the fascination.

And what about the landscape you were in and the countryside, what was that like?

I'm told, I haven't been to Hawaii but it is rather like Hawaii, with basalt mountains sticking up and cane fields they were. The landscape was rather futile. They used to think, the people there, the natives, I mean the natives, the French particularly, thought it was very beautiful, the beaches and things. I have never liked it very much, in fact I don't like Mauritius.

And were you...did you spend much time as a child outside?

Outside? Yes, most of the day I was outside.

And what might you have been doing?

Climbing trees, looking for insects, and...there were some very interesting insects, there were beautiful tree lizards, and they were about a finger long, bright green with turquoise tails and red spots on them, very beautiful. And birds, beautiful birds. Other insects too, I was fascinated by insects. I was fascinated with living things, that's why...my father wanted me to do engineering, or...and I said no, I would like to be either a doctor or a naturalist. And I had

to fight for that, it wasn't easy. But I was sent to school in England very early, so my memories of Mauritius end at about seven.

Right. And when you say you don't like it, do you think that's perhaps that you weren't very happy in your family?

I am sure I wasn't happy then. It wasn't a happy place for me at all, no. There was this background of voodoo magic with servants and with the old girl that used to look after me; I didn't like that, I found it rather distressful that there should be this haunting feeling about things. And as I say, the French children I didn't like very much, and there were very few English.

How did you get on with your brother and sister?

Well.

What were they like, as children?

They were much older than me, several years, seven or eight years, so they were sort of surrogate parents really for me. No, they took quite an interest in me. My sister was also a very keen painter, and she used to paint quite good faces and things when she was young. So, she had a big influence on me.

And were they leading separate little social lives? I mean was there an organised social life for children?

I think there was a...yes they had, as soon as they became sort of teenagers they were in another world entirely. But they also left Mauritius, when I was seven they were fourteen, fifteen, and that was the end of Mauritius for them.

And as you were growing up in those early years, were you aware that there was a war, and the aftermath of war going on in the world, or not?

Oh yes, two of my uncles were killed in the First World War.

Amazing sound effects.

Yes, sorry. Shall we go somewhere else?

What might be quite nice is if you could explain to the tape recorder what those sound effects are.

It's an absolute mystery. I think it's due to the fact that these enormous buildings create a funnel of wind, which is well known, in skyscrapers you get, on a calm day downstairs, on top you get winds of eighty mile an hour, due to the funnelling of the hot air.

Could you explain to the tape where we are?

Along the bank of the Thames at Putney, Putney Bridge is within view, and the other side is little houses, they are very sweet little houses. Have you noticed them? They are very beautiful little houses.

Mm, lovely.

I would love to have them, and apparently they are very, highly considered and very difficult to get. They are about the size of this room, very narrow.

And we are five floors up where we are now, aren't we.

Yes, mm.

And it's rather nice to be able to look at those though isn't it.

Yes it is, yes, look down on them.

Hence those high winds whistling round us.

Yes.

End of F4221 Side A

F4221 Side B

[Please not, interference on this tape continues until page 36]

.....your awareness of there being a war on when you were growing up.

Oh yes, that's the First World War, yes, 1914. Yes, two of my cousins were killed, one of them was called Uncle - no no no, Uncle Willy, that's right, he died in Flanders, he was killed, and the other one I think was killed in German East Africa, which was then German East Africa.

And had you known them, did you have memories of them?

Yes, vaguely, vaguely, very vaguely. After all I was three or four years old when they died, when they were killed.

And that presumably was your first...[PROBLEM WITH MICS] That was presumably your first encounter with death, was it?

Well, it was the first encounter with the folly of war, put it that way, why these, why people should be killed. And of course Mauritius in that time, and probably in the other world war, was rather immunised from the war, because the French people didn't go and serve really, so very few people were killed.

So what had you been told about England? I mean did you know that you were connected to England in some way?

Oh very much so, yes, my father was very interested in English culture, civilisation.

So were you taught to be patriotic about this country you had never been to?

Yes, yes.

And were there things there like, you know, one was told that children put pins on maps to show the progress of armies and things like that?

No, not to that point, but it was more a question of loyalty. I think it was due to the fact that in fact we were a minority group in Mauritius, people like me, and that tended to give us a certain degree of stability to be loyal to the...

Were there any uniforms around? I mean presumably the staff were all in uniforms.

Yes, yes.

But were there any army type uniforms around?

No, no, not really.

And were you taught about the monarchy?

Yes.

What, what was...how was it...?

Oh yes, my parents were...yes, they accepted the monarchy, very much so.

And when your uncles died, I mean what was said to you, how was it put over to you, do you remember?

I remember my grandmother weeping; she was still weeping when she died I think, which was not very long after that I suppose. Oh no, that's after the war, yes. No, I don't remember anything in particular.

Was that the first time you had seen an adult cry?

Oh no, no no no. No my mother used to cry, she was rather a temperamental woman. And other children cried.

But it's different when you're a child, seeing an adult cry from seeing another child.

I don't remember ever seeing an Indian cry, that's true, I've never thought of that. I don't think they do cry. (laughs)

When your mother cried, would you get upset, or did you feel reasonably detached?

No I was more intrigued, more intrigued than upset.

And what did you feel about your grandmother, when her sons were killed?

I was very upset about that, because when I went to see her I couldn't see her, she was in her room, and, I remember that.

Did she have other sons, or not?

She had several, I think. I think two came back to England, and died here. I know very little about them I admit.

And were there any other relatives who were important to you, who played a part?

No.

And any other adults who were important in any way?

Not at that time, no.

And what about religion, what part did that play, if any?

Yes, we were a church-going family, Church of England, that's all, every Sunday.

And did you go willingly?

Not always, no. No I thought it was rather uncomfortable, and, no, no I can't say I did. And then of course school, I had my dose of it there.

And what about, when you were on Mauritius, what about Christmas, how would you have spent Christmas?

Oh yes Christmas was spent in the warmest part of the year, and it got quite warm. But it was Christmas, it was...

So it was...there was some sort of family ritual?

Yes, but, and there the various English families, the army people there and the children would all meet.

And that would be enjoyable, or not?

Not really, no. I don't like Christmas, I think it's a dreadful time of the year, and what a waste of money, and I get so cross. (laughs)

As a child, would you have had Father Christmas?

No, I don't like Father Christmas at all.

Even when you were little?

Yes, even when I was little. I thought it was a farce, even then.

Right. And, so what about your education, what was your very earliest education?

I went to a little school, and there was...there were about four or five of us children, English children, who had a woman who came and taught us various things. I can't remember her name.

Did you find it quite an easy transition, home into school, or was it traumatic?

Well from that, which was a very sort of, one was very spoilt in Mauritius, had servants and this and that, and to be sent to a prep school in England was a very traumatic experience. I was sent to a place in Eastbourne, St. Christopher's. And now of course, looking back on it I realise that I went there in the sort of post-World War, when most of the teachers had been to the war, were traumatised individuals; they were all kinky, they were all absolutely bonkers. So I really walked into a very strange world from my fairly...my beginnings.

Were you taught to read and write by the first little school?

Yes, yes.

And so how old were you when you were there?

Seven or eight I think.

Oh right, so you stayed for quite a while.

Yes.

And can you remember other things you were introduced to there, books or anything?

Where, in England, or...?

No, in the first little school.

No, except that I was discouraged to draw and paint then. I used to draw and paint in all my books, and that had to be stopped. No, I don't remember anything in particular really.

When you say you always drew, I mean, do you mean from when you were about two or something?

Yes, yes.

And have you any idea what those drawings were like?

My sister had a drawer full of them, and they've got lost, I don't know where they are.

Can you remember them?

Yes, yes.

What were they like?

They were unfortunately mostly battles, you know, the news of the war had come through by then, and, I'm talking when I was about three, four, five.

So would it be imaginary battles?

Yes, imaginary battles, all sorts of terrible things happening.

There were magazines at that time weren't there, with pictures of it.

Yes there were, yes.

Did you have that?

Yes, we used to get 'Illustrated London News', it used to take three to four months to get there, and we got it in the end; and the French 'Illustration'; and...yes, these came.

And did you play at battles, was that one of the games?

No, no. But it was played around me, and, I didn't like that game at all.

And, what were you drawing with?

Mostly pencils, and watercolours, because my sister had watercolours and she allowed me to use her watercolours.

And were they battles as well, or...?

No, no. Nature things, flowers, plants, lizards, creatures.

And, by the time you were sent away to your school in England, had life been really fairly regular and smooth? There hadn't been any drama?

Very regular, very protected, very cosy, very comforting, and prep school really shook me.

Were you aware of any tension between your parents and the staff, or was it natural for you what was going on?

No, I don't think so. I think they were fairly fair-minded people. But there was a lot of tension between them.

And what was your parents' social life like?

Quite a lot. My mother was a very social person, always having parties, and my father didn't like them as much so he used to retire to his plantation.

So was it a not terribly happy marriage do you think, or what?

I wouldn't have thought so, no.

But there were no quarrels in front of you?

No, no. But I remember my mother crying about things that had happened. I didn't pay much attention to it.

And when they had parties, did you take part in them?

No I used to watch through a little door.

And were they very glamorous parties, or not?

They certainly ate a lot. This was one of the big entertainments in a place like that, it's the same in other colonies too. I knew Kenya very well, I used to stay with an uncle there, later, and I think this is one of their main entertainments, eating and adultery as they used to say.
(laughing)

And did your parents take part in both?

No, no no they were too old-fashioned for that. They were...before that.

You said in the piece you wrote for me that they were quite elderly when you were born. What sort of age would they have been?

Well I think, my father must have been sort of, well into his fifties, who knows, later even, and my mother must have been close to 40.

And what sort of food would you have had a child?

Tropical food, rice and curry. And English, steaks and things. But my parents never...yes they did, they ate mostly colonial things. The food was really very good, because Indian coking is quite tasty as you probably know.

And did you have radio?

No. Gramophone. My father was a great listener to gramophones.

What sort of things did he play?

One of these enormous horn things. Classical music.

Any particular composers?

Chopin was his...and Mendelssohn, of course Beethoven, Mozart and the rest. He was very keen on those. The only thing that got me down was, he was also keen on operas, and as a result I've taken an intense dislike to opera.

And, what about other entertainments? I mean were there theatricals put on and things like that?

Yes there were, yes indeed, that kept them busy.

And did you go, were you taken?

No, no, no.

Were there entertainments for you of any kind?

Well parties, children's parties, which I found terribly boring. And in fact I became rather obstreperous towards the end. I was quite big as a child and I used to be a bit of a bully, I think, I must have been a bit of a bully.

And do you know what you were after in bullying people?

Just boredom I think.

And, were there any cinemas? Was there any sort of screen...?

Indeed there were, yes, yes.

Did you ever get taken?

No, no. I don't think they approved of cinemas, for some reason.

And what about beaches, was beach life part of...?

Yes there was a lot of beach life, a lot of, water, sea; the sea was beautiful, warm, and I was...I think my parents belonged to the generation where they were rather frightened of the sea, and there were sharks of course, and there were all sorts of very poisonous things in the water; there were things that if you stepped on them, the scorpion fish, you would die, and a very very painful death. I saw a fisherman die, they had to cut his leg off before he died and eventually he died anyhow. And there were beautiful jellyfish that were also very poisonous. So there were lots of very poisonous things in the sea, so it was a sort of poisoned paradise.

But you still went in?

But I still went in.

And were you keen on boats, were there boats there?

Yes, I loved boats, I always had a liking for boats on the sea. There's something terrifying and pure about the sea.

And, were you athletic?

Not then, but at prep school I was made to play football, in the public school I played quite a lot of rugby, and in fact I'm suffering from it now, if you...

Oh Lord, yes, a bandaged knee.

Bandaged knee. Comes on regularly. I can't say I was keen on sport. I think I liked sport chiefly as I...I think I am a very energetic person, I'm always moving around, in fact I'm an absolute bore anywhere, I won't stay still for very long.

And were you competitive?

Competitive? I think I must have been, yes. I think, I'm not...competitive? I had a sense of loyalty I think, at school, I wanted to...yes, yes. Is that competition? I don't know, I'm not sure. Not particularly competitive I don't think.

And, you talked about having your own pets, but were wild animals part of...at home?

Oh very much so, I love animals, yes, I adore them. And in Mauritius, when I was very young there, there were...there was a very beautiful deer which was killed, and I think that decided my horror of killing animals, and the fact that I eventually became a vegetarian. They had these hunts, and these horrible people would just blast away these things, and I strongly objected to that.

When did you become vegetarian?

My wife was a vegetarian, and, when, I think I became initially through her. But I've always had feelings towards that, I always held as wrong to kill a lot of animals just for...that wasn't necessary, especially when I studied biochemistry and physiology, and knew that we were monkeys, and our physiology hadn't changed a wit, and that the chimpanzee, I mean we are jolly close to the chimpanzee; something like 90 per cent of our genes are very very similar.

And just before we leave Mauritius, what were your own animals? You had a dog.

Dogs, birds. My father was very keen on birds, and he built an aviary about the size of this room, bigger than that, with wire netting all round, and he had all sorts of funny birds there, beautiful red things and blue things and green things.

And that means you must have spent quite a lot of time watching colour move.

Yes, yes. And flowers of course, I've always been mad about flowers, but they didn't move. But as I say, lizards are the things that did move, and I always tried to find a way to try and lure them; I thought that something sweet should get them, and I was very frustrated when they took no notice at all. Of course they're insect-eaters.

Were there snakes?

Mm?

Were there snakes?

No snakes.

And, what were you told about the fact you were going to leave the island and be sent to school?

My parents regularly used to travel, every two years they would come to Europe, so it wasn't a big thing to travel. In fact my brother died on a boat once when we were outside Mombasa, just, he just didn't make it, he had appendicitis and died from peritonitis.

How old was he?

He had just finished his law things at Cambridge, I must have been 15 or something, 16. He was 20, yes, 21, 22.

And how did that affect you?

Oh that was a very big, traumatic thing in my life, yes. Would be, I mean, it was quite a very... And the whole business of Mombasa, which was a horrible place I thought compared to Mauritius. I had an uncle there, fortunately, and we had family there, that made it easier. Anyhow, this wasn't...

But when your parents had travelled when you were tiny, before you left Mauritius, would you have gone with them, or you would have stayed at home?

Oh yes, yes. No no, mm.

Oh right, so what were those early travelling...?

Oh they were boring because it used to take you a month to travel, and if you went by the French boats you first had to...they used to call at Mauritius, you would go along the Madagascar coast and.....[BREAK IN RECORDING] I am a fiddler, so if...

No, I think it must have been my microphone actually. [BREAK IN RECORDING] See what happens now. Sorry, you were talking about the long journeys, and rather boring.

Yes. Then East Africa, and Egypt and all these marvellous places that I saw as a child, or as a young boy. Or the other very boring journey was from England to South Africa, and that's just one long haul, three weeks at sea it used to take then.

And would you draw while you were at sea?

Not really, no. In fact I only would draw when I was really settled somewhere, a hotel lounge. My parents loved hotels and they were always moving round the hotels, and I really didn't draw very much, or paint. I used to read.

And what were you reading by this stage?

Adventure, Rider Haggard and that sort of thing.

And when you were doing these travels, were there any particular places that marked you in any way? Did you like it when you got there?

South Africa, where we sometimes stayed for longer, two to three months, because my father had some business there. Well that's another world, I didn't like it very much. We had no friends there, no family, nothing, we knew no one. I wasn't aware of the racial tension then which would have worried me very much, which did later.

Do you think it made you closer to your family than you might otherwise have been, being isolated like that?

Yes, probably, yes, that is so, yes, I hadn't thought of that but that's probably true.

What sort of age would you have been when you went to South Africa?

On several occasions, let's say I went to public school at seven, or was it eight, seven/eight, I was there three years, then came back to Mauritius and stayed in Mauritius for a year, then I came back again and went to public school, and then I didn't come back for three, four years to Mauritius. So I must have done about three or four journeys in my life.

And, so therefore, what you are saying was that because your parents had travelled and you had done some travelling with them, it didn't seem that appalling an idea in principle, to go away to school in England?

No, no no no, it seemed to me...and it had always been talked about, I mean my parents' idea was to get me to school in England, they were quite determined, they had got my brother to school - I'm sorry...

And how was your school chosen?

I have no idea. Through some English friends I suppose.

Had your brother been at the same school?

No, he went to another school which he didn't like.

And where did your sister go?

She went...ah, that was probably one reason. My sister went to a school just opposite to the school where I went to prep school, that's right, that was the connection.

And so when you came over to school, did you make the journey with your family? How did it all happen?

Well they stayed in Europe most of the time. My father used to go sometimes back for two or three months, come back in [INAUDIBLE]. But they gave me a home life, mostly in France, they bought a house in France, the south of France, so in holidays I would go there, or in England.

Where was the house in the south of France?

Nice.

Oh wonderful.

So I had a lot of friends there. And, they had a house earlier on in England, I can't remember quite where, somewhere near Reigate was it? But I wasn't often there.

So, what was your first memory of England and your first impression?

Rather cold days I think. (laughs) I must have been, my first journey I must have been three or four I suppose. Three or four, yes. There were innate travellers, and of course they had travelled in Italy a lot too, my father was very keen on Italy.

And did you have relatives in England?

Yes.

Who were they?

I haven't seen them. Never got on very well. There are some d'Avrays in England now I believe, my son has contacted them, and they are entirely, they've been here...they've never been to Mauritius even.

But when you were coming over at the early stage of your life, would you have seen them there, were they part of life?

My mother would have done.

But not you?

My father looked rather down on them. (laughs)

So they weren't in any way part of your life?

No, no.

They wouldn't have come to visit you at school or anything?

No.

So what was it like going to this school, what was the introduction there like?

Oh dear. Well from a very soft, sloppy little boy, colonial, I was terribly bullied, it was absolute hell. I used to weep every evening. After a term or two I started getting tough myself, and in the end I was, I think I was really quite a nasty bit of work. I used to take the hell out of the young new boys coming in.

And what do you feel about that now?

Oh, very guilty.

But was there anybody you could talk to about being miserable at school?

No, my sister was the only one. She was next-door then.

And you didn't tell your parents?

No.

Why was that?

There wasn't that bridge really. My father would have said, 'Shut up and stick it out,' or 'Hit them,' or 'If they hit you, hit them back,' which in the end I did.

And did you make any friends there?

Prep school? No.

And what were you taught?

The usual things, you know.

And had the grounding you had before been enough?

Oh yes, yes that was all right in most subjects.

And were there ones you were particularly keen on, or not?

I was keen on history, and English, and...I musn't walk on this, what shall I...put it in there, is that right?

OK.

History was my favourite subject, and I wanted science even then, but there was no science. Someone came every, once or twice a term only, he was some derelict scientist of some kind, and he would perform various funny tricks on children, which is lamentable.

And were any of the masters sympathetic to you, did you...?

No, they were all, I think as I mentioned before, they were all psychopaths, they were all traumatised by the First World War.

And did that take any particular form in terms of the way they took it out on you?

No, apart from an extreme dislike of them. We all disliked them. They were all horrible people. I think to be in a prep school in the Twenties and Thirties, Twenties, was really something.

And, so apart from the complete change in the style of life, were there other things that were a shock to you?

Were a shock to me? Well I learnt then about the First World War, and I was appalled by it, and history as I say I think was fascinating because of the extraordinary, terrifying things people do to each other periodically. It's more exciting than any terror, I mean it really is, I mean historians try to gloss over it but the horror of it is there the whole time, and I was very very aware of that quite early.

And the holiday times you would quite enjoy, or you weren't terribly happy in the holidays either?

Not too happy, no. No I was a solitary, complicated, difficult person.

And did you do any writing at this stage?

Yes, I wrote a lot, but most of it was chucked away straight away.

What kind of things would it have been?

Oh, pathetic things, stories of being punished, and, you know, children, childhood things.

Confessional or fiction?

Yes, confessional and fiction. And also stories of revenge, that was obviously cooked up on the stories that I was reading at the time. There was a certain craving for the heroic personality.

And did you carry on reading poetry, or not?

Yes, that I always have done.

End of F4221 Side B

F4222 Side A

So, what age did you go onto your next school?

After that I was sent to Brighton College, which is a second grade public school.

What sort of age were you, 13?

Mm.

And do you know why that was chosen?

Again, my father I think had friends there.

And judging from what you said about the prep school, I presume there weren't particularly pictures on the walls or any art history taught?

No, nothing at all. No art, no science.

Right. And so, when you went to the next school, were things improved in any way, or was it really fairly continuous?

At the public school you mean?

Mm.

There was a bit more science, there was in fact a science course which was interesting, so, from then on I became really more interested in science and mathematics and...

What was science taught like, in what way, at that stage? I mean what was science, where was science at that point?

It was a general course taught to, once a fortnight or something to the whole, you know, large classes where...it was pretty broad, but then they had a library which you could consult books, and some of the books they mentioned were, I read a lot, I read quite a lot about science.

Can you remember any of those books?

I doubt if I have them any more now, no. Let's see. Oliver Lodge is one man that sticks in my mind, he was a physicist, and he was also very interested in the metaphysical, which even then I was interested in. So, it was that kind of thing, slightly off the main line. There was another one, Keith, Sir Arthur Keith? No, you wouldn't, these wouldn't ring. He was an anthropologist. And, my memory isn't very good.

And by this stage would you have been looking at the....[BREAK IN RECORDING] I mean would you have been looking at them under a microscope by this stage?

Yes, yes.

You would have had access to that equipment?

Yes. I was given a microscope by my father quite early, and that's been very much part of my life because it's, in a way I have used it as a way of getting away from, I realise that, from the world of ordinary things.

And you are obviously a collector of minerals, but did you start, was one of the pleasures of it cataloguing them and categorising them?

Oh yes, very much so. I never, I didn't study mineralogy, but I know quite a lot about them, scientifically.

And did the anthropology aspect you were taught really excite you? Did you think about that as a career for example?

No that came later.

Right.

No, it's biology that really, it's life, I wanted to know what life was about.

Who actually told you about sex?

Now, other little boys I think.

And your parents never mentioned it to you?

No.

And the house master didn't mention it?

No.

And was there homosexuality in the school?

Oh very much so. I wasn't aware of it. At prep school, again, there were two masters who were really quite unpleasant. It used to be called 'pressing', they would take you and they would hug you, and you would feel their penis and that sort of thing; it was really unpleasant, but I mean little boys were just subjected to it, and it was quite a matter of ordinary conversation, saying, 'Have you been pressed today?' sort of thing, you know, rather pathetic. There was no buggery as far as I know.

Most of the children accepted it but weren't very keen on it?

Oh not keen at all. I don't think the homosexual is formed at that age, I think it's formed post, or at puberty and subsequently, when there's...I mean the pre-pubertal child has no sexual impulse at all, apart from certain sexual arousal and masturbation, which is fairly harmless. I don't know, I suppose most little boys masturbate, I don't know.

But at school you weren't...

Harassed?

Yes.

No, not at all.

It wasn't an anxiety at all?

No. There was one assistant matron for a while, which I must say I found very interesting, and she is the only person that had any heterosexual interest for me.

You were interested in her rather than her pursuing you?

Oh yes, well I was a tiny little thing.

Had you actually fallen in love with anybody, I mean either as a hero or a real person?

Oh yes, I was very much in love, in Mauritius when I was six or something like that, there was a little girl, I absolutely adored her, adored her.

And was she pleased?

Well, it was a matter of, it was something so strange that...I don't think she or I understood what it was.

And how did you show that you adored her?

Well I hugged her, I just wanted to touch her. Very gentle and pure, just, it was ecstatic, there was no sex in it at all.

And always? And you always felt the same about her, or it was just at the beginning of knowing her, or what?

I've always felt that, I've always felt that love should have that in it. I was pretty dissolute as a young man, and I've always believed that sex should have some auroral ecstatic quality, not just the bang. But unfortunately at that age one is very nervous, and the two are not very easily welded together.

And the fact that your parents, or your teachers, hadn't talked to you about it, I mean did it have that quality of being something hidden that you didn't talk about, and that was rather...?

Yes very much so.

And, when you came to England presumably you did begin to hear radio and see films.

Yes, radios, yes, yes.

And did you fall in love with film stars or anything like that for example?

No, because I think films stars, I've always felt about the theatre, and the cinema to some degree, and certainly the popular things, musicals and...and there is an element of irreality

about it. I have never...I have loved serious films, you know, things with the dramatic, or tragedy.

Such as? But like what?

Ah, well, the Shakespearian things, and later on of course I liked any Existentialist writers on... My wife thinks I am a little wrong, and I've always been wrong in this way, that I deprecate triviality, I hate easy entertainment. There's too much of it now I think, it's just too easy. And it was easy then too, and it struck me even then as really too light.

Can you remember any of the things you did enjoy when you were about sort of fifteen?

Fifteen, yes, 'All Quiet On The Western Front', that film, now that was a film.

And did you read that as well?

Yes.

And, did you get taken to London from your school, did you begin to know London a little?

No, the school didn't. My parents were in London, they had a flat in London, and, so I was quite often in London.

Where was their flat?

Kensington.

And did you begin to go to galleries?

No, no. My father took me abroad to galleries. I went to the big galleries, you know, the...did the Courtauld exist? It didn't I don't think, no. The National Gallery. And I spent a lot of my time in the Science Museums. Science was much more important to me then than art.

And was that looking at minerals, or all sorts of things?

Everything. I was very interested in biology, and...so they were marvellous for me, I spent, in fact I spent most of my holidays in them.

And did you have anyone that shared your interests? I mean was there anyone you talked to about these things?

Not really, no. At university, yes of course, I mean there, that was...but not at school.

And what about music at this stage?

My father was very keen, and he insisted that I have piano lessons, and eventually I did the Spanish guitar, and I learnt the trumpet, I played in school. At university we got a jazz orchestra going, jazz band. That didn't last long. Anyhow, I knew the Spanish guitar quite well.

And it gave you pleasure, or it was something you had to do?

No, I was too much of a perfectionist and I realised that I wasn't good enough and I got fed up with it. And I am very intolerant of amateur music.

And did you make friends at your public school, was that better from that point of view, or not?

Yes, and I haven't kept up with them. I was on the shooting eight, I was a very good shot, and there I met some people that I liked, and we had...but they were totally different from me, and I mean their interests were not mine at all. And in fact, this is a contradiction in my character, because why I should have been keen on shooting I don't know.

And did you go and stay with other boys' families, did you have any...?

No, no.

So, did you have a picture of what English life was like really, or not do you think?

No, I'm sorry, this is not true, I had one very good friend, now what was his name? His father owned several hotels in London. Cross, George Cross, and he had me often to his house.

And what was that household like? Was it very different from yours? It must have been.

Yes it was I suppose. How different I wouldn't know.

Did they have staff? I suppose, a hotel it would be...

Yes, I would have thought so. Yes, things...the meal was served for instance. They had a cook, mm.

And do you think his relationship with his parents was different from yours?

Entirely different. Worse than mine, I mean mine was pretty difficult because of age, but his parents I don't think really bothered about him at all.

Did you ever feel responsible for your parents because they were elderly? Did you have any sense of...?

No, no.

Because they were very self-sufficient?

Yes, I think so.

And when did you begin to be dissolute?

At Cambridge. I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty.

And you said, when we were talking earlier, that you had a year in Mauritius in between schools, is that right?

Yes.

And was that a significant year in any way?

No, a waste of time.

Right.

Hated every minute of it.

Why did it happen, why did they take you back?

My father wanted...and in fact I think he was trying to get me to take on the business, and I said nothing doing, I am determined to be...to do science. And he said, 'Well you can't, you've got all this here, I've worked my bones to make it successful, you can take it on.' I said, 'No, nothing doing.' And, I felt a little guilty, because my brother had died then, and... No, I was quite adamant.

Do you think your brother would have taken it on?

I doubt it.

And when you were growing up, were you taken to the plantations?

Yes very much so, yes.

And did you ever think that you might want to work there?

Never, no.

Right. And so, when you left school, how old were you when you left the public school?

Seventeen I suppose, sixteen-and-a-half, seventeen.

And did you take exams, did you end up with any qualifications?

Yes, matriculation was it one did in those days? Yes.

And you did quite well?

Reasonably well. So much so that I got into Cambridge without any further exam.

So there was never a sort of anxiety about whether or not you were going to pass exams or anything like that?

No.

Right. And did you have any ideals about what you wanted the future to be, did you have a picture?

Yes, I wanted to be a scientist.

But did you have a sort of idea of how you would live, and the kind of life you would lead?

Well I suppose as a scientist I would be in laboratories and things. I loved being in a laboratory, in fact I...I suppose that... But in Cambridge I soon realised that it was not...it was really at Cambridge that I discovered that I was more of an artist than a scientist.

And how did that transition take place?

Well it had been happening in France, where my sister had been taking lessons in portraiture. She became quite a good portrait painter. No I haven't got any here. And I met quite a lot of French art-connected people, and I was then in the holidays aware, my mother used to take me to shows and things. She was very keen.

What did you see, can you remember?

No. Things like Cézanne and things of course. And the Impressionists then were very much, and she was very keen on them. So I had quite an upbringing in the holidays with my family, and friends there.

And can you remember, I mean were you very excited by them? What was your response?

Oh very much so, yes, very much so. But a lot of it left me...you know, the thing, I think the thing that has really always interested me was vitality, animals, things growing, things moving, and my own vitality, I've always felt very vital, and to see a painting which is actually dead, even if it's beautiful, wasn't good enough for me.

What would have been the difference for you between one that was dead and one that was vital?

Well I think Cézanne was good enough to be a very good dead painter; I think his paint was very alive, and I realised there that vitality was something which was very subtle, it was not just appearances, it was something to do with the very technique of the thing, with the technique of life itself. But I was earlier drawn to the Expressionists rather than Impressionists, Vlaminck and people like that, and my mother didn't approve of that at all.

Why?

Well because she liked the nicely painted gentle...she was a great admirer of Whistler and Turner, and I've always thought that they were very weak painters. So there was a clash there I'm afraid.

And was it quite an enjoyable clash, or was it just no communication?

Oh yes, it was a clash of...oh yes, she used to say, this is dreadful, of something that I had done, or, a lot of colours, and...

So was it quite helpful in a way because it made you define what it was you liked?

Yes, probably see, made me more stubborn in what I believed. But then I realised that vitality was something that required energetic expression; it's not something you could do nicely, it's something that had to be...you had to resonate with it, you had to fight for it, and you had to resist, particularly resist what was immediately appealing and attractive.

And had you been drawing continuously at this stage, and were you good at it?

No, and I gave up drawing very early, I took, I did just painting from that time on.

When you say that time, what time are we talking about?

From the time I was at university, or even still at public school.

And what paint were you using?

Watercolour.

On paper.

Mm.

And at the time you were leaving school, what would your painting have been like?

Watercolour, little sceneries, scenes and things. Very popular, people used to ask me, 'Oh would you do one of our...'

And would you have done it?

Yes. I was quite, I was quite competent, and, horrible and stupid little things, but there they are, and people liked them.

And so how did it evolve, your painting then? What began to change?

Oh dear, that's a difficult one. I think the first indication that there was much more to painting than just doing things that you saw, was what I felt as I say in Vlaminck and people like that. But it was in science I realised that a life, when you saw it in its throbbing nature, in its vitality, when you could imagine it as something, you couldn't do a nice painting of it, you had to do something that was full of life itself. And I was very good at drawing and I used to, in fact I did some drawings under the microscope for, what was his name now? He was a demonstrator and he was doing research on various forms of tissue, growth. Tissue culture was not yet available, they were doing things, and he stained these things. I was quite a competent laboratory assistant then, and he wanted drawings of these things, and I used to do these very meticulous drawings for him, with watercolour and the colour of the stains, preparations. And they were very boring things to do, and I discovered that if you whipped them up in a moment of excitement, they would suddenly burst into life. I think that was my first indication.

So it's a spirituality coming out of science.

I suppose life is spiritual, now I am sure it is, I think life is a form of spirituality, so I think you are right. But then it wasn't, it was something much more, I don't know, it was something much more vital, dynamic. And a line, to discover that a line done with verve and passion and colour could symbolise vitality, was a great discovery. And I think I re-discovered this again when I wanted to paint modern; I was still then painting ordinary things in the late Thirties, and it was a very difficult thing to break away from that. I'm not the only one who has had this difficulty.

And again, was there anybody to share it with and...?

No. No I've always been a very lonely person I'm afraid, I haven't...I haven't relied on people. In fact I think I've done the opposite, I've...anyone who has tried to come close to me, I push them off.

And did you show these new paintings to anybody?

No. Oh no, no.

So were you going round in a sort of, on a private high really? It sounds as though you must have been.

It wasn't a high then, it was really rather upsetting, because I hadn't found my reason. Here I was, trained in science, believing that what is real is something that's provable, examinable, analysable, and there I was fiddling around, or thinking in terms of things which were totally opposite to what I had been made to believe in, and...no, I was disturbed by this more than anything else.

And how did that disturbance affect you?

Well it made me feel uncomfortable, and I would do straightforward landscape to counter-balance the disquiet of having fiddled with paint.

And what about religious beliefs at this stage?

At that stage I was quite irreligious. That came later. No, I was...in fact I was, with the people around me at Cambridge, we were all agnostic, atheists, and, in science I don't think there was anyone religious. It was part of scientific materialism which was taught. Quite insistingly, looking back on it now, it was really quite a manoeuvre, one was indoctrinated quite powerfully. One was given books, or told books to read, like, oh dear...the Huxleys for instance, you know. There was scientific materialism very ably and elegantly taught, and very convincingly. So because of that I was a very mixed person, and when I became interested, or think, thought that painting was...vitality in painting was my line, I was really a very jumbled person, I probably still am.

Did that make you silent, introverted?

I have a violent streak in me, yes.

Violent?

Yes, mm, sorry.

What...?

Well, at Cambridge, and subsequently, I have been involved in fighting with people, which I am ashamed to say...

But would a fight arise on the spur of the moment, or would it be about a belief?

No, I think I really become aggressive when I think that something is very wrong. If someone says something which I find...I say, 'Oh you are talking absolute crap.' And if the person takes umbrage, I become more aggressive. (laughs)

Have you ever been arrested?

No, I haven't, no.

And can you remember any particular incidents at Cambridge?

No, I was drinking too much, and I think most of the things happened when I was in a fairly drunken state.

Would it have happened because you weren't able to properly express your own point?

I don't know, I've never...it's a part of me that I am ashamed of, and I am still an aggressive person. I occasionally do something which I am ashamed of afterwards.

When did you last hit anybody?

I haven't; I'm too old now! (laughs)

Have you any reason?

(laughs) But I find myself, if someone...the other day in the lift there, I came up and I came out and an old man...an old man - he's probably younger than me - said, 'What have you been doing with the lift? I've been waiting for a long time for the lift'. I said, 'Why don't you walk, damn you?' He was going down, he could have walked. There's aggression for you. Why did I do that? Unnecessary. And the poor old boy has got a limp. So, I'm ashamed of me, myself.

But you had been attacked in that sense.

Oh yes, I have been attacked, often. I have a tooth missing...(laughs) And I used to play rugger, which is the total contradiction of my other side, which is gentle and loving and sensitive. I used to enjoy rugger of all the odd things.

Did you ever do any analysis of yourself?

I've been analysed, but I think the analyst gave up. (laughs)

How long did you do it for?

Not for long.

And you didn't think it resolved anything?

No. I had trouble at one time in my life, and I was getting involved with someone that I was very worried about, so I thought I would get help from someone, and that's the only reason I was analysed. But, it was helpful, and in fact I have been entirely loyal to my wife; we've been married for 60 years, and I've, although I love women I have never been unfaithful to her. And during the war of course we were separated, and I don't think she was unfaithful to me, it doesn't matter anyhow now.

And, what about politics, had you begun to think about politics when you were at Cambridge? Presumably you had.

Oh yes, I was very Left, mm.

And where did that begin?

I think my first term, you know, there were groups you were asked to join, and you joined, you listened to other people, there were books everywhere around. But I studied Marx fairly closely, and I was soon aware of the total opposition to the aesthetic in Marx, and I had moved away from that, then, early. So, I became more of a Liberal than Left really I think politically.

And were there politicians you particularly respected?

Well, this may shock you but I am a great admirer of Churchill, I think he was a marvellous man. And I do believe this is a dreadful world, and I don't think you can temporise, you've got to struggle, you've got to be prepared to fight for what you believe. And I think so many of the people I met at Cambridge were theoreticians of politics, and that wasn't good enough, politics is something you've got to live. But I haven't been involved in politics in any way.

Presumably you were in England during the General Strike?

Yes I was.

Have you got memories of that?

It's a long time ago you know. (laughs)

But did you sort of take a side, actively, or not?

I can't really remember the ins and outs. I think there was crass injustice, and there is still in the world, but I'm not sure that you can do it by dismantling society. I think it has to be creative, and I think that's one thing I have learnt, is that the only answer to any problem is creative struggle and not destructive struggle.

[END OF SESSION]

End of F4222 Side A

F4222 Side B

[Interview with Frank Avray Wilson on January the 4th 1995.]

You mentioned that you were about to go away on, I think the 15th of January. Where are you off to?

To France, to a little village behind Grasse where we have a small flat about the size of this room.

What's the name of the village?

Chateauneuf-de-Grasse.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

We got you to Cambridge.

Yes.

And, in the typed pieces you had sent me you said that at Cambridge you became, or you joined with the vitalist biologists.

Well it wasn't a movement, but you know, there were such things as vitalist biologists.

Can you explain it to me because I don't really know that world at all.

Well science has been very reductive; reductivist in its attitude, assuming that if you break down anything sufficiently far you will get at the causes of why it works. It's the mechanistic, materialistic, reductivist approach to the world, to the universe. And that's all right in physics, but biologists in the 19th century thought they would apply that to biology, in other words if you disassemble a living organism into its molecules, in the end, if you know every molecule and how they work together you will know what life is. It seems reasonable enough. The only thing is that life is really a qualitative thing, it's not a mechanistic thing, it's something that is really not very definable, it's rather like, I don't know like beauty or, it's...vitality is an aesthetic quality I feel.

But wouldn't you also, even if you were trying to scientifically reduce it to the most basic mechanism, you would still have to account for how that became created itself, wouldn't you?

Yes you would, but that's another problem. You are asking about the methodology, about the approach. One is reductivist and the other one is vitalistic; in other words if it is vitalistic you will reach a point where you would have thought of all the material problems, all the molecular problems, and you yet won't know what life is.

Right. And you had colleagues who felt similarly to you?

Yes, a few, one or two. There was a supervisor in biochemistry who I saw a bit of, and he was quite, very interested in that thing. But it was almost a 19th century thing, molecular biology had been so successful, and Cambridge was so strongly disciplined, in fact they produced people like Crick and things who unravelled the DNA code, and that wouldn't have been done without very strong discipline and teaching, because the information was there several years before Crick actually unravelled it.

So you were having conversations about this rather than any kind of formal debate going on.

Yes, conversations, yes.

And were there people who were very vociferously opposing you, or did it not get to that sort of level?

Well I did notice that the average person in science, in biology, in any biological subject, whether it be biochemistry, physiology, zoology, they were all very unthoughtful about any such things as vitalism, they were dedicated to reductivist, scientific, official attitude to life.

And were you also at this point reading philosophy?

Oh very much so, yes.

When did you begin that?

Oh in my teens I think, yes.

And can you trace the path you followed in that direction?

Ah, hardly. I used to just read books on philosophy. I was very influenced by, at one time...I mean you know, by anything one reads like that one is influenced. I was very influenced by Spinoza for instance. And later I actually met someone who had a big influence on me and that was Professor Waddington of Edinburgh University. Did I mention that?

No.

And he actually liked my paintings, and he went to the Redfern and bought a painting and said he would like to meet me. And so, we met and we had long talks. Of course he was very renowned, world famous, and he couldn't commit himself to vitalism, but he secretly approved of my attitude, that vitality was something special and that if it, life, the way life made it, and life made the machinery to express it, and therefore the artist is also qualified to use the same resource of vitality to express it in the form of art.

And he had recognised this from the painting?

Mm?

He had recognised that from the painting?

Yes, yes.

Do you know whether he approached your painting as you would approach your painting? I mean was he...was his approach, or his response, different in some way?

No, he was a very, very wide-ranging man, he wasn't just a scientist; as you probably know, they are very narrow-minded people, they have to be. But he was a wide-ranging person, he loved music, he loved everything, he loved art. He was a wonderful man. Unfortunately he died shortly after I met him.

When did you meet him, roughly?

In the Sixties I think, or late Fifties.

And had he painted at all himself?

I wouldn't know that, I'm sorry.

Because it's a quite remarkable approach really from somebody in that field, isn't it.

Yes, it is. One thinks of it, it is quite remarkable.

Did you meet him often, once you had...?

He came actually to stay with us, and he mentions me in this very big book of his, 'Behind Appearances', which is his philosophy of life. It's a big thick book with lots of illustrations, and he actually mentioned me, which I was very tickled about, very honoured.

So did you talk quite deeply with him?

Yes, on these subjects, and he helped me to clear my ideas. But he wouldn't have approved of the way I've gone.

Can you, a) clarify how he helped you, and b) why he wouldn't have liked your work since?

Well he helped me to rationalise speculation, and I think he is correct, and I am sure he is, that any interpretation of life or mind or art has to be consistent in a self-consistent way of nature. You are not going to bring in gods and devils and all the rest of it, it has to be contained. If there is such a thing as vitality as a special quality, it has to be cosmologically referable, it has to be innately programmed to come out somehow during evolution, and it is a natural quality, however different it is from our material and ordinary understanding. Sorry, that's not very clear is it?

So, how does it relate to consciousness?

Ah my dear, that's a very very big...I've just been going on, on and on about that. Well very broadly, it's rather arrogant, but I can't answer that question without saying that. If one starts basically in physics, in quantum physics, you come to the quantum field which is a necessary thing, even traditional physics had to have this field concept to be able to explain mathematically, work mathematically, how forces reacted, they had to have this basis, because a force like the electromagnetic force is not material, it's electrons, which are tickled and they convey their energy, and for that energy to be displayed in particular ways requires a field. So even classical physics had postulated a metaphysics, a natural metaphysics, and they wouldn't accept that, but they had to do their calculations. And quantum theory came along with Niels Bohr and other people, and they found that they had to postulate much more about

this field than had been done before, that this field had qualities, and this field had extraordinary qualities; it was, in fact anything that subsequently came out in the form of matter or evolution, must somehow have been originated in that totally immaterial, beyond space and time, and universal field. They wouldn't elaborate on this aspect of it, but that's what it had to be. So that is the basis of consciousness I think. Consciousness is, was in the original field, was before, that field must have been there before the world began, and then with quantum theory certain perturbations of energy came in the field, and the universe began with the big bang and all the rest of it, and all along matter has been formed with this ontological view, with this project of making consciousness, making mind; and matter evolved, stars came, you know, solar systems all over the place, and life evolved, and somehow this ability consciousness was used, was drawn out of matter, through the nervous system, through special cells and brains, and produced conscious. But there again, it's like life, if you break up a living organism and you find all the bits and pieces, you won't get life. You will know how it's been made evident. And this is the same for mind, if you break up the mind, the brain, you won't find what thought or consciousness is; you will come to a vast extraordinarily intricate... Actually something quite remarkable has just happened in biology, because for me biology is a retrograde science, it hasn't...am I talking too much there?

No, please go on.

Because do, I do talk too much.

The point of this is to make you talk.

Ah. Physics has made a wonderful break, and it's so wonderful that we don't really realise how wonderful it is, in the new physics, in quantum physics. It opens up a total new universe in which mind is very very important and relevant. And biology was still, until literally a couple of years ago, was still a retrograde science in the sense that it was still tinkering about with molecules and thinking in mechanistic terms, and people like Crick making pronouncements that the brain is nothing but a vast automatic computer, and you know, it was... And now, something absolutely fantastic has happened, it's the microtubules, you have probably read about them. Actually an article came out, I think it was the 'Sunday Times' which, very surprising that, it is a very very surprising thing. Now, if you go right down to the level of a 100,000th of a millimetre you come - and you can do that now with an electron microscope, and recently they've got a phase to it which enables relief on the surface of things, at that magnification, to be discovered. And that's how they discovered that all the connecting things in a cell which hold the mitochondria, the genes, the DNA, is all strung up by microtubules. Now microtubules are tiny little things made out of a special protein,

tubulin, and which forms little cavities so small that quantum effects can occur there. And quantum effects are miraculous; it's beyond space and it's beyond matter. Miraculous things are happening in there. And a big scientist, Penrose, I think, did I mention that to you? I was talking to my son about it, I was so excited. Penrose has written a big book called 'A Shadow of the Mind' or something, in which he says that these tubules are the first breakthrough into a possible explanation of consciousness. But it's an explanation which is quantal, and therefore not reducible to ordinary language and terms.

And what is the relationship between energy in the terms you are talking about and vitality?

And what?

And vitality?

Well the field, again, now, in modern, in the quantum field, must, is energy; energy is eternal, it's always been...one can't conceive that it hasn't been, and things have happened by energy organising themselves in particular ways. How one doesn't really know. I have come to the conclusion that one has at some stage to bring in mind some sort into organising things, so that if there is the start, of course it may be...

So therefore a god?

It's not a word that I would use. I would rather use Mind with a capital M than God, because God is so...so anthropomorphic, and... But I suppose ultimately it is what most people would like to call... But that's... But what was it you...?

It's the relationship between energy and vitality.

Well yes, well energy belongs to this field, this basic, this substratum which has always existed, and out of which the universe has been made. So energy in itself, the energy that we use in boiling water to make tea, or to make electricity, or radiation, is entirely insubstantial, it has no mass. So it is, it remains a very mysterious thing. We know a lot about what it can do, but no one knows what energy is really.

But is it quite separate from vitality, or is it the same thing?

No, vitality is a form of energy, but then that's almost an over-loose description, because everything is energy if it comes to that. Mind is a form of energy too, life is, and so are aesthetic qualities, and so is everything.

Can you elaborate on that? Because you talk about that in the script you sent, the relationship with aesthetic qualities.

Yes, well, one of the ways in which energy can be organised is in aesthetic ways, and one of the things that struck me very early, in the Thirties, was that nature had produced amazing art; we tend to overlook that. And science, that's a very guilty accusation, has overlooked this, because it didn't want to accept that there was such a thing as a natural aesthetics, because that would have contested its mechanistic formulation. So there is no, as far as most science is concerned, there is no such thing as aesthetics, as art, in nature. Nature is a machine, and art doesn't come in very well with machine.

So the fact that in most of nature there is a balance and a geometry...

Yes.

Doesn't affect their view on it?

That is a very superficial aspect of aesthetics; it really belongs to, almost to the material world. I mean you have order, obviously you have order, you have order in crystals, you have order in form, you have order in buildings and architecture, and that is a cubistic, geometric order. But that's not, it's totally bereft of vitality. But you've touched on a very interesting point there, because very early I realised that fundamentally nature was symmetrical and geometrical, so you have, you know, you are on the right line there. But some stage in the evolution of the universe, this was vitalised, and that's what really intrigued me, how was that done? And nature has done that in many different ways.

Sorry, you mean it was imbued with energy, when you say it was vitalised? What do you mean?

Yes, it was imbued with a special vital energy, which wasn't there before. There was this energy which had organised, for instance crystals are extremely beautiful things, and they have great order, great geometrical order, and that is energy, it's energy expressing its...being expressed in a geometrical way. And that has remained, I think, I may be wrong, the background of all order in nature. If you rummage around you come sooner or later, in the

molecular and atomic thing you come to geometrical, symmetrical, mathematical presentation. So, that is basic. But that's not life. That was the basis to life, I don't think life could have come without that. And I found that in making art, a vital art, one has to have a geometric basis. I start, I started with geometry, I started with a very stylised geometric...like that little painting there, that goes back to '47.

Could you actually describe it, because the tape won't be able to see it.

Ah. Well they are triangular forms and circles, and the usual geometric things. And I found later when I was groping for a vital image, that I would start with these geometrical forms, free, freely without thinking in terms of geometry, and the forms that arose were obviously lines, trajectory, twirls, wobbles, circles, squares, geometrical things, and the next step was to vitalise them.

So you chose those forms because they were found in nature?

Yes, I think that is...yes, I wouldn't probably have done that if I hadn't done science. So it did give me a basis to start on.

And so what is the key to vitalising those forms?

What is the key to it?

Mm.

Well it's not...it's not me, I think that the energy works through me, I express this vital energy, which is available, which nature used to make life. And there I have had to really get into very deep waters, much too deep for me, I have had to explain this, I've had to suppose that everything in the universe at the material level is replicated in a metaphysical level. We are replicating ourselves the whole time, but you just, these replications are as they are in the field, they are timeless, they are spaceless, they don't fill up, but they are made, and they exist. And it's these replications which were first vitalised in another world, in a natural, metaphysical world, and then which organised cells and living matter out of the non-living for the first time. And I can't find any other explanation. It's a very complicated one.

Yes I don't think I understand that leap.

No.

Can you elaborate?

I'll have another go. The big problem, as you imply, is to, if it's correct that the fundamental order is geometrical, symmetries and geometry, how was that vitalised? Unless you postulate that some god or some force came along and breathed life into it, as the Bible describes, you have to think in terms of a mechanism of some kind, and the only mechanism that I have been able to find is that the material world is not reality, and physics, the new physics agrees with that. And if that is so, then reality must exist in a metaphysical sense.

Why must it exist at all?

Well, because we are there, and we have a mind, and we are aware of it, otherwise there would be no reason for it to exist. I think we justify our existence by becoming aware of it, and ultimately, this is another thing of quantum theory, they found in working out some of their figures, their equations, that mind has to come into the picture. And of course they keep that to the level of observation, they say that unless mind, unless someone comes to observe a phenomenon, it doesn't really happen, it doesn't happen as it should happen, it's observation that makes it happen. They keep it at that, but that's absurd, because they are touching on the very explanation of why there is life and why there is mind in the universe, because the mind is there, our minds, is to help nature to evolve further, is to help the Reality with a capital R, which is metaphysical, which is not material, through our minds, which is not material, which is aesthetically attuned, to reach ever higher and higher levels of aesthetic perfection. We are creators. The mere fact of experiencing beauty and order and life, we are adding these qualities to the universe, not at this level, although, perhaps we can even affect material things, if we had sufficient power we could, but we haven't.

And do we ever find this transcendental reality, do we ever discover it?

We certainly do in dreams. Have you followed your dreams at all? No, not...well... Well I think one is aware that there are other lives that one is living the whole time in dreams. I have been very careful to try to study my dreams; unfortunately the most interesting dreams on awaking, as one's material consciousness takes over, they are pushed away. I don't think they are pushed away forever, because sometimes they come back and intrude and you're aware of them, and I am absolutely convinced that we lead many kinds of lives, not just the ordinary life we are leading here. I am absolutely amazed at the amount of people I have met in my dreams that I have never known in life. I think we are radiating creatures, we are not linear. I think everything is miraculous if we really knew it.

And, it's not a state we attain after the end of our lives?

I think if our minds, if we...if we...if I am right in believing, and Professor Wheeler of Yale, who is a physicist, believes this also, it's not only me, he thinks that our minds pool universally, and contribute to the universe, so you know, it's not me only, but most scientists wouldn't agree with that. If one has fulfilled one's life as cosmologically, as we are intended to be, that is as human beings, that's what the universe wants us, that's why the universe has made life, is so that we should have a human mind, aesthetically attuned, and that is the key. I think all this blah about brains and automata and computers, that's all side issues; a central feature of our minds is that we are loving animals, and that we are beauty loving animals, harmony loving animals. We are aesthetically attuned, our minds are aesthetically tuned, that is the primary quality, and with that, it's with that mind that we make our contribution to the work of creation. We don't have to be conscious of doing that, it just happens; the fact that we love, that we love beauty, that we pursue the aesthetic rather than ugliness, we are adding to the work of creation. And therefore, automatically that aspect of us which is unconscious, our unconscious, not our conscious mind, which is perhaps our superconscious rather than our conscious, is part of eternity. I mention that to answer the question you raised. I do believe that, I do believe that if we do comply with the cosmological intention with which we have arisen, we do share in the timelessness of the creation.

And so, what does somebody do who doesn't comply with it? They are just unaware and, unresponsive?

Well I don't think being aware is necessarily important. To be aware means to be conscious, and to be conscious is not, is rather a limited way of knowing something. The best way of knowing is to feel intuitively. As in art you don't, you can't explain art, you experience it or you don't, and that's true for love too. So the most human things aren't analysable and knowable in our common understanding. And that's very true for art; I think the most moment you start to analyse art you destroy it, just like life, I mean if you start fiddling with living organisms you kill... But I've gone off the track again now, haven't I.

But, can a human being fail?

Of course. Most of us do. But, I don't think that matters you see, because it's not being aware of this, or conscious of it, that really matters; it's just by being human, by being human we would automatically succeed. And by being human doesn't mean to say that we have to be a goody-goody, I mean we can be extremely naughty but we could still be human.

But do we have a choice?

Yes we certainly do, especially in this world, because I think this earth...mind you there again, I think there are probably...am I playing with this too much?

No, not at all. I'm just going to have to change the tape that's all.

End of F4222 Side B

F4223 Side A

.....if we could fail.

Fail. The answer is obviously yes, because I think, we all fail. And it's not really our fault, because we are in a world, in a planet, which has gone through an extremely traumatic experience. The evidence now is that humans moved from a primate antecedent, anything from one to two million years ago. Fossils haven't been found, because there again this is another complicated biological things, the key features of creation in biology have occurred very quickly. They've been prepared somewhere else in this metaphysical world, and when they were ready they came very quickly, so I don't think they would ever find a succession of fossils in human [INAUDIBLE], like they haven't for instance from the passage from the sea to the land. Creation, really the things that matter have been done very quickly, very ingeniously but very quickly. So I don't think we'll find our origins in that sense. But certainly shortly after we were created as human beings, and of course we were humanised thanks to our mammalian ancestry, thanks to mother love, the female was humanised long before the male. OK? My daughter is very pleased with that inference. And in fact the male was created from the female, I think there is genetic evidence to that. The Y chromosome was passed on to the male after, in the egg. Genes can be shuffled around, and this has been found a couple of years ago, genes can be shuffled around in the fertilised egg, so whilst...the first steps in humanisation was mammalian mother love, which made the mother, mammal mother, love its child, that's the birth of love, selfless, totally dedicated, ecstatic, totally rewarding. I think that's the origin of love. Then the male had to be humanised, but that must have occurred quickly, about a million years ago. But after that was done, the earth went through the Ice Ages, which thoroughly de-humanised us. The first Ice Age came about 100,000 years ago, and lasted for 20,000...then there was an inter-glacial, there was another inter-glacial, in which we partly recovered, and we are now probably in an inter-glacial, we have partly recovered from, say, 10,000 years ago when we were very very inhuman. But the Ice Ages are still with us, we are still killing each other, we are still killing in order to eat; we don't have to do that, we are primates, we should eat like primates. We have become killers because we had to during the Ice Ages, in order to survive we had to become ferocious, ruthless, selfish, aggressive, and I think our sexuality became wrong there too, we became...lust was born in these conditions. Love should be, I mean sexual love should be totally revealing, ecstatic, and pass on naturally to pure love, which, one should transcend sex through sex. But we don't; I mean people get older and they get more and more vicious, more and more sexual. I think it's absolutely obscene.

So, in this century...

Yes.

We have actually gone backwards rather.

We've gone backwards in the sense that science has brought in scientific materialism and it has destroyed religion. I'm not all that for religion, because religion became, like everything else, contaminated by Ice Age decay, you know, religion became used for power. I just saw last night on the television, something cropped up about the extermination of the Jews, and the person asked, well she just can't understand how the Pope for instance didn't intervene, and stop this terrible thing that they were doing. And he didn't, so there's religion for you. It's contaminated like everything else. So, yes we have fallen. We fell, the fall was first a geological fall, which affected all humans, possibly some races more than...I don't know, but it happened a long time ago and we have recovered on more than one occasion. We recovered from the last Ice Age splendidly in the Mediterranean civilisations, the earlier civilisations, four or five thousand years ago, and in ancient Greece; after all their thinking was very very advanced, we haven't got there. I mean you read Plato now, it's absolutely incredible what that man thought, it's all there.

I mean...that was what I wondered partly, was how the idea of this metaphysical reality relates to Plato.

Plato's metaphysics? Well he was trying to be a scientist, Plato, as you know, he was trying to rationalise everything. He got very near to explaining metaphysics, but he did open himself to the supernatural, which I think one has to avoid. There may well be a supernatural, but I think the fact that we have been given a rational brain, we have to rationalise everything first, and only hand over to the metaphysics when there is no further rational explanation, and I think we have come to that stage now thanks to science. But science is responsible, to come back to your earlier question, for our present decadence. We are decadent, and we have become rapidly more decadent in the last few decades.

Because everything has been so reduced, in the way you've mentioned.

We have...yes, well, chiefly that we have not belief in our meaning any more, we are just animals, science has told us that. The universe is an accident, we are just animals without any meaning, and we can't, we are not...this offends our cosmological relationship. I mean, creatures like that are no use to the creation. If we believed that really, if we really applied that, we will exterminate ourselves, which we are very nearly doing.

And where does instinct come into all this?

Well instinct is really an animal reaction, a Pavlovian reflex response, which very much interested scientists in the 19th century, and Darwin for instance, instinctual behaviour was very important, and they even tried to say that consciousness was an aberration, because we should behave instinctively rather than rationally, instinct being so powerful in life. And I think, we have instincts, but in the process of humanisation, instincts, the animal, was replaced by intuition, and intuition is the way in which the unconscious influences consciousness. And unfortunately instincts are revivable, the subconscious, the Freudian subconscious is not normal, it's the earlier stages of the mind, animal mind, which are whipped up again by abnormal living, and brings up all the filth and barbarity of our past. So that is instinct I think, but it's in a derogatory sense. I think we are intuitive rather than instinctual animals.

So it's a question of which of those has the more power at certain points.

Yes, yes. Unfortunately instincts are very, now they are very dominant, I mean, everything is instinctual. We are killing each other by instinct, by aroused angers and hatreds, which are not human, and our sexual behaviour is largely instinctual. I think, yes, I think we are governed by instinct. And that's why art is so important for us now, it's the only therapy which would be widely applicable to counterbalance this decadence, this handover to our animal revival, because art applies, appeals, to our highest, our most evolved unconscious, which is the aspect of us which is most needed by the universe.

Can you, I think I took you on a bit of a detour when I was asking you about the aesthetics that you derived from looking at biological structures.

Yes, yes.

Can you talk about that a bit more, about what those aesthetics were?

Yes, last time I think we touched that, didn't we?

Only a little, but you were talking about it this morning and I asked you a question and I took you slightly off what you were saying.

Yes. I'm not quite sure in what way...

You were talking about, this is going backwards really, about seeing the structures under the microscope, and how that became related to the way you thought about art and art's place.

Ah yes, that's right, yes. The thing is that at the visible level, life is hardly apparent in vegetable forms; you wouldn't think that life is really living unless you become aware they grow. Change and movement are the most common form, criteria of vitality. But if you take a section of a plant, some parts more than others, you find an absolute tumult of activity; you find cells, the chromosomes pulling themselves apart, separating, and the mitochondria which control the process and cell separately, they have their own hereditary separating[??], there are other things in the cells also pulsating, bubbling, squeezing, the whole time. I mean a cell if you see it under a microscope alive, is a tumultuous vitality. And that's where you realise that, at least one should realise, that the first step in life-making was to find the instruments, the mechanical ways, of touching into this extraordinary quality which is not in the things themselves, it's somewhere else.

You mean the impetus is somewhere else?

Yes, the impetus, yes, yes that's a good definition. The source perhaps would be more...yes, the source. The vitality is a quality which can't be expressed.

So how do you relate this to aesthetics in terms of painting?

Well having felt this, and having been drawn to vitalism in biology - there again I'm not sure that I answered your question there, did I?

Elaborate, if you would.

Well the vitalist biologists were those, particularly like Bergson, the French philosopher, believed that evolution was not a mechanical business, it was a creative process, inspired from resources from outside the material world, and that vitality was a quality which was made visible by living forms and machinery, but it belonged to another world. That is vitalism. So, now, where, why did that come up?

I was asking you the relationship between...

Ah yes.

The biology and the aesthetics of art.

Yes. So having, in science, come to the conclusion quite early that life was not in the machinery, in the visible things of life, and belonged to another world, when I later, much later, became determined to, or became much more interested in art, because I was always interested in art, but I wanted to give up science because it was to me a dead end, a dead materialistic end, I was keen on exploring life, I was greatly helped by having come to this conclusion, which was in fact an unorthodox rebellious conclusion, that vitality belonged to another order. So when I came to painting, I was confident enough to believe from the start that what I had to do was to find ways, like nature had done, to find ways of giving life to form.

And would that always be form in relationship to other form?

That's...you see that's a very very important question, because form in biology, and in art, is absolutely decisive. You can't have biology without form, and you can't have art without form, and that's something which many painters in our times now have forgotten. Having been freed from the bondage of representation, of realism, they immediately discovered this verve and vitality of direct symbolic expression, and forgot about form. I think that Pollock committed a sin in a sense, except that he did make evident that one could liberate oneself from form, but there is no form in Pollock, or very little. The mind, the looker, the onlooker, at a Pollock, gives it form, and one sees form in it. But Pollock himself was a sort of, just one long orgasm of formless expression, and that's where I think modern art has gone wrong, and I think one can say that about a lot of painters. But, this sounds very conceited but it's just a personal thing, it isn't at all conceited, I was saved from this in the Fifties, late Forties to the Fifties, because of my fortunate biological training, I was confident that form was essential; that's why I came to geometric form first. Does that make sense to you?

Does it completely exclude the random?

Not at all, on the contrary, it's only by the random that you can express it. I would like to show you how I do painting, when I have to be rather...it's no point for some but, the whole thing is to let randomness take over. But, randomness which has to be guided. In other words, the discovery of randomness, which is perhaps the key quality of the new painting, I think you would agree with that, intuition, freedom of expression? Perhaps you wouldn't, but it is a very important quality, and I think it has been abused of in the sense that it's such a wonderful thing that people literally ripped in it, and to the exclusion of form, and they have to go together.

So when you were beginning to paint with these geometric forms, what was guiding you, what was the discipline you were attaching to the random?

Form. I wanted form, and I wanted to make it live. And there, they are not alive. That's a very early one, but it makes a pretty...

Again, would you explain it for the tape?

I think in my room I have some of the early ones. Well there you see in that Riopelle there, form is alive, and he has given life to it by the top one, by the vitality of paint itself.

Can you describe the picture?

The form is built up by the solid use of intuitively applied paint, and it works, it gives a strong feeling of vitality because it has been freely done, and yet has form, and yet has vitality. No?

Can you just, for the tape, can you just say literally what it is?

I don't think I can, because there is no literal figuration there, that is the whole business of the new painting, it has freed itself from figuration, and discovered that the symbolic can be freely expressed entirely guided by intuition and feeling. Like music.

OK, but maybe we can at least say, I mean it's absolutely not figurative...

Absolutely not figurative.

It's blocks of colour.

Yes. And light and shade also, but not used in a spacial sense, it's used more in an evocative, dramatic sense. The black there has no sculptural meaning at all, it's just an element which appeals to the tragic, the dramatic. And the colour, he hasn't used very much colour, but having used that amount of black he could have used much more colour and got away with it, because unless one uses darkneses and stark forms, colour tends to be nature-related, and more superficial.

And there are no empty spaces.

No, there should be no empty spaces, because the emptiness in itself is symbolic, and it does have a symbolic significance for this new painting, but it has to be, at least for me it has to be a vital space, it can't be just nothing. So if a space comes up and I find that it works with the other things around it and produces a sensation of life, of vitality, I leave it, otherwise I mess it up.

That painting that we're talking about is utterly independent.

I don't...I didn't know, I don't know Riopelle, but he came from a figurative background, his early paintings were figurative, he went to art school, and I think he had quite a job to get free from figuration, like every painter has had to do, of this generation. Now it's admitted, in art schools they splash around, and it's part of the teaching, but at that time the artist had to, the painter had to find his own way out of figuration, and it wasn't easy, and some of his early paintings, I haven't seen many of them, I've seen one or two, they were absolutely appalling. And that is in fact the destructive stage that one has, painters have had to go through, in order to gain their liberation, and you find that in every revolutionary movement, in every field; you don't pass from one reality to another without wreckage.

And where did you find this picture?

I bought it a long time ago when they were cheap. That painting now is worth a lot of money, because I think it's a very significant painting and I saw it as a significant painting thirty years ago, when he had just painted it.

Significant in your own art?

In my own art, for my own.

Can you talk about that a bit more?

Well he has a quality which is as important as vitality. We live I think in a terrifying world, in a very dramatic, tragic period of our history; I even at times wonder if we will survive. So any painter who comes and makes a pretty painting with lots of flowers and nice blue skies and bubbling water is just to me absolute drivel, it's got no aesthetic significance, no dramatic, philosophical significance whatsoever, it's got nothing to say, and in fact it's meaningless. Whereas this painting has a strong tragic, dramatic tension, and that is the existentialist quality which we have to face; we can't just dabble in pleasure and uplift and joy, we can have some of it, but we have to have this confrontation with the tragic. And that's why I have

used a lot of black in my painting, I find it necessary, because without it, there isn't this resonance of drama, which we have to have. We are in a very dramatic situation.

And, black is something that has become culturally associated with tragedy.

Yes, very much so.

But do you think it has a deeper sense of that in some other way?

Oh very much so, I think it must, it must do, like darkness in general.

Because it is not light?

Yes. It's the denial of light, and light is after all all that has...well, colour, and we are the only animals with a colour sense, we can distinguish something like 300 different tones of colour, the average person, and that's taken a lot of very special evolution, and I am sure, and I discuss that with this biologist I mentioned, and others, and they were surprised at my theory, but I think it's the right one, is that we could not have had this colour sense unless we had been evolved in a highly floralised environment, and a life full of flowers, that's the only way in which nature could have performed this miracle of making us see colour. So the current theory of evolution, the African origin, I think is wrong, because I know Africa well and Africa is a land poor in flower species, apart from the south and east actually, due to infiltration from Eurasia in the Jurassic. But anyhow that's another subject, I am wandering there. Coming back to the colour sense, we are colour-adoring animals, because we were created in a colourful environment, and to be human we need colour.

What about the times when one needs darkness as kind of peace?

In a fallen world. We can't have pure colour; if we have pure colour, we are having...we are deluding ourselves. We have to...to confront our situation and to be able to come out of it in a human way, we have to face this fall, this drama, this terror, with black. Not only with black, but with darkneses. If you use colour for instance, if you use red, in a painting, and it doesn't work, you put green in it, rub it in, and green and red as you know, they're complementaries and they produce browns and very dark colours, not blacks. So you can do that in blacks; black is not one thing, black is very profound, it has an infinity of colours. But I also use black for form. It's very difficult to create form spontaneously unless you have an idea of form; I don't want that, the form has to arise, and the only way I can catch it, if it's there happening, is to jab with fairly strong, either colour or black. So I get the form that way, and

usually it doesn't happen, I have to destroy and dismiss a lot of painting, but when it happens there's no doubt about it, it's there.

And why do you think it happens sometimes and not other times?

it's just a question of correspondence, it's just a question of intuition, of guidance, and you can with practice, I think in any creative occupation, writers have expressed this in their own way, musicians have, and it is a state of feeling which is, it's a receptive state, it sometimes comes in the midst of anything, and you feel it, and you feel that something, if you touch something, if you did something, notes or something, something would happen.

And, what about...and does it link at all with some of the things that Baudelaire expressed?

I'm sorry, I just can't...I love Baudelaire but I can't just catch on what you mean.

The idea of correspondences.

Oh, surely, very much so.

And the darkness really.

Yes, absolutely, you've hit it. I hadn't thought of that but that's a very good, a very good explanation, as far as explanations go, I mean analogies are all we have really, but that's a very good one.

And you said that one of the other pictures here doesn't work in the terms you are talking about.

This one doesn't.

Yes. I wondered if we could do rather what we did with the other picture, and talk about why that doesn't and what that picture is like.

I haven't got any of them. Oh yes, I have, that's one of mine there, you see, that's an early one, that's a '50 one, and that does work. It's got the geometrical forms, and yet they have been modulated, they've been fiddled with, they've been splashed into, and they've come out, there is life there. It's a very sombre life, but a painting like that's very meaningful to me, it gives me a lot of pleasure, and I like seeing it, and I feel a great empathy with it.

What the name of that painting?

I don't give them names. I stopped that, oh, quite a while back, because that tends to canalise the feeling, the response, and I think the person should themselves find what it tells them; if it doesn't tell them, well I mean, walk away, chuck it.

But in both the two we've talked about there's a coherence. Is that a key part?

Coherence. Now, coherence would be in the sense that things hold together, sympathetically and significantly. Is that what you mean by coherence? Definitely, oh yes. This touches on holism, which is a key quality of the aesthetic. And, again, this is the thing that fascinates me the whole time, I know it bores people, it bores my family.

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It's the confirmation of ideas that I have come to, as a painter, primarily in painting, in the business of painting, in making paintings, not for other people but for myself, quite selfish in that, I do it so that I can get at what I want to feel. And this has happened in painting, these ideas I have originally had from painting, this idea of the existential necessity of darknesses, and form, and vitality, have all come from painting. But subsequently in the Sixties, in the late Fifties and Sixties, I became aware of the new physics, just by chance, I picked up a paperback by someone called Gribbins I think on the new physics, and God! there was everything, and they had hit on an analogy in physics which I had found in art. So, I felt very cocky about this, you know, people think I am bonkers but I think it's absolutely fantastic.

Can you elaborate on it, what they discovered?

The book?

Mm.

Well, there are a whole bunch of these books now, people must read them because they are quite popular. I can't even remember what it was called, but I read several of them then, I devoured them. There's a book called 'The New Physics' by Paul Davies, now he is a marvellous man and I would like to meet him, in fact I'm going to write a letter to him sometime, he's a younger man. And 'The New Physics' has everything in it, has all that quantum theory. Now the essential thing about quantum - now tell me if I am off... - quantum theory is the discovery that if you go down into any material situation you will come to a point where you confront matter in the form of energy. And that takes an extraordinary form. You can't pin it down; if you pin it down in space, it's something else, it gives off another quality which you have to express mathematically in a non-spacial sense. So quantum theory, as Niels Bohr worked out the mathematics of it in 1914, 18, a long time ago, '22, is the way of expressing the way that energy, which is totally non-substantial, forms matter, and it does it in little quantas, minute little quantas. Now these quantas can exist in two ways, they can exist as little dots, and they can congregate into little things to make material objects, or they are waves, they can radiate. A photon of light is a quanta, and quantas are here assembled in particular ways. So there you have this extraordinary creativity of matter out of nothing, out of energy, by quantal wave and particle superimposition, that is the wonder of quantum theory, and which I came to rather late, I should have come to it earlier. And my science, biology, hasn't, only now thanks to these microtubules I mentioned come into it.

Can you tell me what you mean really by holism?

Holism is a quality which has been, has had religious connotations. Now who is a person I could...? No, I'm sorry, my mind isn't that good. Anyhow it is a subject which has been treated by religious philosophers, and that is that the universe, reality and the mind in particular, has a quality of sensing the totality in any situation, and this sense of totality gives one a criterion of the human and divine significance of a situation. If there is no holism, it's irrelevant; if there is holism, it's automatically relevant, whatever it is. So that was the philosophical background to holism, which of course was attacked by science in the 19th century as absolute crap, but it isn't, it's a wonderful concept. But it can be freed of the religious connotation, as it has been in quantum theory; in quantum mathematics you have a recurring requirement of a holistic reference in your equations, so they are co-ordinated, otherwise they don't make sense. And this is the other wonderful thing about mathematics, is that it has a coherence, it has a holistic quality in itself, and in fact someone like Dirac for instance, a physicist, a great great...whom I actually had the privilege of meeting at Cambridge, he's dead many years ago, but whose theories on matter are still in every textbook, and he said that if he brought aesthetics into it, to him holistic was an aesthetic quality, which is very important. If an equation is beautiful, it's right; if it's not beautiful, it's wrong.

Truth and beauty?

Truth and beauty. It's marvellous. And he proves it in many many cases. Theories that were brought up, and he said no, this is...this is not...harmonic, it is not holistic, out!

And another part of the text you sent me that I wanted to talk about was, you said, and I might be getting this wrong, that if the aesthetic was right, if the equation was right, the form was replicated in some metaphysical sense.

Yes.

And if it wasn't, if it was imbalanced in some way, then it would decompose, or would be destroyed.

It wouldn't work.

Could you talk a bit more about that?

I don't know what sort of nonsense I wrote down, it probably was not very clear expressed. But you see, I believe in this replicate thing. I think if you paint a portrait for instance, and I have painted portraits, not good ones but I used to like trying to do them, and every now and then I found that something happened, and I got a likeness, which was not due to the paint or to the drawing, it was some other quality, and I believed from that that the face that I was painted existed somewhere else also. The fact that it existed as a face automatically meant that in a metaphysical universe it would exist somewhere else, and I got some quality, some replicate quality, symbolised in the paint, without my knowing. That's why I think the artist is not the decisive person, he is just an instrument that interprets the hidden, the replicate, the miraculous, eternal quality in anything, in a pin.

And that presumably would be the case in the two pictures we've talked about?

Yes. Yes.

And can I just pin you down, is it this picture between the two doors that you think doesn't have this quality you are talking about?

Oh no no, that little thing...that's mine. That's a Sutherland, a Sutherland.

So it's your early picture you're saying doesn't work?

Yes. It didn't work as I wanted it to work, that was on the way, that was on the geometric precedent. All my work at that time was, up to '47, '48, '49, '50, '51, was geometric. Every now and then the geometry was wobbled and...like in this one though. And then eventually I found the real way of working, for me, and they were more common, but they weren't invariable, I mean you know, as I say one is just a little machine there to...

And the early one has a sort of serenity.

Yes, which is wrong.

In the sense that it's coming from values outside itself?

It's coming from a metaphysical source, possibly, which is not relevant to our present condition, which is an existential situation of anguish and terror. I think that sort of art is benign and irrelevant.

Why have you got it on your wall?

Because I like it, and I think it's...it doesn't mean to say you can't like it. But I think that art's great role is as a cultural therapy to re-humanise us, which we need, I mean to readjust us to our world. We're not adjusted animals at present.

And you've mentioned existentialism; were you reading the existential authors as they came up?

Yes, yes, oh yes.

Where were you and what was the context of reading them?

Kirkegaard was the original father figure. But there again, like in a lot of things, like in painting itself, there's a lot of...in the mind, you know. I think the vanity of a creative person is to think that it's he, or she, that's doing it rather than one is a medium. It works better if one can hand over and let things happen, than one tries to impose, and I think a lot of existentialist writing, and so-called poetry, is so arrogant and assertive that it's really disturbing, it's some twisted little bugger sort of talking about things that, he should really talk in humility rather than arrogance.

Are you thinking of anybody in particular?

No, I won't mention names. (laughing)

And since it's cropped up, can you tell me about the Sutherland?

Yes, well there again, that's a painting I bought from the Redfern when I had a nice credit balance with them there, because, I don't quite know why I got it. I think it has a quality; I don't admire him as a painter, but I thought it would be nice to have one.

But why that one?

Why that one. I think it's...he was haunted by that sort of form; he did lots of paintings in that line, some of them were bad, and that was a good one. And that intrigued me, there's some sort of bony part to it, a sort of vegetable hanging there. It's got some vital dead and yet alive quality, and I think that's what interested me really.

And when we were talking earlier, you said apropos the professor at Edinburgh that you had had a lot of recognition of one another's ideas, but that he wouldn't have approved of your subsequent development. Which bits would he not have approved of, what were you thinking of then?

He approved of my painting, but not my...not my replicate idea; he thought that was the introduction of a metaphysical quality, which he believed in but which he thought was unnecessary to bring in, because it's something so subtle that the moment you give it a form or an equation or a reality you depreciate it. But then my argument to that is that you are not really explaining a replicate order because you can't, it's beyond explanation. You are only positing it, you are only conjecturing it, so as to explain things that happen in the tangible and reasonable, knowable world. For instance as the basis of guidance in art, I think as you look at a painting, if you are a realist painter and you are a sensitive person, that the replica of the thing is immediate obviously, it's been there even before you, and what you are doing is to establish a resonance with the replicate, not with the actual thing. And the thing is good if you manage to do that, because then the symbols you've managed spontaneously and intuitively to put them down, in paint, in form, in line, in whatever.

So it's an equivalent.

Yes, it's an equivalent. Yes, it's a rapport between two worlds.

And, can you just say a bit more about what happens when the rapport doesn't succeed, and you think these things are then not replicated. I mean you said in your piece that it was a sort of individual natural selection that was...

Yes, chuck it.

But who chucks it?

Well, the artist should, or the critic, if the critic knows what the artist is trying to do, but if the critic doesn't and he is judging that particular image from another standard, then he would chuck it for the wrong reason. Maybe, I don't know. I think the real chucker is the artist. I've destroyed, in 19...I think it's in the Sixties I destroyed something like 150 paintings, and I burnt them all. And now I regret it of course, because they were, some of them would have been useful to me, to know the steps I went through.

Why did you do it?

Because I felt they were wrong, they were of that kind.

The early ones.

Mm.

And how many did you keep?

Very few.

And was this a great symbolic act, or was it a clearing out act only?

Well I think it must have had some symbolic act to my state of mind, because I do at times get a bit rattled mentally, and it clears one's mind out to get rid of things that one knows is not right.

Where did you actually burn them? It's a lot of burning.

I burnt them in a place in Gloucestershire we were living at, a large bonfire, you know, I remember the sight now very clearly. And it's...it funnily enough...the English taste you see is very geometrically-minded. I have known painters who have been tempted in the Fifties and the Sixties by the new liberation, and they have gone into semi-Expressionistic kinds of paintings, but they have all of them, I won't mention names, have gone back to the geometric image, the Hard Edge. I think it's something that's closely tied with English taste, which goes back to the appreciation of order in nature; it's a romantic quality, and it's the harmony of the genre of the spheres, you know, music of the spheres and all that.

What do you feel for example about Howard Hodgkin's work?

I don't really know it. No I'm sorry, I wouldn't be able to comment. He's a figurative painter isn't he.

No.

He's not?

It's largely abstract, colours, or at least now. He did a whole series after trips to India.

Well I would say he is related to the physical environment, the environment for what I...they look abstract. You see this is the big thing; I mean, historically, the first rejection of naturalism, of the visible world as a source of inspiration, was in the Impressionists, and what they did, unknowingly of course, was to bring in this floralised background in human sensibility into colour, and they transformed the image, they gave it a non-realistic quality by floralising it, and it was a marvellous period and really, some of the paintings are magnificent. But, it lacked this other quality which I was talking about, and...

The tragic quality?

The tragic quality. It was too...too wonderful, and that's true for a lot of poetry too, and poetry went its own way too in unpoetical ways. And the next step was, to get out of this floralised lush, was to impose a sterner synthetic order on it, which was Abstract Impressionism. It was in strips of colour, or, mine has derived from, ultimately derivable from visual experience, I think all Abstract...that's the test really, and that's the test of Hodgkin for instance; he remains visually related to that period of... And that to me has, it looks as if that's remained the type of art which the English sensitivity will accept spontaneously and readily. And the other line, the one that I have taken, the Expressionistic line, is not popular in England, for many reasons. I think it is often rather brutal, rather rough and crude; some of my paintings are really quite shaking in their...they're so violent and firm, and the English temperament, which I appreciate because I share it, would like something more harmonious and gentle. And in fact there's very little Expressionism in England, very little; I can't think of any painter. Bacon, but his Expressionism was demented, it went wrong.

In what sense?

It became what Expressionism shouldn't be, disorderly; it became...some of his, that famous painting which is so reproduced, of a face torn with lines all over the place, is Expressionism gone mad, and he went mad, I mean he...it was pathological painting. No, I just don't know of Expressionism, but it's hardly taught in school. My daughter has recently been to art school, she took a degree in the Royal College, and I asked her this question, is Expressionism touched on? 'Oh yes.' And I said, 'Well come on, tell me, what have you learnt about it?' She had learnt nothing about it. Expressionism is not a subject which is considered right in England, and it has had very little influence in literature too, and yet sculpture it has, for the simple reason that sculpture, quite different from painting, is far more subconsciously espoused. Someone like Lynn Chadwick, who is a close friend of mine,

whose work I know well, his forms are demonic forms, and that has Expressionistic qualities: to me the wrong kind, but I mean it is Expressionist.

Have you talked with Lynn Chadwick about your aesthetics, does he...?

No, I wouldn't.

Because you think he wouldn't be receptive?

No. I don't know. We talk about other things.

Such as?

(laughs) Well he was a very naughty boy. I've known him for many many years, he used to have dramatic affairs, and he used to have quite interesting stories to tell. No, he's got a good sense of humour, I like him very much, and he gets on with my wife very well too.

If you feel that Britain is very unattuned to what you are trying to do, are there countries where you feel it's received in a different way?

Well I've sold a lot of paintings in France and Germany and Italy, France and Germany chiefly, and America, at least the Redfern did. But there are art collectors. I don't think my paintings are, shall I say drawing room paintings anyway, in any country. It would be collectors. I think most collectors are aware of the importance of the Expressionistic, even if they don't like it, so perhaps some people bought my paintings because they, you know...I don't know.

Can we talk a little more about how they developed. I mean, when you made the next steps from the paintings that, the early paintings which you felt weren't reaching what you wanted to achieve, was it that the aesthetic ideas were already developing in your mind and found expression in the painting, or was it that something fell into place through doing the painting?

I think a bit of both. I don't know. I would have to be outside of it. I had this predisposition of vitalism in science, that's always been with me, and in spite of doing these rather geometric things which denied that, I think, as you imply, the other thing was there simmering away and trying to work its way out, which it did.

And, can I just get a bit of a sort of timetable on this. You did biology at Cambridge in which years?

'31 to '34 I was there, yes. Or 33 to '35. '31 to '34, yes.

And how had the painting progressed by the time you came to leave?

Oh no, I was doing nature paintings then.

Right.

Sorry, no, nothing at all.

Because you said it was a time of great confusion, so was it that you, it was rather frightening embarking on it in terms of the painting?

No, no I was keen on paintings, but I was keen on Impressionism then, I used to go to galleries and look at... No I had no, I hadn't got on my way at all as a painter.

And you had said that...

I came in the late Thirties.

Right. You had already quite an interest in music before you got to Cambridge.

Oh always, yes.

Who were the composers at that stage that were particularly interesting you?

Mostly the great, Bach of course. But, I've never had much time for the more dissonant twelve note...because I think, like painting, they destroyed form unnecessarily, just for the thrill of being able to do so, partly, a long imprisonment of figuration. But I do, certainly my great...admire...now I listen to Shostakovich, Prokofiev and people like that, they are vital musicians.

And, you said you were part of a jazz band, can you tell me about that?

Oh that was just a rowdy little thing, a few of us got together, I used to play the trumpet and the guitar, which I used to, Spanish guitar. That didn't last very long.

And you also said you...

I do like, I like early jazz.

Who?

Oh dear I can't remember names now, it's a long time ago. It's 70 years ago, 60 years ago anyhow.

And you no longer listen to it now?

No I don't, no. My accusation of jazz is, like a lot of the new music now, it's either romantic, which is evasive; Duke Ellington for instance degenerated jazz into sloppy tunes, and a lot of effect, like a lot of the new stuff now is that way. But the old jazz was in a sense Expressionistic, but it's too bodily connected. And then of course, this part of black culture, it is a body connected culture; marvellous, why not? And its music is a bodily music, and that's great, but I think it had its ceiling. I mean I don't think you could reach the kind of metaphysical levels that I wanted to get, a vitalism, with that bodily connection.

Where did you go to hear the jazz?

Records. And I wasn't...I've never been a goer to... To me music is an intimate thing.

And solitary?

Solitary, yes.

And you said you lead a dissolute life at Cambridge; what do you mean by that?

No no, no I shouldn't have mentioned that. (laughs) No, I...no no no, no, I won't talk about that.

Mildly dissolute?

For its time, yes. Now it would be normal. But strictly heterosexual. I hope you've rubbed that out, have you?

If you desperately want me to I will. When you came up to be leaving Cambridge, what was ahead of you? Did you talk to anybody, were you offered advice?

I wanted to go into research, do more time at Cambridge. I got my MA. But my father wanted me to go to Mauritius and take on the business there, and I resisted that, but he made me compromise, and in '36 he got me, and my, we were engaged, she came out to Mauritius with her mother, English mother, we all went to Mauritius, and he said, 'Well come and see the place, one try and see if...!' And of course we got trapped there, and we were there for four, five years, in the war, during the war, which was a very dull war for me. I had done a bit of flying in Cambridge and I wanted to be in the Air Force, and I was turned down - did I mention that? - because of a heart condition, which nearly killed me a month ago actually. But I've lived quite well without it.

I was going to say you look very well for someone who has just been nearly killed.

(laughs) So I was in the Army, very boring, waiting for the Japanese, they were supposed to come; they didn't come fortunately because there were only about 3,000 of us. They were going to take Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands, where we were, and we were sent out in little troops on all these islands and things. Nothing happened.

End of F4223 Side B

F4224 Side A

And, you mentioned that by this stage you had become engaged. We haven't had you meeting your wife; where did you meet?

We met...no we met in France, because her mother, her English mother, was living in France.

And what's your wife's name?

Ivy.

And what was her...?

Else, ELSE, ECKBO was the name, the family name, Norwegian.

And can you tell me about her family?

Yes, her father was one of the leading lawyers in Oslo, that's why we have one of these Munch paintings there, and we have other prints of his. And thanks to that, during the times I went to stay in Norway after the war, I went to art school there, and there of course Expressionism is very much part of the teaching, so that was quite a good period for me.

I would like to come to that in detail. What was your wife actually doing at the time you met her?

What was Ivy, my wife?

Mm.

She was just a little girl I think. I got her very young. (laughs)

How old?

She was 20, I think, 22.

Where had her schooling taken place?

In England and in Norway.

And what had she done after school?

Did she do anything? Yes, she took a course in typing and all these sort of things. It was only typewriters in those days.

And your parents at this stage were living in France.

Yes.

That's why you were there.

That's right, yes.

And why were you attracted to her, what was between you?

Mm, mm... She was a very beautiful person. Mm... I think that was it. I had very very low ideals I'm afraid at that time.

And you at this stage were being a scientist, you thought.

That's what I would have liked to have been.

And was she interested in science, was she interested in painting?

Yes, she used to be interested in the things I did, little paintings. She has always been interested in the things I did, which rather pleases, you know, raised my...she has always been interested in me, and I became more and more interested in her as I got to know her.

And had you ever proposed to anybody else?

No.

Had you ever thought about getting married?

No.

Did you imagine that you would get married always?

I wanted to get married young, because I wanted children, I've always been very fond of children, I love children.

And did she have siblings?

She had two brothers, yes.

And did you meet them at the same time?

Yes, yes, yes. I'm very close with her Norwegian family, we go there every year for a month or two in the summer.

And where did you actually propose?

In France.

On a beach, in a restaurant, in a field?

In a nightclub I think. (laughs) Something like that.

And were you fairly confident you would be accepted?

No. And totally aware of the fact that we wouldn't be allowed to.

Because you were too young?

Yes.

So what happened? She did accept you and you were allowed?

Yes. And we said well, if you don't, we are going off on our own, which I think we might have done, without a penny but still, it might have worked.

And when did you actually get married?

We got married in Mauritius in '36.

And did you get married in a church? What was your wedding ceremony?

Yes, yes.

And what did you feel about that, what was your attitude to a church by that stage?

Totally neutral. As I say religion is not my forte.

And your wife?

She was brought up as a Lutheran I think, rather a severe religion I think. Her mother was Church of England, so she was rather nondescript I think. Her mother was a curious, very advanced...her family name was a sort of rather upper class family, hunting and shooting, you know, that sort of thing, horse woman, very keen, and a total eccentric. She was one of the reforming women of the Twenties. Very irritating woman! (laughs)

Did you have quarrels with her?

No, I admired her greatly, and she was very keen on painting, and did some very good watercolours. I don't think we have any here. For her time they were marvellous, big sweeps of colour and not this fiddly thing of...

So do you think that fed what you were doing at all, or was it just something you happened to see at the time?

Well she had some influence on me I'm sure, yes.

And, when you went to Mauritius, were you painting again there, did you paint in those years?

Yes, but not...nothing of interest at all, just landscape, not very good.

Right. And were you actually running the sugar plantation?

Well, yes, I told my father I would try to do that, and then I chucked it in when the war came in, I did other, I was in the Army. And then I was...the Governor, Sir Bede Clifford, I was his private secretary, an ADC, for two years.

And was that enjoyable, or not?

Well it meant quite a lot of, I was...the codes had been, the Naval codes had been broken by the Japs, and so all the coding came through our office, the military, there was a military office there, so we had a lot of extra work to do, and we worked all night and all day sometimes. It wasn't a social ADC job, it was really that more than anything else. And also the Governor's security, I was in charge of that.

And do you think having had those experiences, which you probably wouldn't otherwise have had if there hadn't been a war, did it mean anything significant?

It did, it gave me lot of time to think, because, sometimes there was nothing on, and that's when I got to know the monkeys there very well, because there was a big forest around the Governor's residence at the Le Reduit and there were troops of monkeys there. And, when it was possible, I used to run out and be amongst them, and in the end they got to like me very much, and they would come up and crawl all over me. And there was a little fruit, a guava, and they would go and pick them up. And that's very interesting, that had a big impact on my thinking. I noticed that they picked only the ripe fruit on the ground, and then shove them... Anyhow I had great fun with them.

So what was the significance of that?

Oh the significance was that all our vitamins are derivable from primate foods, that is from shoots, roots, nuts, cereals, the food that monkeys and non-carnivorous animals eat. There's one vitamin, which is vitamin B12, which is not present in these foods; that wasn't known at that time, but I did notice this at the time, that they didn't pick the ripe fruits on the tree, they had almost the fermenting alcohol, and I thought they liked it because of the alcohol, because the yeast makes the alcohol. And at the same time, I was out of the Army in '43, just before...no that was after the Governor, sorry, my mind's rather confused, after the Governor left in '44, and then I was nutrition adviser to the Government, because I was the only one who knew anything about nutrition and I had taken a special course, the Mond, in Cambridge. The island was in a terrible state of malnutrition due to the sinking of boats. Didn't I tell you? No. And so I organised this yeast - yes I told you that, didn't I? - this yeast, to be collected from the distilleries, which is thrown away, and given to the school children and to the pregnant mothers, because the pregnant mothers had tropical macrocytic anaemia, which is due to a vitamin deficiency which no one knew what it was, but a Doctor Sippe there at that time thought it could be one of these rare B2 complex vitamins, which after the war was known as vitamin B12. And actually this yeast was marvellous, it really helped a lot. These

children had, another one, a vitamin deficiency they had was pellagra due to vitamin B6, and also, another, a kind of anaemia related to this. It was marvellous to be able to use this stuff, and especially with pregnant women. They looked perfectly all right, and in their blood you found these enormous, the red cells were all swollen, and they died, they killed them, these beautiful Indian women they just died out of this anaemia. And in those days there was very little... Anyhow that was a very terrifying part of my life. I was two years in that. And that's where I found, later, why monkeys had these fruits there, because these fruits had the yeast in them, and the yeast in them had the vitamin B12. That clicked, just like that, and in fact all our fruits we eat unripe for the convenience of the shops who sell them and transport them, because a ripe banana you eat from the tree, it's something quite different from the banana you have. And so is an apple, I mean a really ripe apple, fallen apple, is marvellous fruit. But the things we eat, they are all picked green. Most of our fruit is picked green, and we unfortunately tend to eat it unripe; we should allow them to get a little ripe. But if they've been picked too soon, they don't ripen. Sorry, that's got nothing to do with this subject.

But it has in a sense, that there's a pattern.

[END OF SESSION]

[Interview January the 10th 1995.]

What are the last three books you read?

Ah, one was Penrose, 'Shadows of the Mind', and the other one was a book given to me by my son for Christmas, a big thick book by a well-known author. It's very interesting because it gives the history of various aspects of culture from a very unusual angle; he is a poet and he sees the sort of...is that all right? (laughing)

It's the trouble with ties.

And the third one, oh yes, a book given to me by my daughter, who I hope you meet today, she is coming for a bit of lunch, on music, and it's marvellous. I can't remember the name or the title.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....the main part of the interview. You are wearing rather a splendid tie; tell me what the story behind that is.

I used to make...I like wearing ties, I don't know why, I think it gives me a certain respectability which I don't otherwise often have, with rather dirty trousers and... And the story, well it's just fun doing them. One can buy the ties just of different colours and..

Is it silk?

No, I doubt it. This one's rather dirty as you can see, it's probably been in soup and porridge and all sorts of things.

So it's...what have you done then, you've painted straight onto the tie?

Yes, straight on it, with black and another lighter colour.

And have you got a whole collection of your ties?

Well, yes, I should imagine so, yes.

Are we talking about hundreds, or five, or what?

Well I have to chuck them away occasionally. I should think I have about twenty or thirty.

And do you still do them, or was it a phase?

It was a phase.

And when were you doing that?

Oh, fifteen, twenty years ago.

When we were last talking we had you spending the war on Mauritius, and I want to take you away from that. Just before we move on to you chronologically, had any of your children been born by the end of the war?

All of them.

Right, so could you tell me when they were born and their names?

Oh dear.

Or roughly.

Two of them were born before the war, and two were born in '44, '43/44, '44/45, I'm sorry, I'm very bad at that sort of thing.

What are their names?

One is Wendy Ann, and my son who died was Austin Raymond, and my other son is Jason, and the other one is Norman.

And were you present at their births?

Yes.

And was that an experience that changed you?

Well I had assisted at births twice before, so it wasn't a new experience. It's always, I've always wondered why births should be so difficult - I'm sorry, there's something wrong with my voice today - why births should be so difficult. Nature had a big job there as you can realise, being a woman, and it's amazing the process of birth, I've always been fascinated by it. When you think that a foetus, the head of the foetus is only half developed when it's born, but all the nerve tracks in the brain are laid down, it's a marvellous job. And it's, the foetal head is elongated so that it can come through the canal, but in order to do that it has to turn half way. It's quite a job. That's why recently some anthropologists have thought that from the word go, from the earliest humans, there must have been something like midwives, or women or men must have helped in the birth process. And doctors unfortunately haven't always been very helpful, because they come with these dreadful tongs and pull the damn things out, and often damage the mother and the child too. After all it is a long process, and it works if it's helped.

Why had you assisted at two births before, how had that happened?

Friends of mine.

What, you just happened to be there at the moment?

Yes, yes.

And, but was it different seeing your own children born?

It was, because I was very concerned of course for my wife rather than for the child at the time. But, I did notice with the first birth, my daughter's birth, which was a difficult one, that the actual moment of birth was a rapturous moment, you can see it in...

For who?

For my wife. And I noticed that. Unfortunately it is often very traumatic, and I think things have gone wrong where women are not in a good physical state. I think, they have to be fit to...it's a...you know, it's a very muscular process. And women tend to slack during their pregnancies and get fat, and have a lot of booze and smoke and things, and it doesn't help.

But what did you feel emotionally watching your children be born?

Oh, absolute rapture, because there was the whole process. I mean, this is creation of the utmost importance.

And you had said in the previous interview that you had always wanted children. Why do you think that was?

Did I say that? Well I like children, I like to look at them, I love seeing them running around.

And how involved were you in their babyhoods?

When they were babies?

Mm.

22, 23 to 30, 28.

And how involved were you in sort of changing nappies and feeding and...?

Oh very much so, oh very much so. I used to do the night work so to speak, so that my wife could... I enjoyed it. No, I was quite helpful, I think, as much as I could be, if I was there.

How do you think it changed you, fatherhood?

Well it certainly pin-pointed the importance of procreation, and I realised the enormous difficulties nature or God or whatever you like had had to face to solve it, and one of the ways it solved it was to, literally the human infant had to come out before it was finished. All other foetuses in mammals are absolutely, I mean they can walk literally when they come out, but not the human child, the human child has...is only half-developed brain-wise, which is the important thing, at birth, which means that for months the child is entirely dependent on the mother. In other words the mother acts as a sort of post embryonic process, I mean she really carries on what other mammals do inside them. And in the state of nature, the man would have had to be present. So that is the origin I think of the fact that we are intended to be bonded together in love, otherwise it wouldn't have worked. I mean if the man just had his thing and then just rushed off, as monkeys do, it wouldn't have worked, they had to be bonded. Hence that...that is the origin of life in a very difficult, trial, messy business. Then there are mysteries in this thing that I don't think have been unravelled. If, as I think we are essentially aesthetically sensitive animals, it's not a very aesthetic process, except that its redeeming feature, if things go reasonably well, the mother does enjoy a sort of ecstatic moment when the child comes, and she puts it to the breast and the thing starts sucking straight away. It is quite an extraordinary thing.

And what about the children's personalities when they were little, were they very different one from another?

Funnily enough, very young children I haven't really got much feelings for; there's no communication, I think they are entirely mother-involved. I think the man's role is just to be there and help.

But when they were, say, about four, were they very different?

Ah, four or five, oh yes, totally different individuals.

What were their characters?

The first one was very assertive. No, my daughter was the first, she's a very sweet, gentle person, and she has remained that. Unfortunately she married an American and that didn't work. He was a very nice man too, but there you are, these things go. All my children have been divorced, and yet, if we had been an example they should have jolly well stuck to it.

No, they're probably right, I don't know. We had, we certainly exerted no advice as to whom they should marry. I think that's perhaps wrong.

Do you think that's something you can advise people about?

I think so, I think you can try and get them to think.

But, going back though, when they were little, the first one was a gentle child, what were the personalities of the others, when they were, say, four or five?

The first boy was a difficult child, and he was difficult, and suffered for it because he had asthma, and he was a difficult birth, and he was...I think that's one of the causes of asthma incidentally, he was nearly choked at birth, and he had to be pulled out by tongs. It was a very nasty birth. And then we decided not to have any more children, but two to three years afterwards Ivy decided she would like another child, and that was all right, that was...and the last, the next two were OK.

And what were they like by the time they were about four or five?

Oh, great fun.

And did they all like each other?

Yes, like children do, yes, a lot of competition and rivalry and love. It's the world in miniature.

And did you have different feelings about the boys and the girls? Did you think it was a different process, being a father to one and not the other?

No, I've never felt this big difference; I've always felt I understood my wife and my daughters and my girlfriends. I don't see a distinction really, apart from the sex process, which is obviously fundamentally different.

So you weren't closer to one more than the other?

No, I don't think so. No.

And did you have any sort of beliefs about how you wanted to bring them up?

Yes, very much so, yes. Particularly my wife, who was brought up in a sort of nature, pure family. Her father was a Norwegian lawyer of considerable repute and wealth and power, and he started up various hostels and things for teaching mothers how to eat, what they should eat during pregnancy. And he had a lot of support from a German doctor, a man called Hungermayer, that was his nickname, because his method of curing many diseases was to starve people. Brutal, but it's coming back now; you see more and more...I think we all over-eat, there's no doubt about it. And so we did bring up our children as far as we could as vegetarians, as we were, and with strict attention to healthy living.

And what about sort of morals and approaches to life?

Well, I hoped our example was adequate. I don't think one can teach morals; one either feels it or one doesn't. I think it's a matter of emotion and feeling rather than prescription.

But presumably it was a very different upbringing from your own.

Yes, totally.

What were the main differences?

Well, essential difference that we lived with them, they lived with us the whole time, whereas I didn't with my parents.

And you didn't have very many hugs when you were growing up. Did your children?

Oh yes, oh yes.

And did you have help bringing them up? Did you have a nanny or anything?

Yes, yes.

What did you have?

We had a nanny.

The same one for all of them?

It's a long time ago. I think we had one or two different ones.

And going back to you, as the war was drawing to an end what were the prospects ahead of you?

What were the prospects for...?

Ahead of you, for you.

Ah. Well I was then working for the government as a nutrition adviser, and when the war was over there was still a big problem of food, and I stayed on there for a while, but my aim was to get away, I wanted to get back to Europe and paint, and I was decided, I had decided during the war that I was going to give up science and take up painting.

What about...by this stage you had four children, that's quite a financial burden isn't it, or were you all right financially anyway?

Yes, we lived very simply.

But did you have some income from your families?

Yes.

Right, so that wasn't a terrible pressure.

It wasn't, no, no. And I earned a bit of, some money as, working for the government.

So you were relatively free if you wanted to give up medicine or whatever from that kind of point of view?

Yes.

And by this stage, what was your painting like?

It was still naturalistic, figurative, not good. But I was experimenting more and more for myself, I didn't show them to anyone, and much of it I destroyed. But I was working towards this, I think I mentioned that, towards this cubistic basis.

And when you were out in Mauritius at this stage, did you have art books?

No. But I had some very interesting friends. There were two Mauritians who are internationally known, one is Malcolm de Chacile[ph], de Chacile[ph], we were very close friends, and he was totally condemned by the Mauritian community, he was considered an absolute freak, and he wrote a lot and has had lots of things published in almost every language. And what he, his writing was really an attempt to write spontaneously, which is a Surrealistic impact on writing, and most of it is gibberish, but every now and then there would be something very important and full of meaning. And that's what he wanted. So I think he helped me in a way to realise that it wasn't only in painting that one could gain a freedom from traditional ways of working.

And did you actually talk about it with him or it was just being with him?

Oh yes, night and day, yes. And the other one was an older, a much older man than me, he died unfortunately when I was still there, Robert Edward Hart[ph], he was a poet, a Mauritian poet, and is known in the world of poetry still. And he was a totally opposite character, he was a more sublime person living in another world the whole time, which was marvellous also.

And did they get on with each other?

No, no.

Were they actually at war with each other or..?

No just, they were too different to meet.

And were you writing yourself at this time?

Yes, yes.

What?

Well, thoughts, books. They didn't get anywhere, so...

Fiction?

No fiction.

So these were theoretical books?

Theoretical, philosophical, some of it an attempt to understand biology in new ways, and the other thing was really to try and understand aesthetics, music particularly, which interested me very much in those days.

And have you still got these?

No, I haven't.

Because you burnt them?

I chucked them.

End of F4224 Side A

F4224 Side B

.....the fact that you had spent those years just.....[INTERRUPTION]

Sorry about that, that's Ivy with her...is it shut?

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Do you think it was significant that you had those years living away from galleries and paintings, so that you actually weren't being distracted in that sense?

I think so, I think it helped a lot, because it forced me to find myself.

To be self-reliant.

To find out what there was in me, yes.

And do you remember in those years, I mean were there images that came back to you from other paintings, I mean were there things you were living with in your mind, or not?

Well, yes, certainly. Cézanne was the one that I particularly, I have flashbacks still of his paintings. There's something about his work which goes beyond the naturalistic, but of course he was purely figurative, so it wasn't a liberational experience, it was very powerful.

Are there particular paintings?

Any...? Yes, the one with two or three people on the river bank there with the river going out, I can't remember the name of the painting.

And you had seen that in France presumably?

Yes.

OK. So what actually happened next then?

Then we got back to Europe in '45 was it? And we started, first of all we had to settle down and then I immediately started painting.

Where did you come back to?

To London.

And where were you living?

Kensington.

And why did you come to London?

Well I suppose because England has been my essential, my country. Although born in Mauritius I was at school here, I was at university here, I still had friends then that I wanted to see again, and places. I love England; I thought then of living in Devon actually, but my wife wanted to be in London, and I think she was right, because things happen here.

Had she lived in England before?

Yes, her mother was English, so she considered herself also at home here.

And why Kensington?

Well I had some family living there, an aunt living there somewhere, and her cousin. And since childhood I have always been connected with Kensington.

And, did you buy a house, or what did you have?

No, we had a...6 Pembroke Studios, we lived in a room upstairs with a large studio downstairs.

Where Leonard Rosoman is now.

That's right, mm.

Gosh, those are wonderful spaces aren't they.

Yes they are rather nice.

Can you be careful of your microphone.

Sorry.

And, how did the painting develop?

Well, I think I mentioned that, and first of all I was doing these very, not Hard Edge at all, but geometric forms. I wanted total synthesis so that I could look at them in any way; they were entirely self-consistent. That's '46/47/48, and I was trying to fiddle with them, get to them to become vital, so that was the essential, and they did occasionally.

And were you working sort of dawn until dusk every day? What was the pattern of your life?

Oh no, no no no. We travelled a lot, we both like to move around, Italy, France, Spain. But we were there the longest part of the year, and of course we lived in France too.

In Grasse?

Mm.

Right. But when you were in London, what was the pattern of your day?

I don't...I don't really have a pattern to life; I still live very much by impulse. If I want to do something I do it, if I want to paint I paint, if I don't I don't.

And in those post-war years, were there exhibitions that had a big impact on you? Were there people who were having an impact on you?

Not early, not in '47/48/49/50/51, there was nothing in fact; then I...I met a very odd creature by name of Denis Bowen, and together we started a little gallery in a cellar in Edgware Road, somewhere, was it there? to show people who were coming to England from abroad with paintings that no gallery would show. So we gave them shows.

What was the gallery called?

New Vision.

And is it where he still lives?

He still lives there, yes, but I don't think the gallery goes on any more.

And how had you met him?

I think through a thing called the Free Painters Group, which was a group of, mostly refugee painters, Polish, Jewish, German, and others, who didn't fit into the English painting at all at that time. English painting, so-called modern painting was entirely Impressionistic and post-Impressionistic, and they were more the other way, that I mentioned the other day; they were not necessarily Expressionistic but they were...they didn't conform with the English taste prevailing. So really no one would show them. So, this was very interesting, because I met a lot of people there. A lot of them were no use at all, but a lot of them, some of them very interesting.

And what was Denis like in those days?

I suppose very much as he is now. I was never a very close friend of his, but he...you know him do you?

I've met him.

He had this very distinctive vision, and he was unique at that time, but he is not a thrusting, assertive person, so he kept in this little cellar there. He does contact people but he is not assertive. And a whole bunch of very tough whizz-kids came on the scene in the Fifties.

People like whom?

I won't mention names. No, I can't.

But, are you talking about artists or buyers?

Yes, artists. And they claimed to be the new crowd. And in fact all they were doing, they were zipping up what already the English painters had been doing, people like Heron, you know, and all the rest of it, they were working on that, or they were going Hard Edge; there was a strong Hard Edge movement, which after all goes back to Cubism in the Twenties, it's nothing new. But they contended they were the...and they somehow pushed their way into the forefront of advanced modern art, and they are still there.

And what do you think the role of the press was in all this?

Nil, totally uninterested. The only press that gave us any reviews at that time, I'm talking of New Vision, in the Fifties, was the, you know, Liverpool papers, Manchester, because we did arrange, there were little galleries coming up, we arranged shows with them, but as far as I remember no, none of the major press was in the least interested in it, they never came.

And do you think the press was responsible for creating these whiz-kids?

I don't know. No I think the whiz-kids were smart enough to profit of the prevailing traditional English taste which had taken a sort of modern form, and to exploit it. And we were out of it in the sense that we didn't fit into this, at least I didn't feel I fit, and obviously none of these other people. Whereas in Paris I found that when I had shows there, my work was much more widely accepted, criticised, and... That's I think a historical thing which one can't do anything about.

What was the cellar space actually like, how big was it?

Abut the size of this room I should think.

Which the tape recorder can't see.

10, 20, 30, 40, 40 by 20.

And what was it, white walls?

Oh very...yes, white dirty walls.

And lights?

Bad light, electric light, yes.

And can you tell me some of the shows that happened there? Were they mixed shows or one person shows, or what?

Well I should think, Denis will tell you. I'm sorry, I...

But was it a sort of meeting place for people as well?

It was, yes, it served that. More and more people, people were coming over from America, young people who had been, who were aware of the American...we were not yet, we hadn't seen the American works then, in the early Fifties. But the young people, the young art students and young painters were coming over, and they came to us because none of the big galleries were interested in them at all. And then we realised that something was happening in America. But I was myself much more early influenced by Tachism and the Cobra group, and things like that happening on the Continent, than by the Americans.

And at that point, I mean were you meeting those artists, or were you seeing their work, or both?

Yes, both, yes.

In France mainly, or what?

Here too, they were coming over, and by the mid-Fifties galleries, a few galleries were taking, beginning to take, and they realised there was something happening.

And among those, who were the people that you felt most in tune with?

Oh dear, I'm really bad at names, I really can't... I'm sorry, my mind is pretty empty for names.

But did you at that point sort of feel more of a sense of being part of a group than perhaps afterwards?

Yes, very much so. A group, no, I don't like the word group, I...

I don't mean in terms of an ism in painting...

No.

But I mean part of a community in a sense.

Something happening, yes, mm.

Yes. And where were you showing in Paris at this point, what were your contacts there?

Galerie Craven, Galerie International, and another one.

And were you still, as in Mauritius, being very affected by what was happening in literature at the time? Were there writers who you felt quite close to?

Less so. I was really, now, much more, much of my time was thinking about painting, and the philosophy of painting, and ideas behind painting, I've always been very interested in that, right from the word go. But by the...this, if we are now in the mid-Fifties, I've had a show at the AIA, Artists International, on which, which I worked with quite a lot, I think they were rather more interesting. Gillian Ayers was running it, and Harry Mundy was her husband, they were both quite advanced-thinking people, well ahead of their time.

And would you see them socially as well, were you sort of having a social life?

Yes, they would come, yes, they came to our house often.

Was Paul Hogarth part of that too, or not?

Paul Hogarth? I know the name but I don't remember him.

And, what about Cork Street galleries, had you any relationship with them?

Yes, the Redfern, Rex Nankivel took me on, was interested in my work the first time I went. I was going round the galleries, and I had gone round to Gimpels, the other ones, they were having Continental and American painters. And so I would hawk around paintings; most of them didn't even bother to look at them.

And did you hate doing that, or not?

It's part of the job. I mean I wanted someone to take me on. But the Redfern were very interested from the word go.

And what were they like in those days, what was it like going to the Redfern?

They had, like all galleries they showed everything, I mean you know, they showed things they could sell. My kind of painting was difficult to sell at that time, although a few collectors were realising that there was something happening, and that I... And when Rex gave me a show in, was it '55, '56, around there, much to his surprise too they actually sold.

Do you know who they were selling to?

Who? No I didn't know, no. It's not my business to know.

But they were private collectors?

Yes. And schools too. And there was someone called, he was the Director of Education, in one of the counties, the name will come back in a minute, and he was very interested, not only in my work but in other works, and he bought a lot of my paintings very cheap, used to come to the studio and pick. I was delighted because the schools had them.

And, in the Redfern show, what sort of work was it, how had it changed from the very early ones?

No, it hasn't changed all that much. I had found myself by then. My first show was at the AIA in '54 I think, or '55, and there they were a lot of them like that sort of...but they were changing, they were mixed. They were already quite advanced.

And what sort of colour range were you using at that stage?

Oh a lot of very violent, strong colours. The thing is I use strong colours, but I don't play with colours like the Impressionists do; I mean the colours in Impressionism is like melody music, you know, you have yellows and greens and you balance the colours. It's not necessarily a conscious process but it is something quite different from what I want to do. I use colour Expressionistically, and therefore I use usually one colour predominantly. When I start I do the under-colour, and that may determine the colour that I use throughout, but not necessarily, it can be blue or green, and I work over that. But I feel - this is not something I calculate or determine - that a colour has to dominate; it's either red or blue or green, or sometimes two or perhaps three colours. But I don't play with colours, that's painterly, and I'm not a painterly painter.

And what sort of pace do you work at?

Paste?

Pace, what speed?

Oh, very very, very fast. I used to do these big things, I mean I have done enormous, there's one that's just come back there from the storage, because the Redfern wanted...it's almost as high as this room, and it's narrow; well I would do that in an hour.

And would you ever go back to them, or are they absolutely complete then?

My ideal thing was to have this big studio, and that was marvellous because I would paint flat on trestles, I can walk around it, I can go out and half a cup of tea or a glass of beer or something and come back and look at it again, and if it's good then, it's all right. But not always, I like to live with it, I like to have them around, and to be able to touch them if necessary. But touching them is a very tricky business, because unless you get really worked up again with an image, the odds are that you will make a mess of it. So, I don't like touching up.

How exhausting is it?

Pretty exhausting. I used to weigh 60 kilos, I don't know, I was quite thin.

So was it sort of, would you be going through a whole emotional cycle going through the process of doing the picture, was it something that was a sort of pattern that you repeated?

Well there must be, I suppose, some sort of a pattern somewhere, but I wasn't aware of it. But wanting to paint would come almost like a sort of sexual thing, you know, I mean something very strong, something very...and when it came, if I couldn't paint, I wouldn't be happy.

And how often were you painting? I mean, would you have...?

Oh, the whole time, every day almost. Unless I was travelling or somewhere else, because I couldn't paint. But then travelling I would do small things, so I was always involved in painting.

And when you were in the studio, were you completely alone?

Yes.

And was that essential?

I often play music, yes, I like working with music.

Particular music when you work?

Well the music I particularly liked then was Sibelius and, I know Mahler isn't...he's considered a bore, but I thought he was very, he went on and on, and he is the sort of music that one could play to oneself, you know, in one's mind. It was so laborious and slow that you could...(laughing)...change it in listening to it.

And were you going to concerts at this time?

No not really. No, no, I would much rather listen to music privately.

And were you reading the art press, did you pay any attention to that, the art magazines, was there anything you read particularly?

Not really, no. I'm sorry, I should do perhaps, but...

And, did you go for example, did you go to the Festival of Britain?

Yes.

And what was your response to that?

Confused.

Because?

There was such a lot of stuff, and if there is a lot of things round me, like a fair or a...I don't notice anything, I don't empathise with anything. That's why I don't like a lot of people, or I don't like painters with me; I like talking with them perhaps, but I don't like them around. I would never work in a group.

And in these years, were there any particular major exhibitions that you particularly liked? Did you go to the early Surrealist exhibitions for example?

Yes, very disappointing. I think Surrealism is a very important movement in the history of aesthetics in general, because it helped the break from traditional figurative and descriptive literature to free, to freedom, to symbolic freedom. But in the visual arts for some reason, I

think because the first painters were figurative painters and hadn't found a way of getting out of figuration, Surrealism in painting was essentially figurative and very boring. But its influence was enormous, and of course evidently I was enormously influenced by Surrealism; the mere fact of believing that one could hand over to something beyond oneself to create is Surrealistic. But to go and see a Surrealistic exhibition is very disappointing.

And what did you feel about a figure like Herbert Read?

Oh I greatly admired him. He was...as you know his guiding principle was this sociology of art, that art only had relevance in terms of society. Well of course he was right, because art has, or should have, a guiding role in society, in guiding sensitivity and response. So, he was a very sensitive man, not sufficiently appreciated. Well I think, he became very, fully appreciated.

Did you meet him?

Yes, I did, yes.

And was it a memorable conversation, or not?

He wasn't a person who communicates easily, as you... No, he wasn't easy. But he was very kind to me, he wrote an introduction to a book of mine which is a wonderful introduction.

What was the book?

Oh dear. 'Art As Understanding', it was published in '56 or '58.

And that was a theoretical book?

A theoretical book, yes. That was the first time I really felt I had assembled a consistent, new aesthetics, which was desperately needed because there was nothing like it. None of the official art history and art psychology taught in schools was relevant.

And how had you come to write it? I mean did you always know that you wanted to make an extended statement of some kind?

Well I was always writing, and by that time I felt that my ideas were coherent, they made sense to me, and I am afraid quite selfishly I wrote, I've always written for myself rather than

for anyone... And I thought, well, why not? And it was published by a big publisher, Routledge, who kindly arranged to ask...I couldn't ask him, ask Herbert Read if he would write it, and he said yes, very kindly.

And what was the response to the book?

Well, I would like to believe that it will be a book like Kandinsky's book, which was published in 1918 or '19 and no one read till the Forties. I don't think many people have read it.

Is this the book about colour?

It's about everything. I have my own biological theory of the origins of aesthetic sensitivity, again tied to this question of human reproduction, because we are as a species different from the other primates; we have to be together to breed, and that meant developing a sensitivity and an aesthetic sensitivity in particular, and that's how we acquired our colour sense. So it's all about that thing. It's a very interesting book I think, I read it again recently and I think it's a marvellous book. (laughs)

And who else was writing about your work? Was there anybody else who was being in tune?

Well I have a dossier of stuff like that. There were other people, I'm sorry, I can't remember. The Redfern have, they've got together now a thing of my, my CV of that time, which there are hundreds of references in other, if you ever drop by.

I will drop by. And what about a figure like Roland Penrose?

He was a friend really more than... I don't think...he asked if I would like to meet Picasso, he was a great friend of Picasso as you know, and I have a horror of Picasso so I said no thanks very much, because I would probably be rude to him.

What's the root of that horror?

Why?

What's the root of the horror?

Well because I think he is a trickster. I think he's a...he is an acrobat. His, or he was called a modern painter by deforming nature and by deforming visual experience, which is cheating. Nature has made a marvellous job, nature is...if you are sensitive you can sense the art in nature, and there's no need to deform it at all. You can do a good portrait or a good painting. But if you want to go beyond nature and touch roots of vitality or whatever it is, wholeness or...you don't deform nature, you go beyond nature, which the Cubists did, and the Surrealists in their literature, not in their art. So, I think Picasso was an absolute rogue, absolute bandit; I mean he found that by doing his dreadful figures and literally...he could get away with it, and people are stupid enough to think he was doing modern art.

And how would Penrose have reacted to that?

Well he was one of the early ones who reacted to this and thought it was great stuff, and I kept on telling him this is crap, I mean you are wasting your money. 'Oh no, this is marvellous, he's a genius, he's a great man'. That's fine.

But he wouldn't have been angry at your response, he would just have...

No, he was a very lovely man; I mean he...not at all.

When did you first come across him?

I can't remember how we came across him. At that time we knew a lot of people in the arts, not well but we went around, and since then I've become more of a recluse. In the Seventies I decided to get out of showing altogether, to devote myself, I was 60 then, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life working out these ideas of mine, which I thought were, for me, they were really more important than my painting then.

But what was Penrose like as a man?

Very charming, very...he was a gentle person, and full of fun and...he was very kind too, that's a great quality. He tolerated upstarts like me who said terrible things about what he obviously thought was...(laughing) And he had a very interesting wife, Lee Miller.

Did you go to their house?

Yes.

And what was that like?

I can't remember. There were Picassos everywhere.

So you were in agony.

(laughs)

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And what was the balance in the relationship between Penrose and Lee Miller?

And her? Well she was a fabulous woman; unfortunately she was too tempestuous to be able to...anyone to manage. So I think he...he got hold of her towards, after she had had a pretty big run. (laughs) She was a very attractive woman, but she would drink like a fish, which was bad, and she would become incoherent and really quite disgusting when she had drunk too much. But he was very kind to her, and I think that's the quality which she really appreciated in him, he was a very very kind man.

And did you know his son, Tony?

No.

And did you, through him, perhaps come across Man Ray?

No. I wouldn't have gone out of my way to meet Man Ray either.

And what about the ICA, was that important to you?

Yes it was, and he asked me to help Phillips, Ian Phillips to start it, and I said I'm sorry, I am not an organiser, I'm not a practically-minded man, but I was a founder member, he made me a founder member. But I have very seldom gone there, because I think it was...there again it was taken over by the whiz-kids fairly soon.

What was it like in the early days there?

Full of ambition. I think his ideas were marvellous, and if...you know, it's very interesting, these people have these ideas, like Penrose and...he was a man of ideas too, I think that's really one of his great qualities, and he wanted this institute, which would have been marvellous if it could have been run by him, or someone who really believed in him and believed in his totally democratic attitude and... The thing is with art, like in everything else, people who come in, it's a source of power, and once they've got in it's no longer democratic, they use and show what they want. It's not dishonest, because perhaps they believe it, but someone like Penrose was a big enough mind to be open to everything, and if he had been able to run it himself, or get someone to run it according to his ideas, it would have worked. Mind you it has played a big role, it has encouraged lots of things, it encourages lots of

discussions which I haven't gone to. But it's become a sort of orthodox, instead of being a revolutionary institution, which it should be, I mean anything really new is necessarily a revolution, it became rather... Ian Phillips is dead now unfortunately, he ran it, but he knew Penrose well and Penrose knew him well, and he was a very fine person, I liked him, he was a very close friend. We met him in Mauritius, he was out there in the war. But he was not firm enough to have a straight, strong line for the institution. He was also a very kind, sympathetic, so anyone who would come and, you know, convince him that... And eventually he was...I think the ICA was overtaken by this crowd of people who run the modern art world in England.

And what about people like, did you know Eileen Agar, who must have been just round the corner from you?

I met him, I can't say that I know him, no.

And, did you ever meet Kokoschka? Because he was in London at that sort of time wasn't he.

No. I may have done, I...

And what do you think about his paintings?

I like his work, but, he's not quite as bad as Picasso, he's more passionate and genuine I think. But it is part of this deformation of appearance which I strongly object to, because, there's nothing wrong with...well with nature anyhow; a hell of a lot wrong with the world we've done, but nature's fine. But of course Kokoschka was not so much a naturalist, as Picasso was, I mean Picasso did people, he distorted people, which is the ultimate offence, because people are beautiful; Kokoschka contorted in very passionate ways landscapes and semi...and groups and things, so, I think his paintings are very justifiable.

And what about somebody like Chagall?

There again, this is Surrealism in its wrong direction. It's attractive, everyone can appreciate it. Oh yes, they can see all the little things in it, and very well done, well painted. But it didn't do what Surrealism promised art, painting, to become, and that was a symbolically free subject, as music is. Music is symbolically entirely free.

But painting couldn't do that, could it?

Of course it does. That's what I hope I am doing, and hundreds of others now.

But your painting is so completely melded in with your scientific background and your feelings about the world. I mean in that sense it's not free.

Well that's true to everyone. I mean you are what you are, you can only paint... But I wouldn't say it's melded to my scientific...I don't think so, I think my scientific background enabled me, because I was a rebel as a biologist to be a rebel in art, but it didn't teach me the forms that I...not really. I think these forms that came to me, I mean every person is a very limited object, and can't do an infinity of things, so if you paint or if you do music, if you do poetry, if you do anything, and you find a way eventually, you stick to that way, because that's the way that in a sense you've been appointed to use. So the things, the forms that my painting took, I don't think I imposed them, I think they came through from somewhere else, through me, influenced of course by what things I had, but they belong somewhere else. I think that's true for all art, it certainly is true for music.

And what did you feel about a figure like Henry Moore at this stage?

I've had no time, very little sensitivity for sculpture, because I feel that sculpture is in our time essentially affected by the subconscious rather than the unconscious. I mean there of course one gets into complicated... The unconscious is the most important part of our mind, it's where all our feelings are for love, for beauty, for order, harmony, comes from, and I think the unconscious is universal, like Jung believed, something sacred and universal that we, in living, participate in, and we have an individual unconscious but we share in a universal unconscious. So this is the part of us which is cosmologically important, but, because we live in a very disturbed world, we are all mentally disturbed, the subconscious is aroused, and affects our mind, our consciousness, it affects our way of life, it affects our vision, our feelings, our sex, everything. And the subconscious was in fact silenced when we were humanised, when we had acquired a really aesthetic, loving predisposition a million years ago, or...the unconscious had to be pushed down, it was quietened. All our mental ancestry, through the primates and from animals beyond, it was done. But when the Ice Ages came and later in the disturbances of culture, killing, torturing, horrible things we've done to each other over hundreds of thousands of years, the unconscious, the subconscious, became more and more aroused, more and more powerful. And I do believe in something that is very important and that is that the mind, because it's not a material thing, abides by the non-locality principle of the new physics, minds tend to affect each other, not only on this planet but probably on international, universal ways, and the unconscious is certainly universal in that sense. And the subconscious, in spite of being pathological, has used this so that we are all influenced by

mind group[??] forces, which we have created and our ancestors created, which were essentially evil, hence the compulsive behaviour to which we submit. I mean if you really look at history calmly and as a human being, a sensitive human being, it's terrible. Think of the wars that we've fought, the killing that we've done, absolutely unnecessarily. These things could have been arranged. So the subconscious is something horrible. Unfortunately we are all subject to it, and it's made a joke of our so-called humanity, we are not really human most of the time; we're nasty to each other, we're unloving. Anyhow, why did I bring up the subconscious? You asked me a question.

I was asking about Henry Moore.

Oh yes. Sculpture is, in our civilisation and in all primitive sculpture, is subconsciously influenced. It has very little sublimity, the unconscious is hardly there. Henry Moore, yes, he is one of the few sculptors who hasn't been affected in...I mean Lynn Chadwick was a close friend of mine, his sculpture is very subconsciously influenced, they're all devils really, his work, and we are haunted by devils, I mean they are part of us. So sculpture has had the therapeutic role in exercising and ventilating our demonic things, it's a useful art form, whereas Picasso is no use to anybody, I think sculpture of that kind is, although I hate it, I have no feeling for it. OK?

And, in the period we're talking about, the Fifties, late Fifties, early Sixties, what did you feel about the role of the Tate, did you think it was an exciting place to go to?

The Tate?

Mm.

I used to go there very often, because there was there everything you wanted to see. They had a lot of rubbish, which you always have, I mean any gallery has to have, but they had the Americans when I became aware of them, the late Fifties.

And what was the impact of that?

Oh, enormous of course. But, again with criticisms, because I think that most of them had touched this enormous power through Surrealism, and through American freedom, a sense of freedom which the Americans have which we haven't got in Europe. And it was too exuberant, too wild, and too untamed, and lacking form. I think I mentioned that before; form is such an important thing in art, in music, it's decisive, and it...many of the moderns have

done the same thing, they have been so enthralled by the power of free symbolic expression they've overridden form and some of this music is horrible.

And can you remember any particular paintings that you saw from the Americans that really...?

Of course, I saw the lot of them, Sam Francis, the lot, Rothko. They were all marvellous, wonderful to see, but, lacking form.

And, had you analysed it like that at the time, or...?

Straight away. Because I had this bias towards form. Perhaps again that might be a biological influence; form has always been...to think of being able to express purely symbolically in colour was to me not possible.

And at this stage had you been to art school at all?

Yes, I went in Norway, and I went in France.

When was that then?

Norway was after the war.

So you didn't come direct to London perhaps, you might have gone there first.

No. Oh yes, we stayed for months in Norway at a time; we had a flat in London, were living in London. But I was not interested by what I saw at the art school exhibitions I went to, the Royal College exhibitions, I didn't like at all what I saw, and there was nothing modern to me there at all, whereas in the Scandinavian countries there was a historical interest in Expressionism which I felt for me was the way out. So I went to...

Munch was still alive at this point, wasn't he?

I beg your pardon?

Munch was still alive at this point, wasn't he?

No, no I think Munch died in the Fifties.

So you never met him?

No.

So where did you go to art school in Scandinavia?

It was...I can't even remember the man's name. It was in, there were about thirty students.

And what did it teach you?

They taught drawing, it was a classical school, you start with drawing and you started...and figure, figure painting, figure drawing and painting. And then, painting, which you only did in your last phase of your... Drawing was very important. I still think it should be an important study, provided it's used, in my sense, as a means of expression rather than delimitation, and still is taught in all art schools as a means of delimitation, vision, visually-perceived objects, which is wrong.

So were you allowed to draw as you wished?

Yes, you were encouraged to draw as you wished. You had to use still life or a figure or...but you were encouraged to feel your drawing.

And, is that something that you needed to do within an art school context? Could you have done it by yourself and achieved the same thing?

Yes. And in fact it confirmed what I had found myself, and I did it because I was there and it was a good thing to do I think.

And when you got to the stage where you were allowed to paint, what were your paintings?

My paintings were nudes and faces and...done, necessarily, in a very Expressionistic way.

And, Munch was an important influence, wasn't he?

Very much.

Can you talk about that a little? Why was he?

Well I think because he was a tempestuous painter I think; his paintings, although figurative, have a profound sense of tragedy, of the mystery of existence, of horror of existence, and of the drama of being I think, it's all there in all his work, he couldn't do anything without it.

And any particular paintings of his?

Well there are so many, you know, in the National Gallery there, they've got such marvellous paintings. He did some very traditional paintings, because he studied in France as you know and in Germany particularly, and some of them are really very mediocre, big nature paintings and things. You can get them anywhere. His really great work is essentially calligraphic in his printing and there they are marvellous, any one of them.

And you have one in this flat, don't you?

I have two, yes.

How do you come to acquire them?

My wife got them from her father.

And can you describe them?

Yes, it's a woman with her breasts and looking very anguished, and sperm running in the bottom of the painting, you know the painting, you know the one.

Yes, but the tape recorder won't know it.

Oh.

Could you say its title? Does it have a title?

'Madonna' I think it's called, isn't it? Mm, I think so.

And did you say there is a second one that you have?

The second one is again of a woman, a naked woman standing up. It was 'The Death of Marat', that's the title. And she has just murdered Marat and has gained her feminine freedom, I think she's standing arrogantly as a woman, naked.

And what about the Scandinavian sensibility? I mean how were you affected by living there and being there?

Well I admired them as people I think, as a culture, they are very robust, and, they're very sane people, which I need badly to have around me. (laughs)

Is sanity important then?

Yes. I think so, because I think insanity can cause a lot of harm and damage. We've been so insane in our behaviour.

And what about the Scandinavian landscapes?

Yes, it's marvellous. Yes I did a lot of nature painting there.

So how long were you at art school there?

Well on two or three occasions, months at a time.

Right. And what about, you said there was other art schools in France.

In France, I went to, I had a private teacher there.

And who was that?

Who was a friend of Matisse, I can't remember his name.

In Paris?

No, in Nice.

And what did that teach you?

Nothing, nothing. That was, I was younger, I was in my teens then.

Right. And you mentioned that you, in the Fifties and Sixties you began to do a bit of teaching yourself, or you went to art schools?

In Norway.

Well I thought it was in England, but, wherever.

No, I've never been to art school in England. Have I? No.

But you went to talk there, did you?

Not in England. I used to go to schools and talk to them, and give lectures to them on art.

So not art schools, ordinary schools?

Not...yes, ordinary schools, yes.

What sort of age group would you be talking to?

I think it was the sort of fifth and sixth formers.

And how did that develop?

Well there was this...I wish I could remember his name, I would have to ask Ivy. Mason, Stuart Mason, he was the Director of Education of Leicestershire, and he was very keen on getting the new ideas to his schools, so I went on several occasions, and he got, as I think I mentioned, lots of my paintings around the schools. And there were...the British Council were also very useful and very helpful. There were other, I can't remember them.

In what way were the British Council helpful?

Well they got my work abroad, very much.

And did you go with it sometimes?

I'm not sure.

And when you went to these schools, what were you saying to the children, what were you talking to them about?

What I was trying to say in my painting, so that they should be able to approach it in a state of mind in which they could at least...because I can't describe what I do, but I can describe the way that I think I do it and what I think I am trying to say, but it's up to the person to intuitively perceive what there is there.

And did you enjoy talking to them?

Not really, because it's like writing you know, the moment you've talked about something you realise how inadequately you've talked, and that's been a big impediment; I would have liked to have written seriously on these ideas of art, more seriously than I've done, but as soon as I've written, I realise how bad it is, and how defective it is. I think this is a common awareness for most people who write.

Did you get much response from the children?

No.

Because it was really beyond their...

Yes.

Experience, what you were talking about.

Yes. Oh I think some of them yawned and slept and played with their, whatever it is, under the...

And at this point when you were living in London, were there other parts of Britain that were mattering to you, were there other places that were important?

I've been very interested in the ancient history of art in England, particularly the cathedrals, architecture, early English architecture. I love going to the cathedrals all over England, I think I've been everywhere, and I like the Anglo-Saxon influence on art which was, on imagery, which was very stylized and, unfortunately very stylized but very abstract, and very colourful and very interesting.

And what would you feel about somebody like John Piper?

He was one of the ones I would have accepted more I think. He had a certain, he had a strong vision that came through. It wasn't the sort of fiddling that some of the younger ones are doing in their abstract; I respected, he was a figurative painter, but a powerful one. So was Pasmore.

And you mentioned Heron earlier, what did you feel about his work?

Well he is the line that the modern English abstract painting has taken, Heron, and what's his other...

Terry Frost.

Yes Terry Frost and that lot. Richard Hamilton and... It's a mixture of Hard Edge and lyrical Abstract Impressionism, which is totally different from mine.

And in the Fifties, were you doing things like going to the theatre? I mean there was a great revolution in theatre from the Royal Court, did you see any of that?

No, I'm sorry, no.

Because it just didn't interest you, or...?

Perhaps, I think that must be the explanation. But I read a lot, I read new plays by, oh dear I can't remember their names now. I read them. I prefer to read them than to actually see them, because I can act it in my mind as I... I'm very critical of actors, unless there is an absolute accepted way in which a writer is acted, like in Shakespeare, which is usually good. There's a lot of pretentiousness in acting I think; actors, if they are good actors, they really think of themselves as gods, I mean they really... And if I read the thing, I feel I get more out of it for me than seeing someone putting it over according to them.

And did you enjoy some of those plays?

Oh very much so. I think they liberated the play, like some of the poets, some of them, from the bondage of a realistic existence. Mind you, I mean music has always been free, and Shakespeare, especially his tragedies which I adore, have always had this potential magic of another interpretation beyond the words.

Are there productions of those plays, the Shakespeare tragedies, that you remember?

No.

And what about Beckett?

I'm not sure, I have a feeling, the little I know about him, that he got bogged up in the machinery of words; he discovered, like all the great writers have done, this liberation from traditional transmission of life in language, in figurative, ordinary terms. And language in itself, like my friend Malcolm de Chacile[ph] found, can be freed, like music it can become the form of music, not in the poetical word, in words themselves, nonsense words. Beckett hadn't got that; he had realised that words are magical things, but he was still using them in a figurative sense, which was perhaps a necessary transition, because words are very difficult to use in that way. Perhaps one can't go beyond Beckett, but I find him a little limiting.

I was going to say, is there a playwright do you think that has gone beyond?

No.

And what about the Scandinavian writers, what about Ibsen?

Yes, I have a nostalgic and romantic attachment to Ibsen. I think he touched on 19th century themes of drama more than contemporary, but he is still very contemporary in the sense that he sensed the ridicule in existence, in human, in the tragedy of life. I mean the pretentiousness that we attribute to ourselves, to our loves and hates and manoeuvres, he saw through that. So, yes he is a big man.

And do you speak Norwegian?

Yes. Badly, but I do.

And somebody like Strindberg, what do you feel about him?

Yes, right, much more, much more trenchant and much more revolutionary in a sense than Ibsen. Ibsen was conventional in his...

And what about somebody like Chekhov?

He certainly reads marvellously, in English translation, it's marvellous reading, isn't it. Very powerful reading. Yes, there words are still being used as words should be used in our very pragmatic civilisation, in a reasonable comprehensible way, but with great magic, mm.

And did you go to see those plays particularly, or not?

Yes I did, yes.

It was the same feeling?

Yes, yes. But there again, I prefer to read Chekhov.

And, Ivy was obviously involved in what you were doing, but was she having activities of her own that didn't particularly involve you?

Oh yes, she is a very, she is much more sensitively artistic than I am. She did a lot of tapestries, very modern, very beautiful, which the family have all over. This, you see this, she did this carpet.

Can you describe it, because the tape won't be able to...

It's, I did the design for her, so it's rather like my design with a central core of twirls and lines and circles and bashes and things, and with a background of black.

And...it's black and white.

It's a big carpet, it's about, what, five, ten, twelve, eighteen by ten feet or something.

So that was one of the times when you were able to collaborate.

Oh yes. And she regularly comes and looks at my work, she is interested in my work, and she is very prompt in her appraisals. I don't always agree but I usually do. I mean I agree with her, not with her verdict.

End of F4225 Side A

F4225 Side B

....travelling in Italy and Europe at the same time, were there particular places in Italy that were important?

No, my parents were very interested in classical civilisation, and I went round all the classical places, you know. I can't believe in anything in particular, no. I have memories of lots of places, but I haven't got names to them.

But there wasn't a particular place in Italy you kept going back to, as in Grasse in France?

Ravenna? No. Naples, I particularly like Naples, yes.

And was the contemporary Italian art world of any importance to you?

I beg your pardon?

Was the contemporary Italian art world of any importance to you, were you a part of it?

No, none at all, no.

And did you have a completely different circle of friends in France, was life in France quite different?

Well, in Nice there were quite a few English people, we had English friends there; we had French friends too, we still have. You can bang that away if you like.

It's all right.

Not necessarily in the arts, no, no.

And were your children at school in England?

Yes.

What did you do with them, where did they go?

Sons went to Whitcliffe[ph], which is a, not a public school, it's ranked as a public school but it goes in for things like vegetarianism and health.

So is that why you chose it?

Yes. And university, my daughter went to Edinburgh and my other sons went to Cambridge.

Right. And you've got two daughters haven't you? No, you haven't, one daughter.

St. John's where I was, yes.

Right. And what did they all study when they...?

Architecture, my son who died; my daughter studied, I can't remember what she was studying, English language I think, but she has become an artist now, she has gone back to art school for three years and at 60 she is a mad painter, absolutely devoted. I have a very guilty conscience about that, because when she was 18 or 19 she said, 'I want to go to art school,' and I said, 'Not on your life!' (laughs)

Why?

Well, I had a poor opinion of the average sort of person who went in for art schools, and they were uneducated, poorly educated people, totally inadequate people. In fact it still unfortunately is the case that people take up art too easily, art is too easy, and you can do art when you can't do anything else, literally. It's sad to say that, and it should be the opposite; I mean art should be a hard subject, and there should be philosophy, psychology, and all sorts of things attached to it. So, I said no, you are an intelligent girl, you jolly well do something serious. Art isn't serious in the art schools. And, she has never forgiven me for that, so, when she has got rid of her husband and everything else here now, she has gone back to art school.

So did she have a career in something else?

Mm?

Did she have a career in something else?

No, just married, not very...

And did you think it would have been impossible for her to be a painter independently of the...?

Yes, I realise I was wrong now. It was a bias on my part that, bad as art schools are, it would have been better for her to have done that; she would have met people and would have... I think that is really what happens, I mean if one in art school meets people who are gifted and have something which compensates for their usual lack of cultural education, that's fine.

And do you think the same thing is true of, say, literature students, that they have no sense of visual arts for example?

Yes. But literature is a more intellectually demanding pursuit, whereas art isn't.

And had she been painting?

Yes, but rather small things, you know, neat little things. I saw no great talent there, so I didn't... But now she is doing marvellous things, and I'll show you on the way out.

Had she had strong opinions about what you were doing?

Well she likes my work, she...yes.

But at that stage when she was herself wanting to.

I don't know, she's not an easy person to commune with, yes.

When they were little did they come into your studio, did you encourage the children to follow what you were doing?

They could come in. I wouldn't say I would encourage them, no.

And what did the other three do?

The son did architecture, the other son...

Where, where did he do architecture?

London. And the other one did law at Cambridge, and the other one did Spanish studies, and is now a professor of Spanish studies.

And were you equally close, or not close, to all of them?

I think pretty well the same, mm. We have no...we never had any sort of, you know, things that we couldn't talk about, we talked about anything.

And did they go through a rebellious stage, did you have times when it was difficult?

No, perhaps because of the fact that they could be as rebellious as they liked with me, I encouraged it.

And when you travelled did you take them with you mostly?

Yes.

And, how long did you stay living in Kensington?

Oh for years, several years.

And did you live somewhere else in London before you came here?

No, no. Yes, oh yes, sorry, sorry yes. I lived in Chelsea and in, what was the last place? I'm sorry, I have a dreadful memory for names and places. I was in 38 Royal Avenue for 15 years.

Which is where? I can't remember where that is.

It's off Sloane Square.

Right. And why did you go to live there?

It was an attractive place, and we had at that time, my wife and I had a certain amount of income that we thought we would put in property, and it was quite an expensive place, and we reckoned it's the sort of place that would increase in value.

And did you have a studio within that building?

No, I had a studio next door, I had hired a room somewhere. But I did eventually have a room upstairs, yes, you're right, yes.

And why did you move to this flat?

It got too much, and it was worth too much money, so we sold it and got a smaller place.

And why did you come to this particular part of London?

This? Ivy chose it, I had nothing to do with it; the first time I... I didn't want to move, I'm not a mover because I lose so many things, all my minerals and things go amuck and my...everything goes wrong. So the first time she mentioned it, I said, 'Nothing doing, I'm not going to move there.' Anyhow, she won and, I'm very grateful, it's a lovely place, I'm very happy here.

And, presumably one of the most marvellous things about this is the way the light changes.

Absolutely.

Because of the water being outside.

Oh absolutely. It's magic. And even at night I could sit here without a light on every night and just watch.

And how do you think being by the water has affected the painting?

Oh, I think it has given me a lot of serenity which I needed badly. I have now, since I've been here, two years now, I have...well of course this is age too, I have accepted myself, and I have a certain confidence in what I've done; in spite of the fact that I haven't been successful, I feel quite happy with my life.

Why do you say you haven't been successful?

Well, as a painter I haven't really... In the Fifties and Sixties, my great...it's my fault, I shouldn't have walked out of the commercial world; I did in the Seventies, I just walked out, I said no, I don't want...I left the Redfern, Rex thought I was mad, [INAUDIBLE], and they were still selling my paintings, and I said, well I want... It's the sort of silly thing I've done

often in my life, taken decisions totally impulsively. But I wanted to spend my time thinking; I wanted to be a philosopher, not to use that dreadful word, but I wanted to think my way out of things that I had been thinking all along, and get some order in them. That's when I wrote this book that Herbert Read very kindly...well that was earlier than that actually, that was the prelude to, that was ten years before I decided to get out of painting.

And what had, how had the painting changed within that ten years?

It hadn't, I've gone on painting, in fact I've got two storehouses full of my paintings, I've got a lot of work. But I was wrong to stop exhibiting, and to have broken my connection with the gallery.

Did you feel in a logical way that it was incompatible to have a connection with the gallery? I mean could you have just kept feeding the gallery with works that already existed?

Yes, of course, of course I could have done, absolutely, and they were...Rex was a marvellous man to me. Lots of people didn't like him. But now the Redfern appear to be, they are going to give me a show in June, a retrospective, which is very nice, perhaps that will put me back. But there's been a, you know, the Fifties and Sixties I think were very important in the history of contemporary art in the sense that that's when painting acquired the symbolic freedom for the first time of music, it's never been done in any other culture, it's never happened before, and it's recognised as a key period in America, on the Continent, everywhere, in Germany, in France. But in England it has been...it's not so marked, for the reason I've already mentioned, is that, it went a special way which the...the authorities and the people who are responsible for it have thought it's the English way, you know, the St. Ives group and all that sort of thing. And that's kept England out of this key movement.

But do you think the decision to stop showing was in any way connected with a loss of confidence? Because it does sound as though it's a defensive thing to do in some ways.

Quite likely, yes, I had thought of that.

And there is nothing you know that was a trigger for that?

No, no, nothing. No, my work was selling, and at the time it was...but I felt that my work perhaps wasn't as appreciated. Could have been.

So when you stopped showing, did the pattern of your life actually change, were you spending days literally thinking rather than painting?

Yes, that is true, yes.

And what was that period like?

Well, I think for me it was marvellous because it enabled me to sort things out for myself, and I think it helped my painting, because my painting became really mature in the late Fifties and Sixties and Seventies, and I think my painting in the Eighties and Nineties, what there is of it, is OK.

And you said that you stopped painting when your son died, is that right?

I stopped showing, it was all tied up with that too, mm.

And what actually happened to your son?

He got leukaemia.

And that must have changed you utterly, that experience.

Very much so, yes, it was...it's one of those things that one can never really accept.

And presumably your knowledge of biology in some ways must have made it more unbearable in a sense.

More unbearable. Oh I don't know, it certainly affected my wife, who was, after all she was the creator of that person more than me. She was terribly affected, every mother is. My mother lost a son too, and she was finished, that was the end of her life.

And did you feel it was slightly history repeating itself, like your brother's death?

Well it happens so often. Yes, I suppose that is true, but I didn't...no I can't see any pattern in it, it's just bad luck. Except that I was very angry with what science was doing then, I have really become very anti-science in that sense, that atomic energy and the experiments they were then making, and the first atomic explosions had already occurred, and had contaminated the environment, and if you look at the graph of leukaemia, it just absolutely

soars up at that period, like that, putt! So, people there are guilty, there's no doubt about it, and you can't help being angry.

How old was your son?

28, just married, two children.

And was it long and drawn out, and or was it swift?

Took two years to die, mm.

And were you able to be very close to him at that time, or not?

Yes.

And did you learn from him?

Yes, I learnt, we had long talks on things, and from a complete disbeliever, which I was still then hankering about, we both realised that there had to be some sort of continuity or the whole thing was a joke. So, we came to that conclusion, and that was something.

And obviously it has changed you in that way, but in other ways has it changed you?

Yes. Yes, that is true.

How else has it changed you?

Well it's changed me to be...well it has done that, which is an enormous change, it's made me more...less superficially confident in existence; I mean I am no longer a materialist, I'm a metaphysician if you like.

Do you still feel the presence of your son, does he seem part of life, or not?

Yes, I think that is true for almost everyone I have known closely. Especially in dreams, I think dreams are very important to me, as they are to everyone, but in our culture we don't apply much attention to them. We don't for instance try to recall them on awakening, which all other cultures do, and immediately they have a dream they go to the dream specialist and recount their dreams. I have done that, so I, I've been aware of another life, and in fact I have

come to the conclusion if we have...we don't have a linear existence, we have a multilinear existence, we are living in different worlds all the time.

And when you say you've done that, you mean you've taken your dreams to someone for interpretation?

No no, no, no I've studied them myself. There are no...unfortunately there are no people you can take them to.

And do you write them down, I mean, what do you do?

No, no.

You just try to recall them.

Yes.

And do you have recurring dreams that are important?

Very much so.

What are they?

They're of particular places, and the extraordinary thing is that they are not places...I find it very hard to think, from my childhood, they are places that I was at. No, they're not, they are another world, absolutely.

What sort of a world is it?

Well it's...there are people there that I've never known, but occasionally some person I know comes into them, but they are mostly inhabited by other people, quite ordinary people, and I have a very intimate relationship with them, I mean we talk...a lovely life. One of the places is a fantastic place, I may have seen it as a child, I don't know. But that's possible, I really do believe that's possible; I think we have a...this material existence is the least important; it's been necessary to start off the others, but the others are very important.

And you mentioned that recently you've had heart problems again.

Mm.

Has that made you think very much about death?

No, when I thought I was dying, I really could hardly breathe, and my daughter and my wife were there, and, no, they were surprised how confident I was, I was...death, I am quite resigned to dying.

And what do you think it will be?

Certainly wouldn't be anything like this. (laughs) It will be, it will be a kind of dream level. I think that in the other world, let's call it hyper-reality or whatever it is, love will be the deciding factor; what one wants in a loving, aesthetic sense, one will have. One will be there with people one has loved, and one will be there with other people that one has known in this life.

And do you dream about your son?

Yes. Not very often.

And do you dream about your other children?

Yes, not very often, no.

And, you've obviously got grandchildren, did that make a difference to you, having the next generation born?

Yes, it's been very exciting. Very...great fun. We have a lot of fun together and we see a lot of them, they come here the whole time, we're very grateful. That's why I don't like going to France very much; my wife's very happy there, she has a little garden there, a village garden which keeps her very happy.

So what's the pattern of your life throughout the year? Do you have certain months in London?

We live about six months here, four months in France, two months in Norway.

But you still feel London is your real home?

I like it, I wouldn't move from here.

And what's the pattern in terms of your painting now? Do you have a sort of regime every day, or...?

No, no, no. I have a room here that I...it's not big enough for my purposes but I...well I've done some pretty big paintings here, 6 by 8, in a small room. Fortunately I don't work on an easel, I work on a table, or on the floor.

And have the materials you use changed since the early paintings?

Yes, I started working on canvases and using oils.

And what were you using before?

Watercolour for small things, but oils, no, I used oils formerly, going way back to the Forties, '48, Fifties, and on canvas. But I soon realised that using thick paint in the way I was using, that they would be, they wouldn't last any time at all, and in fact that's true, some of the...an old old there, that's on canvas and it's cracking all round. So I've used board, that should be eternal, and acrylic.

When did you start to use acrylic?

In the Fifties when they became...late Fifties, they became very...well I still was using oils in '58. I was still using both in fact, you know, but I'm now entirely on acrylics. I think it's folly to use anything else.

And when you work with acrylics, is it a different process from oils?

It is, it encourages an Expressionistic approach to, rather than Impressionistic. Oil paint is loved by Impressionistically-minded painters, even abstract ones, because it has this ease of manipulation and flow which gives it a very sensual something, whereas acrylic is, you know, it's like squeezing a thing of toothpaste out. It's what you do to it that matters rather than what it is, whereas with oil it has a quality, there's no doubt about it, a painterly quality. So with acrylics you can get much more, a non-painterly quality, in fact what I do is I squeeze the thing straight out and scoop it up on a knife and go, [SWISHING NOISE], like that, and you know, that's marvellous, and things happen, they run into it. Couldn't do that with oil.

And are the colour qualities different?

No, the colour's the same, they are the same pigments.

And when did you start to work on a larger scale? I mean when we've talked about the early work that's in this room, that's a very small picture, and, how did you begin to change both the shape of the canvas and the...?

In the Fifties.

Right. And what was the trigger? Seeing the big American pictures, or what?

No, I don't think I was aware of the Americans when I did my first bigger ones. But there was a general movement, I think, other painters were doing big things too. It goes with this struggle for freedom. If you have a small thing, unless you are a complete master of what you are doing, you do silly, minute things. If you have a big thing you have to expand, it's much more muscular, you are involved, you have to run around like a rabbit, I mean you have to... So I think size becomes an anti-easel quality.

And what determines the shape of the canvas, or the board? You've got different shapes all over the place here, what determines it?

Nothing, it's just convenience. One gets boards in standard 8 by 5, or 6 by 4. Squares, squares are marvellous, I've done lots of square paintings, and there's one as you come in there you can see it, it's just come in a couple of days ago, that was done in the Fifties. Square is fine because you can walk round that, you have no top and bottom, and that's very annoying if that comes in a painting, it's out straight away, belongs to this world, not to the other one.

When you find yourself doing a painting that doesn't succeed, how depressed do you get?

Not at all, no. I get annoyed. And usually I am aware of what I've done wrong. It's not a question of fatigue, in fact sometimes one is...things happen when one is really exhausted, I mean it's...it's not a muscular matter, it's something up there, I don't know, it's... It really is, it's a question of feeling, it's a question of, it's an urge isn't it.

And when you had taken time away from exhibiting to formulate what your thinking was, was it just really a release that you had articulated it, or did it actually mean you worked in a different way in any sense?

Well I intersperse painting with writing. I write for myself, I always have done, and when I write I can't paint, there is an absolute clash there. So that, does that answer your question?

And have you been writing continuously?

Yes, for days on end, yes.

And what is the most recent writing?

Well I am writing now.

And what is it?

I'm trying to get down my final cosmological opinions on aesthetics and life. I've had great...that's been very satisfactory because they do fit.

And in between the early book that Herbert Read did the introduction for and the writing now, what's happened writing-wise?

I've written three or four. You mean published by small publishers, without any success, and looking at them now I think they're...well, they each have something but they're not good. One always thinks that I think. One should have done better, one should have gone on and on working at it, but I find every time you come back you do something different, it's very annoying. The answer is, I'm not a writer really, it's arrogance.

And in terms of the painting, have we said all there is to say about the sort of radical changes? I mean you make it sound as though it's, having found what you were trying to express, as though it's all been a straight line, and it sounds so unlikely if that was the case.

Well, looking back I see it as a straight line; obviously there were lots of dead ends along the way. I went through periods, I think I mentioned I destroyed a lot of paintings which were...no, I went through some very bad patches. But now I can see it as a line.

And how have the colours changed? I mean you were talking in the Fifties they were quite violent colours.

They're still sometimes pretty violent. As I say I would like to believe I don't decide that, but of course I must do in some degree. The paint, the tubes are there, I like to have a lot of tubes, hundreds of pounds worth of

colours everywhere and I leave...it's criminal because, unless I come back the next day and put the things back again they dry up, damn things, but they have to be there and I just take a tube I want and squeeze it out, crudely as that.

Is your studio orderly, or not?

Very disorderly.

And is that important to you?

Well I don't know. Sometimes I have to put order, otherwise I can't move. What I do is, after I've painted for a while I move stuff into storage.

Where do you store your paintings?

Momart, and another place called, somewhere on the Thames there.

And do you forget them, or do you have a revelation when you see them again?

Very much so, yes. The Redfern now wanted some paintings, early paintings, and I had no, I hadn't got a clue what there was.

How long is it since you showed them, in England?

In the Seventies I think.

And, do you think...I mean, you've said that you wish you hadn't withdrawn from the point of view of getting feedback almost.

Yes.

Otherwise, was it valuable to withdraw? Do you think it's achieved something you couldn't have achieved if you hadn't?

I don't know. Perhaps...you know, I think...I think, this may be arrogance, I don't know, I think that the ideas I have found are very interesting, they're very interesting in the sense that I've found that aesthetics is not just an accidental or incidental quality in the human being, it's an essential quality, and it is the quality that decides our significance in the universe. I think we contribute to the aesthetics of the universe as a work of art, and we do that not by being artists, but by being sensitively aesthetic. And art only has a role in encouraging this, in making it available. I think we all contribute naturally, just by being human, by being loving, loving beauty, loving order, and of course, unfortunately we are not that way as often as we should be.

End of F4225 Side B

F4226 Side A

.....time.

Oh good. And, can you just tell me about some of the paintings that are going into the Redfern show? Who has chosen them, and what did you feel about the whole show?

Maggie, you know Maggie?

Mm. Did she come to you and say, 'How about another show?'

No I wrote to them, I thought it was time that I had some sort of re-contact with the world.

Why, why did you decide to go back into the world again?

Well because I have such a lot of paintings, and no one has seen them. So I realise now that having walked out was a very selfish indulgence. It's enabled me to find my own ideas very selfishly, but I think as a painter I should have struggled and annoyed and worried and badgered people and got my work around, as they were getting around, they were getting around in the schools, in the universities. So, I did something really quite wrong, there's no doubt about it, and you can't go back on these things. But I thought that if a major gallery like the Redfern takes me on and gives me a show occasionally, and it can get me contacts with the British Council again, and abroad, which they have, which I can't do, I'm no use with that, but they are quite keen on getting contacts again with Paris, which at one time I had quite good contacts with, and there you are, I thought it was perhaps the right thing to do.

Did you know Maggie, or were you writing to a stranger?

No, no. I remembered her as a young girl.

And, how has she been in response to your paintings?

Well, she's been very responsive, very grateful. And I like, what's his name, Gordon?

Gordon Samuel.

Yes, he's a charming person.

And so, Maggie has chosen the paintings for the show?

Yes, Maggie and Gordon.

Right. And can you tell me about the ones they've chosen?

Well they've come here, they've gone into the little room you had a quick look at, and they picked the ones they wanted there, and then when they heard I had more on storage they said well, we want to see them too. So they went there, and I had my knee trouble then, my wife and daughter saw them there, and they picked another bunch in each. So they have about, something like 60 or 80 paintings to choose from.

And what do you feel about the ones they've chosen?

Oh yes, all the ones I've kept I like.

So can you tell me about some of the ones, can you describe some of the ones that will go into the show?

Well I don't know yet, they haven't made their final choice. They're coming on Thursday I think, that's why I've had to assemble, the place is crowded, in fact we are getting another lot this afternoon. I can't hardly walk in some of the...

But what would you like that show most to express?

I think what they are going to do is to make it somewhat a retroactive show. They will have some paintings from the early Fifties, some from the later Fifties, Sixties and Seventies, and some recent ones. Yes, I think that's their idea. But then, the stuff from, say, from '56 to '80, I can tell the difference, my daughter can tell the difference, but they are related obviously, so it doesn't much matter.

Can you and your daughter define the difference?

Well it's not consistent difference, because every now and then I do something different, or go back to something. But their essential difference is, I think, that in the Fifties and Sixties, especially after I became aware of the Americans, that would be in the Sixties, I have become much more splashy and splodgy and hectic, and... But that has given my work a lot of energy which the more stern stuff didn't have before. But on the other hand it's destroyed a certain

sort of tragic quality which the...so I keep on coming back to these more sterner things, like that you see, which are rather dour and...but they have a something which the splashy ones haven't got. It's the difference between...a bit of a sexual freedom, and a bit of long, sustained passion. (laughs)

Very good quote. And are you apprehensive about the exposure of a show? I mean you must have very mixed feelings about it, it must, after this long time of not having one.

No, I'm very curious. No, I'm very grateful. They could have said, oh to hell with you, I mean, you left and you can stay out. But they haven't. I think she is quite, Maggie and...they are both quite interested in my work. The only thing is that I'm not sure that they know...well I don't, you know, I think what...these are intuitive things, they have to, they had to choose them, it's nothing to do with me.

And did you at any time during the twenty years almost approach a gallery?

No. I have had one or two shows, but they were non-commercial galleries. One is by a very rich man who gives...I can't remember his name, I had a show there. Here is my daughter.

Can I just, to finish off, can you just tell me about, when we were recording in the other room there was the Bible that you had painted in.

Oh yes, yes.

Could you just tell me about that Bible and the other books that you have produced of your own, painted books.

Ah yes, yes. Well I got these Bibles very cheaply from a junk place in Gloucestershire somewhere, they were selling them at five shillings a Bible, will you believe it? And there was this marvellous paper. And I liked them, I liked the enormous, big thick books as a Bible. So one day I thought I would paint them, and I painted, I think there are 2,000 pages, and... A lot of them are wash-outs, but some of them are really quite good.

And as far as I remember it, you've kept the text on the left-hand side and you've painted the right.

That's in the New Testament. I've kept texts that I like so that I can read them. In the Old Testament I've used some books. The paper, it's marvellous paper.

And how do those images differ from your paintings?

They're much more varied.

In what sense?

Well, I think, my other ones have a definite kind, I think someone should be able to recognise if they knew them, whereas there they might not. So they are really experimental more than... As I think I mentioned, I think that if you are a professional painter, or a professional creator of any kind, you come to a stage where I think you become canalised, and I think that's a good thing, I think, I think you've been chosen to do it that way, you're limited to that, because you can't be everything; it's unlimited what you can do, and I think it's wrong to do things outside of that, in a way. On the other hand it's one way of keeping alive too. So I think my standard stuff is what I prefer, but it's very nice to do these things, like in these books I do occasionally; I think it's a sort of exercise really.

And when you're doing it, do you do page after page after page?

Yes, I like to do as much as I can till I drop dead almost.

And what materials are you using in the Bible?

That I think is watercolour, or, probably gouache or probably acrylic, it's all the same now.

Is this in a way a bit like taking a holiday?

Yes, or it's like what musicians do, they [INAUDIBLE], you know.

And what about some of the books you showed me that were entirely your images, when did you begin doing those, and what...?

All the time I've done them, they go back to the Fifties, early Fifties.

And what makes you suddenly do a book, what's the impetus behind that?

When I've been writing, I can do books when I'm writing, so, if I get tired writing I can do a book in a day, or a day or two, and go back to my writing.

And, I forget now, are those done in books that are already bound?

Yes, yes, yes.

So you...you have in a sense a given space that you then respond to?

A given space, yes, they're rectangular, they're all right.

And what are you trying to achieve? What is the importance of the sequence, for example?

It's discovery, it's chiefly a freedom which I don't give myself in doing proper painting, because as I say I do respect this canalisation which I am subjected to. I think this is part of the business of being a creative person, you can't dissipate yourself with all the possibilities. And whereas I can in these things, I can do things which I wouldn't do in...

And do you at all use different colours?

Oh yes, anything, any colour.

But from your paintings I mean.

Yes, much more.

And interesting, I mean it's bringing you back to a small scale again isn't it.

Yes, mm.

Do you think that's significant at all?

No, I think it's just convenience, I think a small scale is convenient to do that sort of thing.

And will you exhibit any of those books?

No, no.

Why?

They're too personal.

And have you, apart from the Bible have you used any other ready-made texts?

No.

And in the books you do that are purely your own images there are no words, is that right?

Oh, my son has done some poetry to one of them.

And the poetry is integrated into the books?

Yes.

Ah!

Well, he has done the poetry afterwards.

But it's written onto the images?

On the other side.

Oh right. And how did you feel about that collaboration?

That's great, that's fine, yes.

And in terms of the future, you intend to go on painting...?

That's a big word, I am 80 my dear, I'm ready to go any time now.

Most of my friends are way over 80, I can't accept that I'm afraid.

(laughs)

I mean, you would like...

I'm sorry?

You would intend to carry on painting...

Oh yes.

As you are.

Until I drop dead, I would like to drop...

And writing.

Yes.

We're being summoned I think.

End of F4226 Side A

Side B is blank

End of Interview

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ORAL HISTORY SECTION

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F4221 Side A

Interview 29th December 1994.

FAW born in Mauritius, May 5 1914. Third and youngest child, elder sister Patricia, and brother Austin. Paternal grandparents were dead when FAW born. Details of maternal grandparents. Childhood memories of Mauritius; African nanny; role of the English; architecture. Description of home in Mauritius. Mother did watercolours. Staff attached to house. Sources of father's income. Visits to maternal grandparents. Father seemed an Edwardian figure. Mother was typically colonial. FAW's early drawings and paintings. Father's parents. Family sugar business. Early reading. Brought up strictly. Nanny told FAW stories with Negro slave background, imaginary world. FAW's dreams. African dancing. Interest in rocks and minerals. Dislike of Mauritius. Outdoor life in childhood. Wanted to be either a doctor or a naturalist. Sent to school in England aged about 7. Relationship with siblings. Awareness of First World War. [Sound of fierce wind over River Thames outside.]

F4221 Side B

First World War continued. Attitude to Britain. Religion in childhood. Early education in Mauritius. St. Christopher's, Eastbourne. Early drawings were often of battles; also plants and lizards. Further details parents' life in Mauritius. FAW became a bully. Sea life in Mauritius. Animals - eventually became a vegetarian. Human relationship with chimpanzee. Brother's death when FAW approx 15. [Short break in recording] Travels as a child. School in England. Writing in childhood.

F4222 Side A

Brighton College, developed interest in science and minerals. Homosexuality at school. Fell in love with little girl when aged six. Attitude to sex. Enjoyment: Shakespearean tragedies, Existentialist writers; hates easy entertainment. Parents had flat in London. Science Museum more important than art galleries when growing up. Music. Visits to household of school friend. Father's attempt to bring FAW into sugar business. While at Cambridge discovered was more of an artist than a scientist, details - influence of holidays in France. Interest in 'vitality'. Cézanne a 'very good dead painter'. Was drawn to the Expressionists, mother disapproved. Expression of vitality in painting. Confusion between ability to paint scenic watercolours and desire to express vitality. Did drawings under microscope for scientist - led to discovery of way of expressing vitality. In late 1930s was still painting 'ordinary things', difficult to break away. Has always been a lonely person, hasn't relied on people. Was upset to have scientific training challenged by ideas fuelling his painting. Was irreligious at this stage. Huxley. Aggression. Has been analysed. Has never been unfaithful to wife. Was left-wing at Cambridge, became more liberal. Admired Churchill.

F4222 Side B

Interview 4th January 1995.

Is about to go to stay in home in village in France, near Grasse.

At Cambridge FAW in sympathy with vitalist biologists, details. Interest in philosophy, influence of Spinoza. Professor Waddington from Edinburgh University a great influence, had bought one of FAW's paintings from Redfern Gallery. Discussion of the scientific beliefs and the philosophy which underlie FAW's thinking and his paintings.

F4223 Side A

FAW's philosophy continued. Relationship between scientific thinking and FAW's paintings. Dislike of Jackson Pollock's paintings and their legacy. Scientific thinking led to geometric form in paintings. Discussion of early painting by FAW in London sitting room, contrast with painting in same room by Riopelle. Existentialism. Use of black in FAW's paintings. 'Correspondence'. Discussion of 1950 FAW painting in same room which succeeds. Doesn't give paintings titles.

F4223 Side B

FAW's philosophy continued. Late 1950s and '60s, became aware of the new physics; quantum theory. Holism. Further details of FAW's notion of replication. Further discussion of why early FAW painting in room doesn't succeed. All work until 1951 was geometric before found 'real way of working'. Believes artist is a medium, should hand over and let things happen rather than impose. Vanity of Existentialist writers. Painting by Graham Sutherland in room, bought from Redfern. Further details Edinburgh professor and way in which FAW's views differed from his - replication. In 1960s FAW destroyed approx 150 of his early paintings, now regrets this. Hard Edge paintings and English sensibility. Impressionists too wonderful, lacked tragic quality. Abstract Impressionism. FAW's Expressionistic line not popular in England, reasons why. Francis Bacon. Expressionism hardly taught in art schools. Lynn Chadwick. FAW sells paintings in France, Germany and America.

1931-4 at Cambridge, was doing nature paintings. Interest in music at this period. Was part of jazz band at Cambridge. Prospects on leaving Cambridge. 1936 FAW and fiancée to Mauritius, trapped there during war, details.

F4224 Side A

Details of wife's background. FAW wanted children. Courtship. Married in Mauritius 1936. Mother-in-law.

Tried running sugar plantation. Was ADC to Sir Bede Clifford during war. Watching monkeys during war, impact on thinking re vitamins, application of this.

Interview 10th January 1995.

Recent reading. FAW's painted ties.

Births and names of children. Experience of childbirth. Details re children.

After WWII, FAW returned to Europe to paint, had decided during war to give up science. No financial pressure. Painting still naturalistic at this stage but was experimenting. Key friends in Mauritius. Writing non-fiction.

F4224 Side B

Development in war years in Mauritius continued. Return to Europe 1945. Lived in Pembroke Studios, Kensington. Development of paintings. Travel. FAW and Denis Bowen started gallery in cellar near Edgware Road, New Vision. Free Painters Group. Development of painting in Britain in the 1950s. FAW influenced by Tachism and Cobra. By mid '50s had show at Artists International, run by Gillian Ayres. Joined Redfern Gallery. Some work bought on behalf of schools. Use of colour. Pace of work. Music. Festival of Britain.

Response to Surrealism. Herbert Read. FAW's book, 'Art as Understanding'. Roland Penrose. FAW turned down opportunity to meet Picasso, whose work he disliked. Became more reclusive in 1970s, stopped showing paintings, wanted to spend rest of life working out his ideas. Further details Roland Penrose. Lee Miller.

F4225 Side A

Penrose, Miller continued. FAW founder member of ICA. Response to Kokoschka; Chagall. Source of forms in FAW's paintings. FAW's response to sculpture; beliefs about the unconscious Henry Moore. Lynn Chadwick. Visits to Tate in late 1950s. American painting. FAW's periods at art school in Norway and France. Influence of Munch. Admiration of Scandinavian sensibility. Private teacher in France. Period when talked on art to fifth and sixth formers in English schools. British Council support in getting work abroad. Interest in ancient history of art in Britain, particularly early English architecture, cathedrals. John Piper. Pasmore. Heron. Frost. Hamilton.

In 1950s read new plays in preference to seeing them. Is critical of actors. Shakespearean tragedies. Beckett. Freeing of language. Ibsen. Strindberg. Chekhov. Creativity of FAW's wife.

F4225 Side B

Travel. Life in France. Children's schools. Daughter wanted to go to art school aged 18/19 but FAW against this, daughter has gone to art school recently. Details of sons' careers. London homes. Current flat. Recent serenity. Feels hasn't been successful. Retrospective feelings about leaving Redfern; wanted to be a philosopher. Continued painting, has a lot of work in storage. Has show coming up at Redfern in June. Death of son linked with decision to stop exhibiting work. Son's illness changed FAW from being complete unbeliever. Importance of dreams. Health problems. Afterlife. Grandchildren. Pattern of life between Britain, France and Norway. Room within house where now paints. Materials at beginning of painting career to present day. Scale of paintings. Attitude to paintings which don't succeed. Has interspersed painting with writing, can't do them at same period. Current writing and that done since 1950s book. Development of painting since 1950s seems to FAW as a straight line despite bad patches. Storage of paintings. Conclusions reached having withdrawn from exhibitions for twenty years.

F4226 Side A

Forthcoming Redfern exhibition. In 1950s and '60, particularly after became aware of American painters, style changed. Shows in non-commercial galleries. FAW's work with books. Future.

End of Interview